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A Place of Encounter with a Divine. Heidegger on the Spatiality of Religious Experience

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Abstract: The paper explores how different models of space articulate the nature of religious experience. Analyses are focused primarily on Heidegger's phenomenology. Throughout his work, three models of space are determined: an opened, an empty, and a topological space. According to these models, there are three types of sacred places, that is, places of encounter with Divine: 1. a sacred place defined by coordinates materialized in a sacred building or symbolized by a cultic procedure; 2. a negative place, a place of a negative form of encounter; 3. a place as a path-mark, defined by a transitive (wayfaring) involvement into a lived environment.

Keywords: Phenomenology of religious experience; Sacred Place; Phenomenology of Space; Phenomenological Topology; Heidegger

1 Introduction

Phenomenology of religion understands religiosity as a fact which need not be defined or justified by reasons, but which needs a careful description. Yet instead of striving for objective descriptions of divine beings or worshiped gods, tools for liturgical services, or buildings and procedures, a phenomenological approach focuses on a lived experience, as far as it has a *religious* meaning for individual humans. In this study, in a perspective that might be called *phenomenological-topological*, I suppose that the core of religious experience thus understood is an *encounter* with a Divine (God, a god, gods, divine beings, spirit, sacred animal, etc.) at a sacred *place*. The emphasis is given on *place*, because we may hesitate as to whether the word "encounter" is not unduly strong for describing the nature of religious lived-experience. Still (at least as I presuppose), religious experience always relates to a special place where it happens.[1]

By the expression "encounter with a Divine at a sacred place" (for short, "encounter") I attempt to highlight the spatiality of religious lived experience. However, the aim of this paper is not to turn attention to spatial aspects of religious experience, or to apply the so called "spatial turn" in the field of philosophy of religion. I anticipate the spatial turn, and in this framework I want to ask how spatial descriptions of

1 Mark Wynn in his seminal book *Faith and Place* understands an encounter with God primarily as an encounter with place. According to Wynn, we can approach the capacity of a place to embody a religious experience (i.e., a religious encounter) in a threefold way: "The first of these approaches focuses upon the capacity of a place to image microcosmically the significance of the created order as a whole. The second supposes that our embodied appropriation of a material context can constitute an act of reference to God, or enable some sort of apprehension of God. And finally, I consider the possibility that the meaning of events which have occurred at a particular site, including events of religious significance, can be stored up and then encountered there – where the language of 'encounter' signifies that these embodied meanings are 'presented' to us, rather than simply being entertained in thought." Wynn, "Faith and Place", 15.

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religious experiences depend on models of space, models that are consciously or unconsciously used by a phenomenological descriptor. More precisely, I want to explore how different models of space articulate the nature of "encounters with a Divine at sacred places".

Methodologically, phenomenology begins with a phenomenological reduction, which transfers (re-duces) my own experience into a domain where it could be properly described. Though it often has different names, for example, the transcendental subjectivity or *Dasein*, it always refers to the same *phenomenological* sphere, where places, even sacred places, and encounters are located. When referring to space, we cannot conceive of it in terms of the differences between inner/outer, inside/outside, or subjective/objective.[2] The space, to which spatial characteristics of a religious experience (i.e., encounter) are related, is a lived space because this space has the nature of the phenomenological sphere.

Asking how different models of space articulate the nature of encounters with a Divine at sacred places, I restrict my analyses only to Heidegger's phenomenology for three reasons: 1. for Heidegger, the focus on spatiality is not only one of many phenomenological tasks; on the contrary, it is the core of the phenomenological method;[3] 2. Heidegger strives to explain phenomenological spatiality with respect to different models of space—considering also the transitions of paradigm in mathematics including the transition from Euclidian geometry to topology; 3. when explaining phenomenological spatiality, Heidegger takes into consideration the fact that humans can also understand space as sacred.

In the following I will characterize three different phenomenological models of space that can be traced in Heidegger's work from the early to the late period. Consequently, in Part 5, I will briefly display how these models differently coin the nature of an encounter and the essence of a sacred place. In conclusion, I will also try to propose a phenomenological typology of religious experience.

2 An opened space

Heidegger's close attention to spatiality stems from the core of the phenomenological method. Description of my own experience is always situated, because my own point of view must be located *somewhere*. It is not easy to describe this "somewhere" if we want to remain faithful to the phenomenological method and leave aside all the objective concepts of space. The space must be derived from the spatial features of a phenomenological sphere. Heidegger continuously considers two approaches to the spatial characteristics of the phenomenological sphere: 1. the relation to things of our practical concerns, where the phenomenological sphere is coined as *Dasein*; and, 2. our tendency to understand sense or meaning as an opened space, where the phenomenological sphere is rather conceived as an "unconcealment" (Unverborgenheit) or "truth of Being."

