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Speaking of God in the Realm of Aesthetics: Religion in Hölderlin

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Abstract: This article considers the work and reception of Friedrich Hölderlin with regard to the impact of German Idealism on religion. To this end, two questions must be clarified in advance: can Hölderlin, who is known primarily as a poet, also be placed in the context of German Idealism, and does his work have a significant relationship to religion? I argue that both questions should be answered in the affirmative. Ernst Cassirer’s study *Hölderlin und der deutsche Idealismus* (1918/19) clearly laid the foundation for appreciating Hölderlin’s place within German Idealism, and the question of God is a leitmotif of Hölderlin’s entire oeuvre. I seek to trace Hölderlin’s influence on understanding religion in three steps: First, I want to show that Hölderlin, in a critical continuation of Kant, does not consider religion solely within the matrix of practical reason, but brings into play the dimension of aesthetics. By situating religion in relation to the two focal points of ethics and aesthetics, a fundamental question of the philosophy of religion is addressed. Second, I employ several examples to show the various conceptions of the divine that the poet elucidates and juxtaposes in his work (Christian motifs, Greek mythology, pantheistic concepts, etc.). This leads to a philosophy of religion that is not determined by dogmatic boundaries. Third, I point out how religion plays a major role in the reception of Hölderlin.

Keywords: Hölderlin; religion; divine; modernity; aesthetics; Kant; *Critique of Judgement*



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1. Introduction

Religion plays an important role among all thinkers of German Idealism (Viertbauer and Lang 2022). It is not only a topic to which their philosophical speculation also turns, along with others, but it has a central place in the architectonics of their thinking. A study of German Idealism cannot bypass the reconstruction of the complex and differentiated thinking of religion; beyond that, these philosophical conceptions of religion are also of great importance as a starting point for contemporary theological reflections (Breul and Langenfeld 2023, pp. 175–215). Concerning theology and the philosophy of religion, the rich thinking of German Idealism is still stimulating and prolific, even after 200 years (Verweyen [2000] 2004; Danz 2022; Appel 2008).

The following article draws on the work and reception of Friedrich Hölderlin, who was a contemporary of Fichte, Hegel and Schelling and, for several years, was in close contact with these most important representatives of German Idealism. Nevertheless, we must clarify in advance whether Hölderlin, who is known primarily as a poet, can also be placed in the *philosophical* context of German Idealism. Then, we have to discuss whether the assumption that religion plays an important role for all thinkers of German Idealism, is also true for Hölderlin (Wagner 1991). These two questions, to which I answer in the affirmative, serve primarily to introduce the basic features of Hölderlin’s thought, insofar as this is necessary for this article. Concerning the first question, I refer to Wilhelm Dilthey’s and Ernst Cassirer’s seminal essays on Hölderlin, which clearly laid the foundation for appreciating Hölderlin’s place within the philosophy of German Idealism (Section 2). Regarding the second question, I attempt to provide a short sketch showing that the *Gottesfrage* can be regarded as a leitmotif of Hölderlin’s entire oeuvre (Section 3).

I will then trace Hölderlin's influence on understanding religion in three steps: First, I want to show that Hölderlin, in a *critical* continuation of Kant, does not consider religion primarily within the matrix of practical reason, but brings into play the dimension of aesthetics. By situating religion in relation to the two focal points of ethics and aesthetics, a fundamental issue of the philosophy of religion in general is addressed (Section 4). Second, I employ several examples to show the various conceptions of God that the poet elucidates and juxtaposes in his work (Christian motifs, Greek mythology, pantheistic concepts, etc.). This opens the door for a philosophy of religion that is not determined by dogmatic boundaries (Section 5). Third, I point out how in the reception of Hölderlin the poet is closely linked to topics concerning religion—even in non-religious contexts (Section 6).

This essay is part of a Special Issue on the impact of German Idealism on religion. This also identifies the limits of the contribution: Its main objective lies in the presentation of Hölderlin's perception of Kant and how he sets himself apart from him (Section 4) and gives the divine a variety of forms of expression in poetry (Section 5). In addition, a discussion of Hölderlin's relationship to Protestantism, especially Pietism, would be very fruitful, but would go beyond the scope of this study (Dierauer 1986; Schäfer 1991; Wagner 1991; Hayden-Roy 2007). Another desideratum would be to compare Hölderlin's aesthetic approach to understanding religion to Schleiermacher's parallel concept (Ten Kate and Philipsen 2023). This is also beyond the focus of this article.

2. Hölderlin—A Thinker of German Idealism?

The following considerations address the question of whether Hölderlin is a thinker who cannot be ignored when it comes to the impact of German Idealism. Not only does the time of Hölderlin's intense creativity (1790–1806) coincide with the period of the formation of the intellectual systems of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, but the poet himself is also part of this development (Henrich 1992; Jamme 1983; Waibel [2002] 2011). Since a detailed examination of these connections is beyond the scope of this article, I refer to Ernst Cassirer, whose assessment of Hölderlin from a philosophical perspective paved the way for many other works (Dieter Henrich, Christoph Jamme, Michael Franz, Violetta Waibel, Johann Kreuzer, and so forth).

In the 1790s, when the independent philosophical drafts of the most important thinkers of German Idealism—Fichte, Schelling, Hegel—were developing, Hölderlin was in close exchange with all of them. These years were marked by a process of productive-critical engagement with Kant's philosophy¹—a process which according to Dieter Henrich can “certainly be compared to the emergence of a supernova, in the spread of which immense intellectual energies are released—but as the rise, not the fall, of a stellar world” (Henrich 1992, p. 21, translation JD). In accordance with the Special Issue “The Impact of German Idealism on Religion”, I understand this phase of developing a post-Kantian philosophy as the beginning of German Idealism, which lasted as a philosophical current until around the middle of the 19th century.

