

**Infinity and the Call of Thinking:
Bernhard Welte and the Question of God**

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The 'Heideggerian' philosopher of religion from Freiburg, Bernhard Welte (1906-1983), who reflected profoundly on the intersection of Christian faith with contemporary culture, is virtually unknown to English-speaking scholars. One of the main reasons for this neglect is the lack of English translations of Welte's oeuvre.¹ A major concern of Welte's philosophy was his critique of positivistic thinking. Positivism eliminates the question of God as superfluous for the scientific understanding of reality. Welte was also concerned with linguistic philosophy, since the word 'God' brings with it a strong suspicion of senselessness. For Klaus Hemmerle, Welte's approach was the most significant contribution of the Twentieth Century on the crossfield of philosophy and theology. It was Hemmerle who, inspired by Welte, came up with the formula "faith is a friend of thinking."²

Born in Messkirch, Welte was a student of Heidegger's in Freiburg

¹ See Bernhard Welte, "Seeking and Finding: The Speech at Heidegger's Burial," trans. Thomas Sheehan, in Thomas Sheehan, ed., *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker* (Chicago: Precedent, 1981), 73-75. See also Bernhard Welte, "God in Heidegger's Thought," trans. William J. Kramer, *Philosophy Today* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 85-100. This publication consists of Welte's introduction to the topic and a translation of his paper "Die Gottesfrage im Denken Martin Heideggers," first published in Franz Pöggeler, ed., *Innerlichkeit und Erziehung: In memoriam Gustav Siewerth. Zum Gespräch zwischen Pädagogik, Philosophie und Theologie* (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 1964), 177-192.

² Klaus Hemmerle, "Glaube ist dem Denken Freund," *Christ in der Gegenwart* 33 (1981): 109-110.

and was ordained in 1929. From 1956 till his retirement, Welte was a professor of philosophy of religion at the University of Freiburg. Welte's *Collected Writings* have only recently appeared in German.³ Crucial contributions of Welte's intense discourse on a question of God and religion are now presented in the volume *On the Question of God*.⁴ Welte's reflection on the question of God can be seen as a set of attempts to address the pressing question of our time with the seriousness and sincerity it deserves. Holger Zaborowski, the editor of volume III/3 of Welte's *Collected Writing, On the Question of God*, speaks of the careful movements of thinking (*vorsichtige Denkbewegungen*)⁵ to encourage people to personally meditate on the question of God and one's faith commitment while critically engaging one's own experience of God. For Welte, who has been called an 'attorney of the Holy' in a godless time (*Anwalt des Heiligen*), the presence of God can be sensed everywhere. As a phenomenologist of religion, Welte inspires his readers to think with him about God's epiphany in the world and seriously seek God's presence in his creation.⁶ It is an invitation to 'see' God in the world, and, even more, to let God 'be seen' in his creation. Following Heidegger's commitment to the basic ideal of a phenomenology of letting things show themselves, Welte requires an understanding of God and Being as a condition of the possibility of Dasein.

The historicity of Dasein and the lingual character of human thinking are Welte's focal points.⁷ He elaborates a post-metaphysical philosophical theology, which is a product of him confronting his reading of Jaspers and Heidegger with the neo-Scholastic tradition dominant in the first half of the twentieth century. Welte's passage from metaphysical to non-metaphysical philosophy of religion can be seen, in fact, as shifting the accent from Jaspers

³ *Bernhard Welte Gesammelte Schriften*, im Auftrag der Bernhard-Welte Gesellschaft und in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Arbeitsbereich Christliche Religionsphilosophie der Theologischen Fakultät der Albert-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg, ed., Bernhard Casper (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2006-2010).

⁴ Bernhard Welte, *Zur Frage nach Gott*, in *Bernhard Welte Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. III/3, ed. Holger Zaborowski (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2008).

⁵ Holger Zaborowski, "Einführung," in Welte, *Zur Frage nach Gott*, 7.

⁶ See Jörg Splett, "Ein Phänomenologe des Heiligen: Bernhard Welte (1906-1983)," *Theologie und Philosophie* 81 (2005): 241-246.