The first approach exemplarily appears in *Being and Time* (§§ 22 - 23), where the spatiality of *Dasein* is connected with human relations to things-at-hand (or "ready-at-hand"); *Dasein* derives its own "here" (and the perspective of a "here") from "there" of the things-at-hand, that is, from the fact that these things have their place in a world of material context, and simply belong somewhere. A hammer may lie somewhere around, but its own place is in the practical context of hammering. In this way, Heidegger refuses to derive *Dasein*'s location directly (in a Cartesian manner) from the locality where its *ego* may occur for naïve thinking. He respects that *ego* does not simply have any specific place (for example the brain or the body).

Although the locality of *Dasein* is derived from locations of things-at-hand in the sphere of practical concerns, it does not mean that the spatiality of *Dasein* also emerges from the same source. On the contrary, *Dasein* itself is spatial in an ontological sense of "Being-in-the-world", and this spatiality grounds the possibility of a practical (ontical) locating of *Dasein's* here. Thus, there is a difference and tension between

2 Husserl explains why we should refuse a naive distinction between internal and external in an Appendix to *Logical Investigation* entitled "External and Internal Perception: Physical and Psychical Phenomena". See Husserl, "Logical Investigations 2", 335-348.

3 See Malpas, "Heidegger and the Thinking of Place".

an ontical localizing of *Dasein* and its deeper ontological spatiality.[4] This tension determines a transitive character of space in *Being and Time*, and shapes the nature of encounter in it, since humans as *Daseins* must steadily traverse the difference between the two layers of spatiality.

It is this transition that enables *Dasein* to encounter things-at-hand in the mode of "giving space", as Heidegger explains: "When we let entities within-the-world be encountered in the way which is constitutive for Being-in-the-world, we 'give them space'. This 'giving space', which we also call 'making room' for them, consists in freeing the ready-to-hand for its spatiality."[5] Both happen in the same time, although not reciprocally: *Dasein* ontologically gives space and place (a "there") to things; things ontically constitute *Dasein's* "here". Since this two-way course of "making room" for an encounter with things has the essence of a "freeing" (Freigeben), I classify the model of space used in *Being and Time* as a model of an opened space.

This model of space is further applied in *Contributions to Philosophy*; yet here Heidegger does not connect openness with the practical sphere of being-at-hand, nor does he distinguish between the ontic and ontological; instead, he seeks to grasp openness itself as a truth (unconcealment) of Being. Truth is understood as an opened sphere of sense for humans to enter and move in. This approach also directly addresses the possibility of encounter not only with things, but also with a God. The applied model of (an opened) space remains the same.

In *Contributions to Philosophy*, Heidegger derives a space (or a time-space) from the opened field of sense (das Offene); the first sketches could be found in the lecture *On the Essence of Truth*. This field is opened between (zwischen) humans and Being itself as a "clearing for self-sheltering-concealing" (Lichtung für das Sich-verbergen).[6] Being hides itself necessarily in favor of entities' evidence (Heidegger also calls it the self-refusal of Being). But humans are not bound solely to entities; on the contrary, they are essentially free in respect to such ontic bindings, because they "belong" to the Being. The dynamical relation of "self-sheltering-concealing" and "belonging", the so called two-way "counter-resonance" between Being and humans, involves humans in the phenomenological sphere of truth, and opens the dimension of time-space.[7]

Hitherto the constitution of the between-space resembles the advancement in *Being and Time*. One essential feature makes a distinction, for in *Contributions*, the openness of space is understood as emptiness because of "self-sheltering-concealing": "Openness, is that not the emptiest of the empty?"[8] The main topic for Heidegger, concerning time-space in *Contributions*, is a turning from emptiness to openness. Let us pay attention in following only to what this turning means for a possibility of an encounter with God. In this respect, remarkably, the topic itself turns, because the opened dimension provides no place for such an encounter; it remains empty, so the openness somehow turns to emptiness.

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4 "*Space is not in the subject, nor is the world in space*. Space is rather 'in' the world in so far as space has been disclosed by that Being-in-the-world which is constitutive for Dasein. Space is not to be found in the subject, nor does the subject observe the world 'as if' that world were in a space; but the 'subject' (Dasein), if well understood ontologically, is spatial." Heidegger, "Being and Time", 46.