Hölderlin knew Hegel and Schelling from their time studying together in the Protestant seminary (“Tübinger Stift”, 1788–93). He attended Fichte's lectures in Jena in 1794/95 and spoke with him often during this time. In a letter to Christian Ludwig Neuffer of November 1794, he writes: “I go to his lectures every day. Speak to him sometimes.” (Hölderlin 2009, p. 149). Hölderlin then shared an intellectually productive friendship with Hegel when they both lived in or near Frankfurt (Bad Homburg) from 1797 to 1800 (Jamme 1983). Hölderlin inhabited the environment in which the most important strands of German idealism developed. It was in this “*Denkraum*” (Henrich 1992, p. 23) that the text “The Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism”, found by Franz Rosenzweig in 1917 and so named by him, was written. Hölderlin was probably involved in one form or another in providing ideas for the draft of this philosophical program, even if the authorship and genesis of the manuscript have not yet been reconstructed with certainty (Jamme and Schneider 1984).

In Hölderlin's entire oeuvre, a philosophical background is directly or indirectly evident. In his philosophical drafts, which admittedly all remained fragments, an independent interpretation of Kantian philosophy can be found (Kreuzer 1998). Johann Kreuzer explains that Hölderlin's draft of his main philosophical texts ("The Declining Fatherland. . .", "When the poet is once in command of the spirit. . .") begin when his literary writing was on the threshold of a radical change (Kreuzer [1985] 2021, pp. 1–2). In letters, Hölderlin several times presents a program to be worked out philosophically and comments on philosophical questions. And finally, Hölderlin's literary writing also has a philosophical background. Let us now take a closer look at the process of uncovering the philosophical character of Hölderlin's work.

Many of Hölderlin's poems written after 1800 could not be published by the poet himself. Despite his declared aim, he had not succeeded in achieving a broader social impact with his songs (Vöhler 2018–19). Nevertheless, the author of the epistolary novel *Hyperion* was never completely forgotten in the 19th century (no small thanks to this work, cf. Bothe 1992). Some representatives of Romanticism (Bettine and Achim von Arnim, Clemens Brentano) were aware of Hölderlin's philosophical significance even during his lifetime (cf. Kaspers 1990–91). A few decades later, Wilhelm Dilthey was one of the first to point out Hölderlin's importance again and published two studies on him: a short portrait in 1867 (cf. Dilthey 1970, pp. 102–16) and an extensive study in 1906, which is part of his work *Poetry and Experience* (Dilthey 1985, pp. 303–84; cf. Vollhardt 2014). For Dilthey, who had an excellent knowledge of the sources, which were only partially accessible at the time, the philosophical relevance of Hölderlin's work was beyond question. In both linguistic and philosophical terms, Hölderlin showed a forward movement "towards new possibilities", in which "he prepares the modern age" (cf. Dilthey 1985, p. 338). Dilthey sees the philosophical character of Hölderlin's work in close proximity to Hegel's early writings: "The agreement of the poet and the philosopher derives from the similarity of their approach." (Dilthey 1985, p. 347). Both seek to overcome "all separateness" (Dilthey 1985, p. 347) by searching for a unifying moment that precedes all oppositions. While Hölderlin, who advocated an all-one doctrine, which was built on beauty and had a strong reference to Greek antiquity, Hegel focused on love and tried to give a reinterpretation of the Christian religion.

In the following years, after Dilthey's detailed study from 1906, Norbert von Hellingrath and Ludwig von Zinkernagel worked at the same time on complete editions of Hölderlin's works. Many previously unpublished texts became accessible for the first time and a wave of reception began. On the basis of this new textual foundation, an in-depth philosophical examination of Hölderlin also became possible.

The *systematic* philosophical analysis of Hölderlin's work began with Ernst Cassirer's essay "Hölderlin und der deutsche Idealismus" (Hölderlin and German Idealism; Cassirer 2001, pp. 346–88 [115–155]), which was published in the journal *Logos* in two parts (1917/18 and 1918/19). Cassirer's work builds on Dilthey's studies, but represents the first explicit philosophical approach to Hölderlin and sets its own accents. He neither adopts their biographical orientation nor does he emphasize Hölderlin's distance from his own time and his contemporaneity with the present. In his essay, Cassirer rather gives a panorama of German Idealism and situates Hölderlin's work in the philosophical debates relevant around 1800. With recourse to Plato and Spinoza, he works out how Hölderlin's continuation of Kantian philosophy relates to the works of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. As much as Cassirer emphasizes their exchange of ideas, he is concerned from the outset to work out Hölderlin's position as his own voice in this concert: Early on, he had tried to develop an independent position vis à vis Fichte and Schiller, the two thinkers so admired by Hölderlin; and in the conversation with Schelling and Hegel, important impulses probably also came from Hölderlin: "Hölderlin is not only a mere recipient of the overall intellectual movement of idealism, but by appropriating it, he also enriches it with a new positive content." (Cassirer 2001, p. 349 [118], translation JD). Cassirer arrives at this judgment even though he could not yet have known a fragment that was only published

in 1961 in the *Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, under the title “Urtheil und Seyn” (Being, Judgement, Possibility). In this short text, Hölderlin outlines his own position with regard to the relationship between subject and object as well as the consciousness-theoretical question of the self-relation of the “I am I” and gives an interpretation of the categories of modality. In this, he understands “opposition as the structure of self-consciousness” (Kreuzer 1998, p. XV, translation JD).

What Hölderlin introduced early on into the discourses of German Idealism was the idea that nature, myth, art and beauty cannot be limited to being reconstructed in the trajectories of the autonomous ego’s history of freedom. They carry a meaning that cannot be reduced to anything else or serve as a means for something else. “For Hölderlin, myth is not merely an external allegorical symbol in which thought is clothed, but it forms for him an original and indissoluble spiritual Lebensform.” (Cassirer 2001, p. 352 [121], translation JD). However, this requires not only philosophical reflection, but also an appropriate form of poetic expression. It is from this, he says, that Hölderlin’s work must ultimately be understood—despite all the instructive attempts to trace it back to the influences that impacted it:

“From the rules of this artistry alone can be derived the explanation for the distance and closeness, for the alternation between attraction and repulsion, which is manifested in Hölderlin’s overall relationship to his epoch and especially in his relationship to the idealist-philosophical movement.” (Cassirer 2001, p. 348 [116–117])

If we follow Cassirer, we can state two things: It is clear that Hölderlin belongs in the context of German Idealism. More concretely, the question of his significance can only be asked in connection with his literary work.