⁷ Giovanni Molinari, *Die Religionsphilosophie Bernhard Weltes: ein Denken im Spannungsfeld zwischen Phänomenologie und der Lehre von Gott* (Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1987). See also Hubert Lenz, *Mut zum Nichts als Weg zu Gott* (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1989).

to Heidegger.⁸ Heidegger's philosophy was for Welte paradigmatic for a new attempt to convincingly and credibly (*glaubhaft*) proclaim the Christian faith to a contemporary human being. One of the main concerns for Welte was to express the permanent legitimacy of the Christian message in the language of the contemporary believer. He situates the human being in the horizon of transcendence. Therefore, the human search for God means also a quest for self-understanding. The horizon of faith is the *locus theologicus*, in which, while experiencing God in the act of faith, a human being reaches to the depth of one's very existence. Thinking in the proximity of Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity, Welte interprets the final character of human consciousness not as a negative barrier, but rather as a positive determination of the human condition. He thinks the nature of the Holy in the light of the nature of God.⁹ Thinking the nature of the Holy is the condition of God's self-disclosure. It is only in the realm of this unconcealing of God's self-manifestation that we can attempt to understand the meaning of the word 'God.' With a clear reference to Heidegger, Welte interprets the Holy not as God but rather God's foreclosed depth, *eigene noch verschlossene Tiefe*.

The original source of Welte's philosophy of religion was the metaphysical concept of God, elaborated in his discussion of Aquinas's *substantia*, by distinction from Jaspers's *transcendentia*. Addressing the question of God from the metaphysical perspective of the thinking of Being, Welte identifies Being itself (*das Sein selbst, ipsum esse*) with God. In a further confrontation with Heidegger, Welte problematizes the possibility of understanding God.¹⁰ In response to the Heideggerian clearance of Being (*Lichtung des Seins*) and to this revelatory disclosure of Being, Welte situates human thinking in the proximity of the Holy. He calls this primordial thinking of Being and the meaning of Being recollection (*Andacht*).

⁸ See Bernhard Welte, *Der philosophische Glaube bei Karl Jaspers und die Möglichkeit seiner Deutung durch die thomistische Philosophie* (Freiburg i. Br.: Alber, 1949). See also Ingeborg Feige, *Geschichtlichkeit: Zu Bernhard Weltes Phänomenologie des Geschichtlichen auf der Grundlage unveröffentlichter Vorlesungen* (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 1989).

⁹ See Elke Kirsten, *Heilige Lebendigkeit: Zur Bedeutung des Heiligen bei Bernhard Welte* (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1998). See also further Stefan Raueiser, *Schweigemuster: Über die Rede vom heiligen Schweigen. Eine Untersuchung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Odo Casel, Gustav Mensching, Rudolf Otto, Karl Rahner, Wilhelm Weischedel und Bernhard Welte* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1996).

¹⁰ Bernhard Welte, "Der philosophische Gottesbeweis und die Phänomenologie der Religion," in idem, *Kleinere Schriften zur Philosophie der Religion*, in *Bernhard Welte Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. III/2, ed. Markus Enders (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2008), 17-39.

Everything which exists reveres the Holy as the most unapproachable omnipresence of the inevitable.¹¹

Welte was one of the important interlocutors in Heidegger's last years before Heidegger's death on May 26, 1976. It was Welte, who on Heidegger's explicit request at their last meeting on January 14, 1976, spoke at his grave, and, at least indirectly problematized the latter's break with Catholicism. The Welte-Heidegger correspondence (1945 to 1976) is marked by a student-professor relationship, although their common roots in Messkirch made them close. In fact, one of the first letters from Heidegger is a letter of condolence after the death of Welte's mother who happened to be a friend to Heidegger's mother. Being strongly influenced by Heidegger, Welte introduced Heideggerian thinking into theology in place of the then dominant Neo-Scholasticism. Welte's last seminar at the University of Freiburg in 1973 was dedicated to Heidegger's thinking as the homage to a philosopher whose presence permeated Welte's whole academic career. Being critical of contemporary philosophy, Welte praises Heidegger for his keen and careful way of thinking (*ein waches und sorgfältiges Mitdenken*) and must have been particularly content to hear, in turn, Heidegger's friendly comment that Welte's "careful and cautious thinking along is as enjoyable as rare" (*Ihr sorgfältiges vorsichtiges Mitdenken ist so erfreulich wie selten*). Apart from his polite remarks, Heidegger usually did not engage Welte's thinking. One of the few exceptions is his critique regarding the possibility of understanding Aquinas's *ipsum esse* in the horizon of Heidegger's question of Being, which can be fruitfully related to Meister Eckhart's understanding