5 Heidegger, "Being and Time", 146. "Das für das In-der-Welt-sein konstitutive Begegnenlassen des innerweltlich Seienden ist ein »Raum-geben«. Dieses »Raumgeben«, das wir auch Einräumen nennen, ist das Freigeben des Zuhandenen auf seine Räumlichkeit." Heidegger, "Sein und Zeit", 111.

6 Heidegger, "Contributions", 271.

7 "Be-ing needs man in order to hold sway; and man belongs to be-ing so that he can accomplish his utmost destiny as Da-sein. [...] This counter-resonance of needing and belonging makes up be-ing as enowning." Heidegger, "Contributions", 177.

8 Heidegger, "Contributions", 237. See also: "Enowning [Ereignis] attunes - through and through - the essential swaying of truth. The openness of clearing of sheltering-concealing is thus originarily not a mere emptiness of not-being-occupied, but rather the attuned and attuning emptiness of the ab-ground, which in accordance with the attuning hint of enowning is an attuned - and that means here an enjoined - ab-ground." Heidegger, "Contributions", 266.

3 An empty space, a placeless space, a space of no encounter

Is the opened field of "clearing of self-sheltering-concealing" where humans can enter and move within a sense of Being also a space for an encounter with Divine? Besides the whole range of minor references in *Contributions*, Heidegger pays close attention to religious motifs in a separate chapter named *The Last God*. A reading of this chapter shows the following: Heidegger localizes Being as *Ereignis* between humans and god.[9] In this way, the opened between-space gains a new layer. Humans located in this space may experience the self-refusal of Being in a religious way as a "passing of the last god" (Vorbeigang des letzten Gottes). The between-space is then also a space of negative religiosity.

The emphasis on this type of religiosity derives from the analyses of the "end of metaphysics". According to Heidegger, the traditional ways of interpreting the sense have been exhausted and offer only seeming explanations of our experience. The speech about a "passing of the last god" expresses this emptying of metaphysics. This god is the "last" one because he terminates a line of many metaphysical images of god. And he "passes" us because we experience him in the framework of a self-refusal of Being. Thus, this religiosity is predominantly negative. The last god is in Heidegger's view characterized as "the highest shape of not-granting, since the inceptual withdraws from all holding-fast" (höchste Gestalt der Verweigerung).[10] On the other hand, the most utter withdrawal also brings a possibility of another beginning of thinking, which Heidegger tries to prepare in his *Contributions*. The passing god is thus "awaiting" humans to begin to conceive the sense of Being differently: "How few know that god awaits man's leaping-into Da-sein. Instead it seems as if man might have to and would await god."[11]

If we look closer into the conception of "passing", we can see that there is no encounter with god because of missing place for such an encounter. The reason lies in the metaphysical nature of a human awaiting that God would be the first and the last cause of everything. But the last god, at the time of the end of metaphysics, cannot fulfill this expectation, for his role is to indicate the emptiness of metaphysics. The last god goes "past" metaphysics (Vorbeigang) to define a space into which he does not enter.

In this quasi-eschatological Heideggerian narration, humans find themselves at a threshold between metaphysics and another beginning, "undecided" whether the opened space of sense is full or empty, accessible or not. As Heidegger expresses in more religious terms, humans are undecided "whether god moves away from or toward us"[12]. Another beginning of thinking would be then enabled by human decision, which leads them to accept the emptiness of the between-space. The acceptance would be followed by a leap into this space, where humans do not encounter a god (the last one does not enter this space anyway), but where they reach a turning of another beginning.

The negative form of encounter, as expressed in the reference to reciprocal "awaiting" between god and humans, however, undergoes a transformation, which can be detected in later development of Heidegger's concept of "waiting" (both awaiting and waiting in German as "warten"). This transformation is also connected with a shift to another model of space.

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9 "Finally and above all *enowning* can only be en-thought if be-ing itself is grasped as the between for the passing of the last god and for Da-sein." Heidegger, "Contributions", 19. "Schließlich und zuerst kan das 'Ereignis' nur er-dacht [...] werden, wenn das Seyn selbst begriffen ist als das 'Zwischen' für den Vorbeigang des letzten Gottes und für das Da-sein." Heidegger, "Beiträge", 26.

10 Heidegger, "Contributions", 293. "Beiträge", 416.

11 Heidegger, "Contributions", 293. "Wie wenige wissen davon, daß der Gott wartet auf die Gründung der Wahrheit des Seyns und somit auf den Einsprung des Menschen in das Da-sein. Statt dessen scheint es so, als müßte und würde der Mensch auf den Gott warten." Heidegger, "Beiträge", 417.