3. Religion as a Topic in Hölderlin’s Oeuvre?

Religion and the question of God (*Gottesfrage*) pervade Hölderlin’s entire oeuvre as essential themes: the literary texts (the poems and the novel *Hyperion*), the philosophical drafts and also his translation work. I cannot address those authors who interpret Hölderlin in the direction of atheism (Hörisch 1992) and regard his work an abandonment of the divine, but I hope the following examples can show how present the theme of the divine is for Hölderlin:

(1) In the philosophical draft, which bears the title “Über Religion” (On Religion) in the *Stuttgarter Ausgabe* and the title “Fragment philosophischer Briefe” (Fragment of Philosophical Letters) in the *Frankfurter Ausgabe*, Hölderlin more precisely defines the place of religion within the framework of his thought (Franz 2000, [2000] 2011; Gaier 2008; Kreuzer [2002] 2011; Louth 2016). This draft was preceded by a letter of 24 February 1796 to Immanuel Niethammer, in which Hölderlin announced “New Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man”, in which he wanted to “go on from philosophy to poetry and religion” (Hölderlin 2009, p. 68). This refers to the triad of philosophy, art and religion, which also designates the three dimensions of the absolute spirit in Hegel: art—religion—philosophy. The order of the three has no definitive meaning in either Hegel or Hölderlin; they interpenetrate each other, but ultimately cannot be placed in any hierarchical order, which can no longer exist in the realm of absolute spirit.

The first point we need to address with regard to the *Fragment of Philosophical Letters* (Hölderlin 2009, pp. 234–40) is the basic concept of the sphere. Hölderlin uses this term to oppose a finite thinking that is merely “machinery” (Hölderlin 2009, p. 234). He uses “sphere” to describe thinking in linguistic-historical-cultural mediations in which the human being is embedded. Only within a sphere, i.e., in “a more lively relation, raised above need, which he maintains to that which surrounds him” (Hölderlin 2009, p. 234), can man experience “that there is a spirit, a god” (Hölderlin 2009, p. 234). The relationship to God thus presupposes a certain relationship to the world. It is not merely a product of human self-reflection, nor does it arise from the necessity of connections in the world of phenomena, but corresponds to a living experience of being embedded in linguistic-

historical-cultural contexts. In this there is an analogy to the explanations in Hegel's early writings (Appel 2003).

God corresponds to the individual sphere of the human being: "And everyone would, according to this, have his own god, insofar as everyone has his own sphere in which he is active and which he experiences" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 234). God is thus, far from any heteronomy, a cipher for radical individualization of the human being. This echoes the idea of autonomy and freedom that has been central to the concept of God since Kantian thought. At the same time, the thought of God radiating from the sphere also contains the idea of what we might call a 'translation' from one sphere to another, and thus a border-crossing, a relation between different spheres or a commonly shared sphere. The sphere can also encompass several people, insofar as they are in a living community with each other, i.e., not based on servitude but on recognition. The more intensively mutual recognition is experienced, the more God also appears as the common God of this shared sphere. If all people formed *one* sphere, according to Hölderlin's utopia, there would also be "a common deity" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 234) of all. Conversely, if a religion professes monotheism, it must also promote the vision of a cosmopolitan society.

Hölderlin, goes still one step further. It is the *particular* conception of God, if it has itself emerged from free relationships, which is also the starting point for forms of translation and a commonly shared conception of God, not an abstract-general conception. It is "a desire of human beings, as long as they are not hurt and angered, not dejected and not outraged and involved in a just or unjust struggle, to make, just as in many other matters, their different kinds of representation of the divine join one another, and thus to give the limitedness which every single kind of representation has, and must have, its freedom" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 235).

The close connection of the sphere as an expression for the linguistic-historical-cultural form of mediation of our Lebenswelt with the concept of God leads us to another important thought. Again, Hölderlin's question is how we can escape a finite and objectifying view of the world. He sees in a consideration of "relationships as religious ones" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 237), which correlates to a consideration in the living context of a sphere, a capacity for differentiation that is lacking in "our iron concepts" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 237). Hölderlin trusts a religious perspective to work out differentiations that can be perceived neither in logical nor in moral judgements. He is not concerned with a reversal of the Enlightenment, but rather with a "higher enlightenment" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 237).

The transition to a religious perception of conditions is in no way connected with a decline into pre-modern conditions. Rather, it represents a free spiritual repetition [*freie Wiederholung im Geist*] of current conditions. The spiritual (religious) life emerges where the human being "as it were, repeats his real life" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 236). Spiritual repetition, however, does not mean a mere repetition in thought or through memory that does not become reality and does not expose itself to finite conditions of space and time. If repetition does not enter into the specific conditions of reality, it remains in the realm of necessary (automatic) connections of thought. Only with the transition into historical-linguistic-cultural contexts of the sphere, i.e., in specific conditions, is a freedom and differentiation associated with that can be grasped neither by logical nor by moral judgements.

According to Hölderlin, religion offers a special access to this repetition of reality that does not remain in thought; it can be seen as a form of expression of this new reality. How does he define religion? Hölderlin speaks of *religious relationships* and distinguishes them from "intellectual moral legal relationships on the one hand, and on the other hand, physical mechanical historical relationships" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 238). The first set means man in his freedom, the second man in his embeddedness in natural relationships. We could also speak of discreteness and continuity, of negativity and positivity. According to Hölderlin, religion has the ability to connect the two sets. It is neither absorbed in self-determination, i.e., cannot be reconstructed in the trajectories of practical reason (first row), nor can it be traced back to merely natural dispositions, such as genetic endowment, historical or economic circumstances (second row). It is "intellectual-historical, *that is,*

Mythical" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 238). It unites both sets and gives them expression, as addressed by the word "*Mythical*" (*mythos* as narrative, narration). In the expressions of religion, the I, which Kant imagines in a hiatus of nature and freedom, receives a form that seriously embraces and acknowledges its opposition. However, in order to be able to determine these forms of expression of religion, Hölderlin again finds himself referred to forms of art (Deibl 2023, pp. 143–49).