¹¹ "The thinking that thinks from the question concerning the truth of Being questions more primordially than metaphysics can. Only from the truth of Being can the essence of the Holy be thought. Only from the essence of the Holy is the essence of divinity to be thought. Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word 'God' is to signify. Or should we not first be able to hear and understand all these words carefully if we are to be permitted as men, that is, as eksistent creatures, to experience a relation of God to man? How can man at the present stage of world history ask at all seriously and rigorously whether the god nears or withdraws, when he has above all neglected to think into the dimension in which alone that question can be asked? But this is the dimension of the Holy, which indeed remains closed as a dimension if the open region of Being is not lighted and in its lighting is near man. Perhaps what is distinctive about this world-epoch consists in the closure of the dimension of the Hale [*des Heilen*]. Perhaps that is the sole malignancy [*Unheil*]." Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, *Martin Heidegger Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 9 (Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004); English: *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 352.

of Being. In the philosophical-historical recourse to Meister Eckhart, Welte situates his own philosophical theology in the proximity of the divine God (*dem göttlicheren Gott entgegenzudenken*).¹²

Welte interprets Heidegger's philosophy neither as nihilistic nor atheistic, but rather as a possible connection between Aquinas and Eckhart. By addressing the human condition, the homelessness, and the historicity of human existence, Welte demonstrates that the question of God and the Nothing (*das Nichts*) is constantly present in Heidegger's thinking and determine his path of thinking. In fact, Welte proclaims Heidegger a prophet of the nearness of God (*Prophet der Nähe Gottes*). Bernhard Casper suggests, in the introduction to *Briefe und Begegnungen*, that Welte may be one of the key sources for understanding the religious implications of Heidegger's philosophy in the future.¹³ Welte reads Heidegger as a religious seeker, who contributes to the necessity of a reassessment of theology freed from metaphysical distortions. Since the God of theology is nothing more than Leibniz's *causa prima*, Heidegger feels compelled to reject the divinity of the Christian God.

In his debate with Heidegger, Welte realizes that the question of God can be adequately addressed in an existential symbiosis of *homo religiosus* and *homo philosophicus*. However, the problem remains, if God can reveal

¹² See Stjepan Kušar, *Dem göttlichen Gott entgegen denken. Der Weg von der metaphysischen zu einer nachmetaphysischen Sicht Gottes in der Religionsphilosophie Bernhard Weltes* (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder: 1986), 2-5. See further also Kwang Seop Shim, *Der nachmetaphysische Gott: Überlegungen zur Problematik des Verhältnisses von Gott und Metaphysik in den Entwürfen von Martin Heidegger, Wilhelm Weischedel und Bernhard Welte* (Bielefeld: Kirchliche Hochschule Bethel, 1990). Welte follows Heidegger unconditionally here: "The god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as philosophy, god as *causa sui*, is thus perhaps closer to the divine God. Here this means only: god-less thinking is more open to him than onto-theo-logic would like to admit." Martin Heidegger, *Essays in Metaphysics: Identity and Difference*, trans. Kurt F. Leidecker (New York: Philosophical Library Inc, 1960), 72.

¹³ Martin Heidegger/Bernhard Welte, *Briefe und Begegnungen*, ed. Alfred Denker and Holger Zaborowski (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2003). According to Casper, Welte has clearly recognized that Heidegger's thinking is not atheistic in the sense of absolutely denying any religious dimension. It was rather a quest for "the divine God," a God beyond the God of the Christian tradition (the dominant paradigm of Western metaphysical thinking). For a more critical reading of Welte's interpretation of Heidegger's search for "the divine God" see Andrzej Wiercinski, "Martin Heideggers 'göttlicher Gott' bei Bernhard Welte und Gustav Siewerth," in *Phänomenologie der Religion: Zugänge und Grundfragen*, ed. Markus Enders and Holger Zaborowski (Freiburg i. Br.: Alber, 2004), 525-541.

himself regardless of the self-manifestation of Being. Here we touch upon the notion of ontological difference, which is a common horizon for Welte and Heidegger. Delimitating the indeterminable God and drawing upon Heidegger's phenomenological *Destruktion*, Welte thinks God outside the ontological difference and outside the very question of Being.