12 "What opens itself for sheltering-concealing is originarily the remoteness of undecidability whether god moves away from or toward us." Heidegger, "Contributions", 267.

4 A topological space

A new approach to the spatiality of religious experience is revealed in the text from the winter 1944/45 named *Agchibasié. Ein Gespräch selbstdritt auf einem Feldweg*.[13] Here, in the critical period at the end of the war, Heidegger reads Master Eckhart and applies his expression *Gelassenheit* (releasement). Consequent changes in the conception of encounter with Divine can be demonstrated in how Heidegger develops the motif of human waiting. To wait (explicitly for humans) does not mean anymore to stay on the threshold of an opened space without entering it, but to *let* (German "lassen") this space be opened for what is coming.[14] In *The Contributions* god was waiting for the human "leap" into the empty space. Meanwhile, humans were waiting for god to do something himself. This double waiting was necessarily in a state of passing each other. Yet if humans abandon their expectations of what god should do, as Master Eckhart teaches, they will wait differently: they will let the space be opened for what is coming (or even only passing by). This kind of waiting "gets" humans "involved" (einlassen) in the opened space.[15]

We can notice the shift from *Contributions* to *Agchibasié* on the change from "leap into" (einspringen) to "get self-involved" (sich einlassen). To leap or jump into also means to leave the take-off area (and its space), whereas getting self-involved rather evokes the permeation of two spaces. This evocation can be further fleshed out by juxtaposing Heidegger's approaches to spatiality. In both texts space is understood as opened: in *Contributions* as an *empty* between-space, and in *Agchibasié* as an opened *landscape* (Gegend). The landscape is opened wide as the "free scope" (or free expanse: freie Weite); Heidegger expresses this meaning by the term *Gegnet* (no longer used in modern German).[16]

The landscape as *Gegnet* differs from the between-space in three moments. 1. It is not a container-like space. *Gegnet* refers to surroundings which "are opened so that they gather everything."[17] The gathering of everything creates a living and lived environment, full of things. In this sense, it is also a topological space, because Heidegger derives a topology from things as locations.[18] 2. It is not a between-space anymore; the structure of *Gegnet* is acquired from a horizontality of the lived surroundings.[19] Whereas a between-space is separated from our lived environment, *Gegnet* permeates it. 3. Therewith relates the difference that we have already mentioned. *Gegnet* can be entered neither by a leap into nor by a passage from somewhere to somewhere else. Humans are already involved in this space, but a "task of thinking" connected to a "waiting" remains—to bring more attention to different layers of their lived environment by paying attention to *Gegnet*.[20]

What brings the shift to the topological space of *Gegnet* to Heidegger's approach to religious experience? In *Contributions to Philosophy*, the last god with his passing-by played a key role in bordering an empty container-like between-space. *Agchibasié* belongs among other texts to a broader context formulating the conception of the so called *fourfold* (Geviert), where a relationship between divine and mortals (i.e., humans)

13 The name *Agchibasié* is quoted from Heraclitus's fragment B 122. Heidegger, "Feldweg-Gespräche", 1-159. I work here with the full-length German original; for English wording you may see the English translation of a modified (by Heidegger himself) version published in Heidegger, "Gelassenheit". See "Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking" in: Heidegger, "Discourse", 58-90.

14 "Im Warten lassen wir das, worauf wir warten, offen." Heidegger, "Feldweg-Gespräche", 116.

15 "Weil das Warten in das Offene selbst sich einläßt." Heidegger, "Feldweg-Gespräche", 116. See also "Das Verhältnis zur Gegnet ist das Warten. Und 'Warten' heißt: auf das Offene der Gegnet sich einlassen." Heidegger, "Feldweg-Gespräche", 121.

16 "Das Wort 'gegnet' meint die freie Weite." Heidegger, "Feldweg-Gespräche", 114.

17 My attempt to translate the German "alles versammelnd, sich öffnet" in the sentence which could be considered a definition of *Gegnet*: "Die Gegnet ist die verweilende Weite, die alles versammelnd, sich öffnet, so daß in ihr das Offene gehalten und angehalten ist, Jegliches aufgehen zu lassen in seinem Beruhen."; Heidegger, "Feldweg-Gespräche", 114.

18 See in *Building Dwelling Thinking*; Heidegger, M.: Poetry, *Language, Thought*. Transl. by A. Hofstadter, Harper Collins, New York 2001, p. 150-151. For a detailed explanation of Heidegger's shift to a topological space, see: Nitsche, "Ortschaft".