The *Fragment of Philosophical Letters* remains unfinished; many motifs are only hinted at and not elaborated. Nevertheless, it shows very clearly how Hölderlin seeks to think of philosophy, art and religion as closely intertwined.

(2) In Hölderlin's poetry, the concept of religion is not addressed, but the figures of the divine appear—quite often with a concrete name—in almost all the poems. The reference to God can be traced from the earliest texts to the great hymns and the fragments of the "Homburger Folioheft". The utterances in which Hölderlin refers to God range from a trusting call to a lament that he no longer has a language for God. Sometimes there is even a certain proximity to prayer. This article does not offer enough space to elaborate on this in detail. I am merely listing a few striking sentences to illustrate the breadth of the spectrum of reference to the divine. Admittedly, in all cases one would have to develop the appearance of the divine in the text from the corresponding poem.

One of Hölderlin's earliest juvenile poems begins with an address to God and asks, in a tone similar to the Psalms, who God is and who—in relation to him—human beings are: "Lord! what are you, what children of men?" (*M. G.*, V 1). Hölderlin then contrasts his own being misunderstood by humans with his greater acquaintance with the gods: "I grew tall in the arms of the gods." (*When I was a boy. . .*, V 32; Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 137). However, this turns into one of the most severe statements about the separation of humans and gods. In *Der Abschied*, Hölderlin refers to the time "[. . .] Since the rooted/all-dividing hatred separates gods and men" (*Der Abschied*, VV 13 et seq.). And finally, he states wistfully that the language to address the divine is mostly absent: "Silence often behooves us: deficient in names that are holy,/Hearts may beat high, while the lips hesitate, wary of speech?" (*Homecoming*, VV 101 et seq. Hölderlin [1966] 2004, p. 337). But then it says that "[. . .] the Godhead, the Spirit housed/In human words once more, at noontide/Again with a name, as once, calls himself." (*Exhortation*, VV 26–28, Hölderlin [1966] 2004, p. 221, translation modified). And finally, perhaps the most enigmatic phrase, revised several times by Hölderlin: "[. . .] no/Weapon he needs, nor subterfuge/Till God's being not there helps him" (*Dichterberuf*, VV 63 et seq., Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 157).

In the elegy *Homecoming*, the poetic I explicitly reflects on addressing God in poetry. The second stanza of the poem reports how the figure of the blessed God emerges ever more clearly from the chaos (first stanza). Against this background, the poetic I can also experience itself as speaking and says at the beginning of the third stanza: "Much I said to him; for whatever the poets may ponder, /Sing, it mostly concerns either the angels or him" (*Homecoming*, VV 37 et seq., Hölderlin [1966] 2004, p. 333). Poetry proves—at least in this poem—to be primarily addressed to God or the angels as his messengers.

(3) The reference to religion is also of central importance in Hölderlin's translations. With regard to the Pindar Hymns, *Antigone* and *Oedipus*, it is already true in terms of content that these works are rooted in religious myth. However, I would like to point out another aspect. Hölderlin wrote philosophical notes on both of the translations of Sophocles' tragedies, reflecting on the process of translation. In the "Notes on *Antigone*" (Hölderlin 2009, pp. 325–32), Hölderlin discusses, among other things, the question of how to deal with the names of the gods. Contrary to the original, he translates "Zeus" as "Father of Time" and justifies this intervention in the text with the words: "For we must everywhere represent the myth more demonstrably." (Hölderlin 2009, p. 328). The myth, i.e., the form of expression which—as the *Fragment of Philosophical Letters* shows—is the linguistic form of religion and combines the aspects of freedom and nature, must be given an appropriate form.

For Hölderlin—as a thinker of German Idealism—both the concept of religion and the question of how to address the divine play a central role. Johann Kreuzer states that “the engagement with the discourse of God [Rede von Gott] forms a constant in Hölderlin’s work” (Kreuzer 2016b, p. 245). In the following, I will point out three aspects in which Hölderlin’s reflections on religion and the question of God still offer departure points for reception.

4. Religion in the Trajectories of Aesthetics

Kantian philosophy always remains an important point of reference for Hölderlin, and yet he gradually detaches himself from the attempt to reconstruct religion along the lines of practical philosophy. No longer the generality of morality alone, but also a generality that is inherent in aesthetics becomes the horizon of the consideration of religion for him. In this chapter, I aim to show how Hölderlin takes up the matrix of Kantian philosophy in order to develop his own understanding of religion and the “Gottesfrage”.

(1) Hölderlin’s reading of Kant began in the summer of 1790 when he was already studying at the Tübinger Stift (Doering 2022, pp. 261, 279–87). In a letter from Hölderlin to his mother dated 14 February 1791, Hölderlin gives some hints that do not mention Kant directly, but which Violetta Waibel has clearly ascribed to the latter—namely with regard to Kant’s demonstration of the impossibility of the proofs of God’s existence in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Waibel [2002] 2011, pp. 90 et seq.):

“I had been studying the area of philosophy that deals with the rational proofs for the existence of God and with those of his qualities we are supposed to recognize in nature, and I had an interest in it I am not ashamed of though for a while it did lead me into thoughts you would perhaps have found unsettling had you known what they were. For I soon came to see that these rational proofs for the existence of God, and also for immortality, were so imperfect that a fierce opponent could knock them down completely or at least in their main lines.” (Hölderlin 2009, p. 7 et seq.)