The post-Christian self-acclaimed prophets declare the overwhelming victory of unbelief. There is a striking similarity between the recent arguments against God and religion and the nineteenth-century critics of religion: Marx, Nietzsche, and Feuerbach, along with Freud, the "masters of suspicion." The fact that the talk of the death of God or at least human doubts about God's existence are far louder than the personal testimonies of the real experience of God is not a valid argument for proclaiming the question of God irrelevant.

On the contrary, the question of God plays an essential role in Welte's thematization of human experience. What we learn from Welte's philosophical and theological engagement with the phenomenon of faith and its meaning for contemporary society is to see the present lack of experience of God (*Nicht-Erfahrung Gottes*) as a valid human experience, which needs to be taken seriously and be reflected upon. Welte addresses how infinity places thinking into question (*Infragestellung des Denkens durch das Unendliche*). For him, the transmitted certainty of faith (*überlieferte Gewissheit*) cannot be unreflectively taken over. Faith (*der religiöse Glaube*) is a free and completely self-involving decision to commit oneself to God. The unambiguous characteristic of religious enactment (*religiöser Vollzug*) is an active involvement in and a total commitment to the all embracing reality of the divine mystery (*Sich einlassen auf* and *Sich überlassen an das göttliche Geheimnis*).

In his extensive treatment of atheism, Welte stresses that the denial of the existence of God is not the last expression of human thinking. On the contrary, even though the atheistic critique of God and religion needs to be taken seriously, we do not need to bow before the persuasive rhetorical nature of its arguments. Tradition is, for Welte, an epochal conversation (*ein epochales Gespräch*). If there is a last word, it is the word of God's encouraging assurance and declaration of his liberating permanent presence in the world (*ein Wort des Zu-Spruchs Gottes*).

The Possibility of a Philosophical Knowledge of God

Moving beyond the biblically-based argument that God's existence is self-evident from the fact of creation, it became necessary to rethink the philosophical definition of God, especially in confrontation with the rationalism of Peter Abelard and the inquisitive spirit of Muslim scholarship. Augustine's theology still safeguarded the transcendence of the Creator-God, while the development of subsequent philosophical theology led to placing divine revelation and human reason on an equal footing. Traditionally we speak of two ways to God: faith and reason, which is called by Welte, "philosophical faith" (*der philosophische Glaube*). For Welte, God is, in a philosophical sense, a "meaning-postulate" (*Sinnpostulat*). Traditional proofs for the existence of God are still needed, despite the apparent failure of historic proofs. What seems common to all times is the necessity of living one's own life in a meaningful way, beyond the fulfillment of merely practical obligations. The experience of giving meaning to one's life is accompanied by a sense for the contingency of life. The knowledge of the Nothing permeates the very experience of life. Welte speaks of the coming-together of existence and non-existence in human experience (*Verklammerung von Existenz-Dasein und Nicht-Dasein*). With reference to the experience of death, Welte entertains two possibilities. Since in death, all existence flows into Nothingness, we could assume that death revokes the meaning of human Dasein. However, Welte considers also the other opportunity. It is not impossible to think that behind that which we regard as Nothingness there is, in fact, a final ground of meaning, concealed from us in our *status viatoris*. This second alternative opens up a possibility for a universal horizon of meaning (*universaler Sinnhorizont*).

For Welte, the experience of the Nothing (*die Erfahrung des Nichts*) has a potential to send light into human life, the light of the Nothing (*das Licht des Nichts*), which makes our personal history a meaningful life (*Sinnerfahrung*). The experience of meaning in our life is rooted in the experience of being carried by the invisible yet unmistakably felt power, which we call God. The longing for God can lead human life to a powerful experience of God (*wahrhaft göttliche Erfahrung Gottes*), a true and sense-giving light from above. Welte speaks of the reasonable hope (*vernünftige Hoffnung*) with which we relate our life to God.

One of the essential features of Welte's philosophy of religion is his thematization of the Nothing as a simple fact of life. We find ourselves as

beings-in-the-world without at first noticing our contingency. Our present being proceeds from non-existence (*Nicht-Dasein*). However, there is a fundamental relationship between the Nothing and Dasein. Both are unmistakably identified as our personal experience of the Nothing and existing. The Nothing is the ground from which everything which exists originates. For Welte, the Nothing is not a pure idea, but, in fact, the “negative face” of God. This “negative face” is synonymous with the personal face of God, who enters into a salvific dialogue with a human being and makes this dialogue into a unique *mysterium salutis*. God is the ultimately unfathomable answer to the question of Being and the relationship between Being and human Dasein.