19 "Das Horizonthafte ist somit nur die uns zugekehrte Seite eines uns umgebenden Offenen [...]."; Heidegger, "Feldweg-Gespräche", 112.

20 When Heidegger speaks about waiting he means the *Gelassenheit zur Gegnet*: "Das Wesen dieses Wartens jedoch ist die Gelassenheit zur Gegnet." Heidegger, "Feldweg-Gespräche", 122.

also plays a key role, although differently, not by passing each other.[21] Divines and mortals face each other in a specific tension, which creates together with an analogical tense-pair heaven-earth a topological space of sense. Divines are here defined as "the beckoning messengers of the godhead" (winkende Boten der Gottheit).[22] Analogically with humans, divines are also as "beckoning" involved in the topological space. A tense relationship of facing each other thus leads to a mutual co-involvement in the topological sphere. Mutual co-involvement has a topological significance, in that it constitutes a place in the landscape of *Gegnet*.

5 Places of an encounter with Divine

We have determined, with regards to religious experience, three models of space throughout Heidegger's thinking. An opened, an empty, and a topological space. Let us now reflect on how these models provide sacred places, that is, places where an encounter with Divine may occur—places of divine concurrence. The reflections that follow loosely draw on the hitherto expounded Heideggerian concepts.

The *first* model presents an open dimension that openly accommodates a human search for places of any kind. This dimension provides human experience with coordinates. By them, places in this space are defined as locations. A Divine being can also be invited into this dimension by indicating coordinates for an encounter. This usually happens symbolically or architecturally by building a temple, a statue, painting an image, performing a gesture, et cetera. A temple, a statue, an image, or a gesture marks the coordinates of an encounter for both humans and Divine, in the (opened) dimension between them.

The first model turns into the *second* one, the model of an empty space, when a human individual realizes that it is inappropriate to indicate coordinates for Divine. This model specifies, for example, mystical religious experience which refuses to locate a Divine being. It also applies to religious practices connected with a meditative emptying of mind. Empty space provides no place for an encounter with Divine, but it does not contradict a religious experience. A negative form of encounter, based on the decision to refuse an encounter as a mode of religion, can still constitute a religious experience.

In the *third*, topological model of space, places are associated with a mutual co-involvement of mortals and divines into a topological sphere. Religious experience, according to this model, depends on a specific attunement (a releasement), which lets humans be involved in what comes or what is beckoned in a spiritual sense. What comes must be understood primarily in a spatial way as a layer of a topological space, so it must be unfolded. A religious practice of releasement may remind us of a pilgrimage or spiritual wayfaring. It does not necessarily entail a factual travelling; however, it always conceives of spiritual practice in terms of wandering, searching, unfolding, or layering. It also often compares religious experience to weather conditions on the road, such as being exposed to winds of spirit, et cetera. The mutual co-involvement creates a place of encounter with Divine. These places are not defined as places according to the first model of space, because a spiritual wandering (i.e., releasement) does not proceed by coordinates. Places of encounter in the topological model of space resemble rather a path or a path-mark.

6 Conclusion

We have distinguished, according to the three models of space in Heidegger's thinking, three types of sacred places, that is, places of encounter with Divine. 1. A sacred place defined by coordinates materialized in a sacred building or symbolized by a cultic procedure. 2. A negative place, a place of a negative form of

21 Heidegger develops the conception of *fourfold* from the series of so called *Bremen's lectures* from 1949 which are named *Einblick in das was ist*.

22 Heidegger, "Poetry, Language, Thought", 176: "The divinities are the beckoning messengers of the godhead. Out of the hidden sway of the divinities the god emerges as what he is, which removes him from any comparison with beings that are present." "Die Göttlichen sind die winkenden Boten der Gottheit. Aus dem verborgenen Walten dieser erscheint der Gott in sein Wesen, das ihn jedem Vergleich mit dem Anwesenden entzieht." Heidegger, "Bremer und Freiburger", 17.

encounter. This form does not negate the possibility of encounter, nor does it deny a spatial (place-like) nature of religious experience; it, nonetheless, accompanies a deliberate refusal to encounter. 3. A place as a path-mark, defined by a wayfaring (and therefore also transitive) involvement (or more spiritually: co-involvement) into a lived environment.

Based on these topological types, we may also attempt to formulate roughly a typology of religious experience[23]: 1. A place defined by coordinates connects with a ritual or ceremonial religious experience; 2. A negative place links with a mystical experience; 3. A path-mark is related to a pilgrim's experience; we may call it a transitive religious experience.[24]

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23 This typology has just a phenomenological significance, because the three types may be interconnected in a framework of a factual lived religious experience.

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