For Hölderlin, this insight does not mean the loss of religion, as Hölderlin also says in the same letter: “But I was still left with the faith of my heart, which is so incontestably full of the longing for eternity, for God” (Hölderlin 2009, p. 8). Rather, the reading of Kant forms the starting point for his critical reflection on the status of religion. It is interesting for the context of this contribution that where you can find first (even just slight and indirect) references to Kant, they deal with the *Gottesfrage*. In a letter to his brother Carl dated 13 April 1795, Hölderlin concisely summarizes the doctrine of the postulates five years after he began reading Kant:

“But since this aim [moral perfection] is impossible in this world, since it cannot be attained within time and we can only approach it in infinite progression, we have need of a belief in an infinite extent of time because the infinite progress in good is an uncontested requirement of our law; but this infinite extent of time is inconceivable without faith in a Lord of nature whose will is the same as the command of the moral law within us, and who must therefore want us to endure infinitely because he wants us to make infinite progress in good and, as the Lord of nature, also has the power to realize that which he wants. [...] And so the sacred law within us is the basis for the rational belief in God and immortality, and also, insofar as they are not dependent on us, in the wise governing of our destinies.” (Hölderlin 2009, p. 50)

Although there is evidence of an intensive reading of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* at this time, it does not yet have an impact on Hölderlin’s reference to religion. The connection between freedom, morality, God and infinite progress—all this still points to practical philosophy as the focal point.

(2) A year later, in March 1796, Hölderlin addressed his brother in another letter and spoke again about the path to philosophy. In this letter he refers to aesthetics as *cacumina*

rerum, i.e., as the peak of knowledge. He makes it clear, however, that the occupation with it presupposes that foundation which he has presented him in the above-mentioned letter:

“You say you want to occupy yourself with aesthetics. Do not you think that the definition of concepts must precede their union, and that for this reason the subordinate parts of knowledge, e.g., the theory of right (in the pure sense), moral philosophy, etc., must be studied before approaching the *cacumina rerum*? [...] It’s true it is also possible to start from the top—to the extent that the pure ideal of all thought and action, unrepresentable and unattainable beauty, must be present to us everywhere, one has to—but it can only be recognized in all its completeness and clarity when one has found one’s way through the labyrinth of knowledge and only then, having keenly missed one’s homeland, arrived in the quiet land of beauty.” (Hölderlin 2009, p. 69)

Hölderlin does not want to give up practical philosophy as a foundation. However, through his preoccupation with Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, Schiller’s reception of the *Third Critique* and the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*, Hölderlin develops an independent path beyond Kant. Hölderlin’s letters document this development. This he wanted to give form in an “essay on aesthetic ideas” (Hölderlin 2009, p. 34), which, of course, was never completed:

“Perhaps I’ll be able to send you an essay on aesthetic ideas; as it can be considered a commentary on Plato’s *Phaedrus*, taking a passage from it as its express starting-point, it might interest Conz. In essence it is to contain an analysis of the beautiful and the sublime in which the Kantian analysis will be simplified and also, from another perspective, varied and extended, as Schiller has already done in part in his treatise on ‘Grace and Dignity’, though he has ventured a step less beyond the Kantian borderline than he should have done in my opinion. Don’t smile! I may be wrong; but I’ve checked, and checked again and again at the cost of much effort.” (Hölderlin 2009, p. 34)

Violetta Waibel says of this project that Hölderlin “presents here his ambitious plan to combine and at the same time to surpass the conceptions of beauty of Plato, Kant and Schiller” (Waibel [2002] 2011, p. 92). With the beautiful and the sublime, Hölderlin now also mentions the two basic categories of Kant’s *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* after the aesthetic ideas. So, we are now moving entirely in the environment of Kant’s third critique.

What is meant by the transgression of the Kantian boundary line is evaluated differently in research (cf. von Bassermann-Jordan 2006–7). According to Johann Kreuzer, Hölderlin addresses a question that arises with the *Critique of Judgement* and whose answer remains in abeyance—the question “whether aesthetic experience also has the status of generalisable knowledge [verallgemeinerbarer Erkenntnis]” (Kreuzer 2016a, p. 37). In this respect, Hölderlin had been disappointed by Schiller, who had not taken advantage of the potential offered by the *Critique of Judgement*, since he ultimately saw the experience of the beautiful primarily as a transition to the moral (Cf. Kreuzer 2016a, p. 38).

Hölderlin, on the other hand, wants to preserve the dignity of aesthetic experience and sees in it a constitutive role for knowledge. Kant precludes this in the *Critique of Judgement* on the one hand, but indirectly admits it again in other places. In the first paragraph, he clarifies that the aesthetic judgement “contributes nothing to knowledge” (Kant [1952] 2007, sct. 1, p. 36). In paragraph 39, however, he sees in aesthetic experience “a process of judgement which has also to be invoked in order to obtain the commonest experience” (Kant [1952] 2007, sct. 39, p. 122). In paragraph 9, to which Kant himself attaches decisive importance in the *Third Critique*, he repeatedly refers to what is “suitable for a cognition in general” (Kant [1952] 2007, sct. 9, p. 49) when he grasps the *free play* of imagination and understanding. Although aesthetic judgements do not contribute to the determination of the object, they do thematize the interplay and attunement of imagination and understanding that is necessary for all cognition. With the aesthetic judgements, the activity of the power of judgement itself, in which “the understanding and the imagination

are regarded in relationship with one another" (Kant [1952] 2007, p. 333), comes into view. "Kant repeatedly inculcates that the analysis of pure judgements of taste ultimately leads back to a 'subjective condition' [sect. 9, p. 132] of the possibility of cognition in general", as Stephan Zimmermann points out (Zimmermann 2014, p. 32, translation JD). According to this interpretation, the *Critique of Judgement* provides a deeper insight into the conditions of cognition in general than the two critiques that preceded it. As Thomas Rentsch puts it, the Third Critique partakes in "a permanent radicalisation of transcendental questions" (Rentsch 2013, p. 370): "The preconditions of critically conceived theoretical reason are of a practical (and religious) nature, and their preconditions lie in our power of judgement" (Rentsch 2013, p. 370). Aesthetic judgements, freed from the functionalization on the determination of the object, thus grant an insight into the conditions of cognition that lie in the subject in general. Aesthetics is thus not only a marginal topic of the system of cognition in general, but it brings cognition into focus in a deepened way and thus has a general character.