In what we call “the proof of the proofs,” the contested ontological argument, the striking point is the connection between metaphysics and phenomenology. Welte questions the meaning of the proofs. It is indisputable that the proofs are not the beginning of religion (*der Anfang von Religion*). However, they might be rightly considered a mode of thinking this beginning (*das Denken dieses Anfangs*). With a careful rereading of Aquinas, Welte confirms that the *quinquae via* were truly a meditative path of thinking, a way of recollection toward that which in itself cannot be intellectually grasped (*das Unausdenkliche*) or expressed (*das Unaussagbare*). Welte proceeds from Husserl’s demand that for every science, the noematic content of its fundamental ideas (*der noematische Gehalt ihrer Grundbegriffe*) must be clarified by deriving the fundamental eidetic ideas (*grundlegende eidetischen Gehalte*) from their primordial ground. Husserl’s command is binding also for the science of religion and, in particular, for Christian theology.

For Welte, the proofs for the existence of God are an exact metaphysical articulation of an original mental procedure. The phenomenal essence of thinking is primordially and profoundly religious. Speaking of the philosophical proof from the experience of God we use the word ‘experience’ and the expression ‘the experience of God’ in a phenomenological sense. If a human being can only experience that which is in the world (*das Innerweltliche*), and experience and faith are interconnected (as Welte postulates), and not opposed, the recollecting human spirit can reach the Holy in its absolute withdrawal and its committed self-manifestation. And exactly this experience of being confronted with the Holy is an appeal to freedom. This call to consent to the presence of the Holy motivates the free human spirit to an acceptance of God in his personal self-

manifestation (*das freie Ja*). The noetic element (*die Noëse*) of this experience is the recognition of the divine presence which leads to a personal acknowledgment of the completely inexpressible personal *Thou*. The phenomenal character of this event allows not only for the ontological experience of God as God, but for a personal experience of God as ‘my God’ (*Deus meus*).

In our being-in-the-world, we realize that we are beings who ask questions and are worthy of asking questions. We move ourselves on the path of questioning (*Gang des Denkens*) toward an answer which only unveils itself in the course of our being-in-the-world. Usually what provokes us to ask those questions are particular issues concerned with different aspects of our being-in-the-world and all that confronts us in our existence. The questions can be answered at first fairly easily and every answer inspires us to ask further questions. This dynamic of question and answer elucidates the subject of our inquiry and satisfies our thinking. The question-answer dynamic makes further questions possible. In fact, it compels further questions. Every answer is the beginning of new questions. Thus, the deeper meaning of what has been asked in those questions has been revealed and yet, at the same time, the real meaning of what we are asking is concealed, and what we are trying to approach recedes from our grasp. In this sense, our interrogatory thinking experiences an even more urgent need to see further within the horizon of revealing and concealing (*Entbergung und Verbergung*).

The world and the elements in the world confront us as being (*als seiend*) in their being-Being (*seiend-sein*). In all that which confronts us, the word ‘God’ is still not present. At the level of pure positivity and immediacy, we cannot but realize that things are. This is sense certainty (*sinnliche Gewissheit*). Things are as they appear to us as beings, i.e., as simple, present, and real things. The task of phenomenology is to show that even with this simple sense certainty, there is implicitly a progressive history of consciousness, which is to say, a phenomenology of the spirit (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*).

As beings, we experience a certain restlessness (*inquietas/Unruhe*) which puts us into motion. Seen from the perspective of a subject who is questioning, this restlessness is a motion of inquiring (*Bewegung des Fragens*). I am not only a subject who inquires about things around me and things that confront me. Things face me the way they are, i.e., as beings. This means that they are requesting my answer (*re-spondeo*) in the form of

accepting them as beings in their being-Being (*die Seienden in ihrem Seiendsein*). Therefore, they are putting me in the position of being distinct from what I view. I am, and I am also not the wall, which is in front of me. Hegel would call this “holding the moments apart” (*Auseinanderhalten der Momente*): consciousness seeing the wall and at once being the one that is seeing the wall. In sense certainty, I am both experiencing myself and my not-self, i.e., my separation from the world. At this stage we are only aware of our selves and things that are. Through seeing things and our selves we realize that we are not the things we see, i.e., that there is difference between our being and the being of things. This means that we already use negativity as a transcendental category. At this stage also, we can realize that what we perceive is not only pure presence (things are what they are, i.e., a coffee cup is a coffee cup) but they are not something else (a coffee cup is not a wall). Each one of the properties is different from the spectrum of possible differences (i.e., a coffee cup is firm, not soft, cylindrical not spherical, etc). Each of these qualities is also different from each other (i.e., cylindricality is not temperature, and temperature is not color, etc). Hegel calls these qualities “indifferently related to each other,” i.e., their shape does not effect their color, etc.

The negative and the positive view of the object seem to contradict each other. How could the object be both self-identical and existing only as difference? Dialectically speaking, we can see something as self-identical because of the difference it has to something else, and can see something as different to something else because we know of existing things that are purely themselves. The resolution of the contradiction opens up the possibility of thinking of things which, while being themselves, are also and necessarily in opposition to and contradiction with other things.

Things are different from each other because of their position in the system of differences. Things are what they are and not other things. Something only is when it is different from other things in the system. At this point the difference is based on the pure negativity of things, i.e., their difference from other things and their being distinguishable from each other.

From the perspective of our being-in-the-world, we realize that the things around us have a point of view, including potentially a point of view of us. There are many beings that are in relation to each other and they are also in relation to the totality of beings which are different from each other. This concrete totality is Being, which nevertheless is not a simple sum of all possible beings. Based on the insufficiency of each, all beings reach beyond

themselves. They interact with each other and each one reaches beyond itself toward the totality of Being. This reaching signifies the inquietude and lack of self-sufficiency of beings. Just as we are disquieted by our difference from existing things, so are things likewise disquieted by their difference from other things, and reach outside of themselves. This disquietitude is based on the difference from existing things which, in turn, creates the necessity of reaching out of their simple self-identity.

In our interrogatory approach to understanding the whole of reality (*das Ganze*), we realize that the horizon of that which needs to be questioned is tremendous. With the many answers to particular questions, our amazement grows. We realize that the world escapes our grasp and beckons our continued questioning. The more light we cast on unknown phenomena, the more opaque everything becomes. The meaning of Being remains withdrawn despite the partial illuminations we have cast on it.

The interrogatory movement of thinking experiences at the same time fulfillment and fatigue when confronted with the vastness of the questions that cannot be fully answered. On that level, our concentration moves away from the asking of particular questions toward questioning the Being of a being (*das Sein des Seienden*). The prevailing question is what does it mean for something to be? This new question represents a certain turn in our questioning (*Umschlag des Fragens*). We are no longer asking particular questions but questioning everything as a whole (*alles in einem*). While asking the question, why there is something and not nothing, we realize that not only do things exist, but we as questioning being *are* and our thinking *is*. The question of the meaning of Being (*Sinn des Seins*) becomes a question of the meaning of our being (*Sinn des Daseins*). In this sense, the question we ask becomes a totalizing question (*eine totale Frage*), insofar as that which is addressed is the whole.

This totalizing question cannot be fully answered with reference to a being because it embraces and concerns Being itself as questionable (*das Fragliche*). As such, the mystery of the Being of a being (*das Sein des Seienden*) will not be dispelled by any reference to a particular being (*das Seiende*). Therefore, the questioning reaches out beyond its initial impulse, and beyond that which exists in any form, i.e., toward the Nothing. In this intellectual confrontation with Being and the Nothing, the question incessantly presses itself, why is there something rather than nothing? As questioning subjects, we find ourselves in the realm beyond Being and the Nothing. The mystery of this interrogatory dynamic makes us aware that in

order to ask the question of the meaning of the Being of a being we first need to be somehow familiar with the Being of a being and yet we have not yet fully comprehended its meaning. We would not ask, indeed could not ask, why there is something rather than nothing, unless we found ourselves in the world in which we are commanded by Being to question the meaning of Being. We realize that in the innermost foundation of our thinking there is something from which the words 'being' (*seiend*) and 'non-being' (*nicht seiend*) slides away and do not say anything. In a mysterious way, we are familiar with what we will never grasp and cannot articulate, and what, in an unfathomable way, calls us to think from out of a being and beyond all beings.