Hölderlin follows this specific line laid down in the *Critique of Judgement*, which assigns a fundamental function to aesthetic judgements. In his own thinking, however, it must first assert itself against another Kantian line, which proceeds more strongly from practical reason and the postulates. In a letter to Schiller from 4 September 1795, both lines still appear in parallel:

"I am attempting to work out for myself the idea of an infinite progress in philosophy by showing that the unremitting demand that must be made of any system, the union of subject and object in an absolute. . . I or whatever one wants to call it, though possible aesthetically, in an act of intellectual intuition, is theoretically possible only through endless approximation, like the approximation of a square to a circle; and that in order to arrive at a system of thought immortality is just as necessary as it is for a system of action." (Hölderlin 2009, p. 62)

When Hölderlin speaks of "the union of subject and object", he does not mean the substantiation of an absolute position beyond space and time. He only says, almost casually: "in an absolute. . . I or whatever one wants to call it". Hölderlin is merely referring to a cipher for a position that we must presuppose if we want to think of unification. Here, two concepts confront each other: endless approximation and intellectual intuition. Where with Kant's first two critiques the idea of infinite approximation indicates a point of unification, Hölderlin activates the motif of intellectual intuition in an independent continuation of the *Third Critique*. The concept of intellectual intuition points away from the idea of infinite approximation to the realm of the aesthetic. However, after a brief phase in the mid-1790s, it loses its appeal for Hölderlin again. With this term, Hölderlin strives to express the fundamental meaning of aesthetic experience, which cannot be captured either theoretically or practically. In the words of Johann Kreuzer:

"What interests Hölderlin in this early phase of his thinking about the theorem of intellectual intuition [. . .] is obviously that with it, the epistemological and consciousness-theoretical [bewusstseinstheoretische] significance of the meaning of aesthetic experience becomes describable." (Kreuzer 2012, p. 122, translation JD)

(3) In a programmatic letter dated 24 February 1796, addressed to the philosopher Immanuel Niethammer, Hölderlin now also includes religion, which in his letter to his brother in 1795 was still thought of entirely in Kantian trajectories, in the realm of aesthetics. The idea of infinite approximation no longer appears here; Hölderlin now rejects practical reason as an aid or final focal point. In this letter, he speaks of wanting to write *New Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*:

"In the philosophical letters I want to find the principle that will explain to my satisfaction the divisions in which we think and exist, but which is also capable of making the conflict disappear, the conflict between the subject and the object, between our selves and the world, and between reason and revelation—

theoretically, through intellectual intuition, without our practical reason having to intervene. To do this we need an aesthetic sense, and I shall call my philosophical letters New Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man. And in them I will go on from philosophy to poetry and religion.” (Hölderlin 2009, p. 68)

The framework for Hölderlin’s reflections will always remain Kant’s epistemological critique and the foundational importance he gives to morality vis à vis transcendent ideas. However, it becomes increasingly clear to Hölderlin that the place where he reconstructs religious experience is aesthetics. This is not to discount morality because, as Hölderlin shows in his interpretation of the *Critique of Judgment*, aesthetics itself has a fundamental significance for morality. If it is true that aesthetic judgements have a founding function vis à vis moral judgements, religious content can be interpreted within the broader horizon of aesthetics without having to give up its connection to practical reason.

Hölderlin’s reference to religion raises a fundamental question: In Modernity, can the contents of religion be reconstructed solely and comprehensively within the framework of practical reason? According to Jamme and Schneider, this would be the Fichtean line of the continuation of Kant: “In the Kantian-Fichtean approach, the beautiful had nothing to do with religion, was even a hindrance to it” (Jamme and Schneider 1984, p. 60, translation JD). Can religion therefore ultimately be translated into morality or is there a sensual surplus that points to another form of aesthetic thematization? This would be Hölderlin’s continuation of the Kantian line. This alternative is a basic question that Hölderlin passes on to contemporary theology and philosophy of religion.

5. Multiplicity of Understanding the Divine

(1) In Hölderlin’s literary work, the divine has a constant presence. The names under which it appears are manifold: God, gods, demigods, spirit, the blessed, the heavenly, father, lord, Zeus, father ether, Dionysus, Heracles, Christ. . . The divine is associated with a variety of ideas that are difficult to subsume under a single concept: Elements of Christian narrative, Greek mythology, a pantheistic devotion to nature, a new mythology, a religion of art, as well as the loss of God and the difficulty of still naming him in language, all occur in close proximity to one another in Hölderlin’s literary work.

Thus, at the end of the second book of the first volume of the epistolary novel *Hyperion*, it says: “Sacred Nature, thou art the same within me and without. It cannot be so hard to unite what is outside of me and the divine within me” (Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 73). This is contrasted with a rupture, as we have seen in *Der Abschied*, where it says: “[. . .] Since the rooted/all-dividing hatred separates gods and men” (*Der Abschied*, VV 13 et seq.). The aforementioned pantheistic devotion to nature (“Sacred Nature!”) corresponds to an art religion of beauty, in which Hölderlin has the ancient Greek world in mind. The first daughter of beauty is art and its second is religion: “Religion is love of Beauty” (Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 65). “There will be but one Beauty; and man and Nature will be united in one all-embracing divinity” (Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 74). In *Patmos*, a poem more strongly influenced by the Bible, it is precisely this idea of beauty as a mediating instance of gods and men that collapses when, alluding to the death of Christ and the dispersion of Jesus’ disciples, it says: “But when thereupon he dies/To whom beauty most adhered [. . .]” (*Patmos*, VV 136 et seq., Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 251). Thus the poetic I also proclaims at the beginning of *Germania*: “Those images of gods in the ancient land,/Them, it is true, I may not now invoke [. . .]” (*Germania*, VV 2 et seq., Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 209). The images of the divine and the ideas of religion must be constantly dissolved and rewritten, and only in this way do they retain a moment of withdrawal, of the unspoken: “Now threefold circumscribe it/Yet unuttered also, just as you found it,/ [. . .] let it remain” (*Germania*, V 94–96, Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 215).

All these examples show: if one encounters the divine somewhere in Hölderlin’s texts, one cannot associate with it a definite idea from other texts by the author, knowledge of his biographical background or familiarity with the historical context in order to create a closed theological system. What the divine means, is not given with certainty, but must

be developed from the concrete text, in the act of reading. It is important not to regard individual expressions or sentences from Hölderlin's writings directly as statements by the poet, but to consider their position in the specific text in each case. At certain points in the text, Hölderlin makes the divine appear like figures on a stage. But this is never to be understood in the sense of a final determination. Rather, these figures of the divine also take leave again, only to be called up again at a later time. Of course, this is not an arbitrary process, but has several reasons.

First, the divine can only be spoken of in concrete constellations, i.e., in the context of a certain understanding of human beings, nature and language. This constellation (or sphere) always presents itself differently. With a changed understanding of human beings, nature and language, there is also a different form of understanding of the divine. Second, any talk of the divine is well-prepared in the text; individual sentences must not be torn out of the dynamics of the text and taken as isolated statements. Hölderlin is primarily a poet and is interested in the course of a text and does not write treatises from which individual formulations could be detached like doctrines. Third, Hölderlin struggles—and this touches a deep core of his writing—with how different representations of the divine (and the understanding of human beings, nature and the language associated with them) can be translated into one another. Their connection is not apparent, so that it would only be a matter of explicating it. Rather, it must always be brought forth anew (performatively) in the dynamics of a text. Finding such connections (at least temporarily) is the challenge that Hölderlin's texts face and which they also fail at time and again, which sometimes leads to the abortion of texts. Fourth, a dynamic emanates from the divine that sets the text in motion and leads to its revision in many places, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section. The divine is thus itself something that cannot be fixed in any way.

(2) Hölderlin's legacy in this respect is the openness of the question of God *as a question* (see Appel and Deibl 2020). The divine is no longer a concluding thought, but a reference to an openness that can only be grasped in the specific situation (in the sphere of human beings, nature and language) and requires a new representation in each case. The phrase from *The Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism* could also be understood from this perspective, where it says: "Monotheism of reason and the heart, polytheism of art and the imagination" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 342). The monotheistic matrix of practical reason remains unscathed; the line of flight of polytheism is not a matter of many gods, but of the ever-new representation of the divine, which—as connected with the power of imagination—is transient. In the important § 49 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant speaks about "a faculty for laying hold of the rapid and transient play of the imagination and for unifying it in a concept (which for that very reason is original, and reveals a new rule which could not have been inferred from any preceding principles or examples) that admits of communication without any constraint of rules" (Kant [1952] 2007, sct. 49, p. 146). The creative faculty of which Kant speaks here, Hölderlin tries to realize in his poetry. This is particularly evident in the divine, which can only be thought of as something open.

In Hölderlin's trajectories, the divine neither evaporates into the indeterminate (e.g., of a religion of the Enlightenment) nor can it be grasped within denominational or religious boundaries. It is not beyond its representation, but nonetheless always dissolves it. The idea of God is not what separates the religions and confessions, but what blurs their fixity in the search for forms of temporary possible representation.

6. Contemporary Reception of Hölderlin

(1) With the publication of the first complete edition of Hölderlin's works by Norbert von Hellmuth, a broad reception of the poet began around 1914. His approach to religion plays an important role in this. Hölderlin's reference to God or the divine is obviously suitable for taking up the question of God in the present—sometimes in entirely secular contexts. Hölderlin, who wrote at the turn of the 19th century, appears to speak for a later age and to understand that age better than we, the people living in it, which is why one can speak of the anachronistic contemporaneity of the poet (Deibl 2018).

Hölderlin permits us to address the unrealized potentials of the question of God. This is probably related to the fact that the divine in Hölderlin is not subordinated to a specific concept from which it is thought, but can only be grasped as the open. In other words, the absolute, not as the ultimate conclusion, but as the indisposable/inaccessible (*unverfügbare*) reference point that saves discourses from their conclusion. In the following, I would like to present an important strand of Hölderlin's reception that is closely connected to religion.

(2) With the onset of Hölderlin's reception at the beginning of the 20th century, one also comes across a motif that is repeated with certain variations up to the present: Hölderlin's work reveals a basic apocalyptic tension that pervades Western history and concerns its position in relation to the divine. This is divided into two further issues: In Hölderlin, the tension between flight and the new arrival of the gods is presented, as is the tension between a biblical and an ancient Greek paradigm of relating God and history to each other. In this context, Slavoj Žižek speaks of a "Hölderlin paradigm" referring to thinkers

"who all conceive their own age as that of the critical turning point of metaphysics: in their (our) time, metaphysics has exhausted its potential, and the thinker's duty is to prepare the ground for a new, post-metaphysical thinking. More generally, the entire Judeo-Christian history, up to post-modernity, is determined by what one is tempted to call the "Hölderlin paradigm": "Where the danger is, grows also what can save us" ("Wo aber Gefahr ist wächst das Rettende auch"). The present moment appears as the lowest point in a long process of historical decadence (the flight of Gods, alienation. . .), but the danger of the catastrophic loss of the essential dimension of being-human also opens up the possibility of a reversal (Kehre)—proletarian revolution, the arrival of new gods (which, according to the late Heidegger, alone can save us), etc." (Žižek 2014, p. 344)

In order to express the Hölderlin paradigm, Žižek refers to a famous dictum from *Patmos*: "Where the danger is, grows/also what can save us". With Hölderlin, history is considered in its entirety and it can be expressed that one's own time has reached a low point, but that the saving—whether this is to be thought of divinely or secularly—is approaching. Žižek attributes to the Christian conception of history, which still lingers in many secular concepts, an awareness of the catastrophic, but also of the (divine) saving reversal.

One example for this is Martin Heidegger, who, at the beginning of his first lecture on Hölderlin, states:

"One treats Hölderlin 'historiographically' and fails to recognize the singular, essential point that his work, still without time or space, has already surpassed our historiographical rummagings and has grounded the commencement of another history: that history that starts with the struggle over the decision concerning the arrival or flight of the God." (Heidegger [1980] 2014, p. 2)

Hölderlin's work has a singular character, which Heidegger expresses by stating that it stands outside the order of space and time. Thus, it contributes—as an event—to the foundation of another history. Hölderlin's work reveals an otherwise (as yet) invisible reversal in history that is essentially related to the presence or absence of the divine.