Human thinking thereby reaches into a realm in which it can find no firm ground. Thinking can only hold onto something which exists, onto the thought which is comprehensible. Because any determination is also a dividing line (*χατηγορεῖν*), whenever we determine something we also confine it: we say that something is in one way and not the other. Therefore our thinking, which asks why there is something rather than nothing, ends up in indetermination and infinity. This infinity must halt our thinking. We can only think what is conceivable in the form of a judgment. This judging comprehension (*urteilendes Begreifen*) is the fundamental form of conceiving and, therefore, also of thinking which conceives of itself. The outside of thinking is also its innermost and primordial 'inside' because it puts everything into motion.

Welte speaks of the philosophical proofs for the existence of God as the expression of the metaphysical formalization of a genuine religious thinking of the absolute mystery of God, which is the origin of religion in its primordial sense of revealing that which is inaccessible to human mind by means of reason alone. With his reflection on the question of God, Welte offers the first step toward a post-Heideggerian ontological knowledge of God. It can only be a first outline of that which cannot be outlined because knowledge of God is infinite. Knowledge of God would bestow all that is finite with meaning. In the language of religion, God is called a living God (*der lebendige Gott*). Philosophical analysis can motivate a human being to believe in that which cannot be fully comprehended and, in turn, to entrust to the living God, not only oneself, but all that exists.

The Deficiency of the Philosophical Proofs

The deficiencies of the philosophical proofs for the existence of God are due to the over estimation of human reason and disillusionment with “the God of the philosophers.” However, for Welte, the philosophical engagement with religion is not only an intellectual and academic exercise, but a socially responsible activity that aims to open up a possibility for contemporary society to rethink its social dynamic as the interplay of the divine promise of God’s liberating presence (*göttlicher Zuspruch*), the breakthrough of the Holy (*das Aufscheinen des Heiligen im Profanen*), and the human answer to God’s salvific call (*einem Anruf zu entsprechen*).¹⁴

Welte is careful enough not to offer any simple objective certainty for an eschatological future. Taking seriously our own final destiny, we need to move beyond merely theoretical deliberation. Welte calls here for a particular sensitivity to our being-in-the-world. Confronted with the experience of suffering, the injustice, and the lack of peace, a human being is called to a socially responsible practical behavior. Therefore, the moral decision of an individual has not only the impact of one’s own present life and the life of the community one is a part of, but is, by the same token, the expression of this universal horizon of meaning, and as such, a clear protest against universal meaninglessness. Welte senses in this human solidarity for the weak and needy, not only a great potential of humanity to advance the peaceful pathway to prosperity and a significant clamor against absolute meaninglessness, but also an essential expression of the totality of meaning grounded in the personal God.

If to think is to thank, the philosophical proofs for the existence of God are the expression of thankfulness. We are grateful for our human potential to rationally move toward God and for his ubiquitous presence in the life of his people. Although beyond the full grasp of our reason (*ἐν αἰνίγματι*), God is close to us. As in Paul Celan’s *Tenebrae*:

We are near, Lord
Near and within reach.
Already gripped Lord,

¹⁴ Bernhard Welte, *Die Würde des Menschen und die Religion: Anfrage an die Kirche in unserer Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a. M.: Knecht, 1977); reprinted in idem, *Kleinere Schriften zur Philosophie der Religion*, vol. III/2, 59-105.

intertwined with each other as though
the body of each of us were
your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,
pray to us,
we are near.

Against the wind we went,
we went to traverse
hollow and ditch.

We went to drink, Lord

It was blood, it was
that which you shed, Lord.

It gleamed.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.
Eyes and mouths stand so open and empty, Lord.

We have drunk, Lord.
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.
We are near.¹⁵

¹⁵ Paul Celan, "Tenebrae," in idem, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1, ed. Beda Allemann and Stefan Reichert (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1983), 163. Translation ours, from the German original. "Nah sind wir, Herr./ nahe und greifbar./ Gegriffen schon, Herr./ einander verkrallt, als wär/ der Leib eines jeden von uns/ dein Leib, Herr./ Bete, Herr./ bete zu uns./ wir sind nah./ Windschief gingen wir hin./ gingen wir hin, uns zu bücken/ nach Mulde und Maar./ Zur Tränke gingen wir, Herr./ Es war Blut, es war./ was du vergossen, Herr./ Es glänzte./ Es warf uns dein Bild in die Augen, Herr./ Augen und Mund stehn so offen und leer, Herr./ Wir haben getrunken, Herr./ Das Blut und das Bild, das im Blut war, Herr./ Bete, Herr./ Wir sind nah."