One could also consider the work of the theologian Erich Przywara to be part of the Hölderlin paradigm. In his book entitled "Hölderlin" (1949), he connects the possibility of that reversal of history—with reference to the same passage from *Patmos*—with the tension between ancient Greek and biblical thinking: "Hölderlin is the place of primeval occidental events: namely, of the conflict between what is actually Christian in the Occident and its Hellenistic-Roman form of completion and order" (Przywara 1949, p. 19). Hölderlin's opus shows the tension between a Johannine-apocalyptic thinking, which reveals the ruptures of history and the saving God, and a Hellenic thinking, which thinks of the divine in terms of the perfection and harmony of nature, but which cannot do justice to the abysses of history. "Przywara sees Hölderlin's life as analogous to the development of the Occident, which is characterized by the struggle between pure perfection and the folly of

the cross" (Kathrein 2018, p. 86, translation JD). In Hölderlin's work, the breakthrough of the apocalyptic Christian interpretation of history ultimately occurs and with it, reference to the saving God.

In a similar apocalyptic tone, Peter Sloterdijk also writes about Hölderlin. According to him, Hölderlin for the last time expresses the unification of both paradigms—the Christian and the Greek (Christ and Dionysus). In his last poems, which he wrote in the Tübingen Tower after 1806, this unity dissolves and it proves to be too great to be attained. In the following note, Sloterdijk speaks in the first person in Hölderlin's place:

"The existence in the tower was utterly tuned to the basic sound of the afterwards. Once I spoke like gods. I knew what it meant for grammar to have become flesh and to have dwelt among us. Melos was a frequent visitor. It was not rare for the highest of them all to stay overnight and when morning came verses were in the world that sent a message to the coming century: Christ and Dionysus are united. The alliance that the god forged with the god in me was torn asunder. Now I am small and left behind, a servant in the hall, sweeping the floor after the major conference is over. Robbed I am of my rights, language no longer speaks." (Sloterdijk 2012, p. 14, translation altered JD)

Hölderlin symbolizes an end point in history: his ideas show how much the entire Occidental history revolves around the connection between Greek and biblical thought and how it must be continually expressed in new forms. At its highest point, the concept of the divine, Hölderlin once again attempts to express such a synthesis (cf. Vöhler 2020), but fails.

The dissolution of a certain constellation of the divine (here the connection between Christ and Dionysus) also has far-reaching effects on language. As apocalyptic as Sloterdijk's description sounds and as unrealized as it remains here, it has an important point of reference in Hölderlin himself. In fact, the elusive character of the divine repeatedly leads to the necessity of reformulating the text and sometimes prevents its final expression. With the concept of the divine, a crisis of language occurs. This is also evident in the work of Giorgio Agamben.

At a neuralgic point in *The Time That Remains*, Agamben's book on Saint Paul and the legacy of Pauline thought in occidental culture, Hölderlin unexpectedly appears in the last paragraph of the fourth chapter, and he again leads to a reversal of time:

"When Hölderlin, on the threshold of a new century, elaborates on his doctrine of the leave-taking of the gods—specifically of the last god, the Christ—at the very moment in which he announces this new atheology, the metrical form of his lyric shatters to the point of losing any recognizable identity in his last hymns. The absence of the gods is one with the disappearance of closed metrical form; atheology immediately becomes a-prosody." (Agamben [2000] 2005, p. 87)

This note, which combines "the birth of modern atheology" (Neri 2014, p. 45, translation JD) and the disintegration of language, expresses a change in Hölderlin's poetry that, for Agamben, is paradigmatic for literature and thought in general.

The forms of structure characteristic of poetry, such as rhyme and metrical form, which Agamben talks about losing, are not merely linguistic means of expression. In the poem, they constitute a temporality of their own: each verse end inscribes a coming to an end in each line and recapitulates the content of the verse before the flow of content can continue; in the rhyme, phonetic material is repeated so that internal textual bridges are formed—as references both backwards and forwards; metrics and rhythm structure language, etc. Hereby, a qualification of time takes place in the poem, which forms a structured time within the chronologically passing time, a time of memory, of looking ahead, of recapitulation. Agamben sees in this the vitality of a messianic heritage, or more precisely of the messianic time. When all structures are lost in Hölderlin's last hymns and he creates a new free-rhythmic poetry, and when the text structure visibly dissolves more and more and no further finished texts are produced, Agamben sees this as a sign

of an epochal change in occidental history. It threatens to lose all its messianic traits (cf. Agamben [2000] 2005, pp. 60–87).

What do the examples from Žižek, Heidegger, Przywara, Sloterdijk, and Agamben say about the impact of Hölderlin as a thinker of German Idealism? The contemporary thinkers cited all refer to Hölderlin's work at a very precisely definable point. After the end of the great historical-philosophical narratives, a total overview of history is no longer feasible (cf. Appel 2022). Nevertheless, questions remain about the meaning of history in general—questions that obviously cannot be asked without reference to the divine, even in secular contexts: the divine as a cipher for the saving reversal; the divine whose leave-taking renders the departure from every dimension of the meaning of history thematizable; the perception of history between the utopia of its fulfillment and the awareness of its abysses; the question of the valence of a messianic trace in language and history. However, these questions can no longer be posed directly or immediately after the end of the great historical-philosophical narratives. It seems that the interpretation of some verses by Hölderlin can help at this point. Through them, these questions are temporarily given a language (cf. Deibl 2018).

Hölderlin's discourse on God has likely been such an important point of reference since the beginning of the 20th century because of its ambivalence, the tensions it conveys, its complexity and its openness. Of course, one could argue that all of this is far removed from German Idealism. I consider it a sign of the vitality of this movement that we continue to engage with it, struggling both alongside as well as against its thinkers to this day. It is a sign of the vitality of this movement that its motifs still pervade discourse today and hold it in a state of productive unrest.

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Note

¹ For Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin, reading Plato also played a decisive role (Halfwassen 2020), but it is not the focus of this article, especially since it primarily deals with German Idealism as a reaction to Kant's philosophy.

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