

REVIEW ESSAY

Luther and Heidegger

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Benjamin D. Crowe, *Heidegger's Religious Origins: Destruction and Authenticity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006) 297pp.

This is a splendid and mercifully lucid contribution in the often arcane world of Heidegger scholarship. But Crowe's study is also important for the reassessment underway today (Stayer, Steigmann-Gall) of the ways in which German Protestant liberalism rediscovered the young Luther in the critical decade following the Great War. It speaks to the viability of existentialist interpretation in theology that arose from Bultmann's dialogue with Heidegger and was codified for Luther studies by his student Ebeling. As it happened, the early Luther played a significant role in Heidegger's intellectual journey out of conservative Catholicism on through Nietzschean Nazism to post-war Guru of incipient Deconstructionism. Crowe's book is thus also a *theological* contribution and it is from this angle of vision that the present essay is offered.

Crowe's general claim is "that religious life, particularly Christian religious life, exemplifies a 'basic experience [*Grunderfahrung*]' of human life in general, which, when sufficiently 'formalized' in the notion of authenticity, provided Heidegger with a starting point for his phenomenological investigations into the pre-theoretical sense of 'factual life-experience. . . .' So grounded, Heidegger began in the early 1920s "to craft a conception of doing philosophy that aimed at cultivating, preserving, and staying loyal to this 'basic experience'" (15–16). The religious background of Heidegger's existential analytic of Dasein in *Being and Time* has always been evident. It

is the great merit of this study to expose in detail its sources in the young Heidegger's appropriations of Paul, Augustine, Luther and Kierkegaard in lectures between 1919–1927. This research yields a second, more specific claim: "It is, I submit, the theology of Luther which provides Heidegger with the basis for his own conception of hermeneutics . . ." (38).

Building upon Van Buren's thesis that the "young Heidegger saw himself at this time as a kind of philosophical Luther of western metaphysics," Crowe sees Heidegger united with Luther in finding "the predominance of Aristotle's philosophy" to blame for obfuscating the "intellectual breakthrough that had occurred in early Christianity." This breakthrough, Heidegger charges, "was subsequently concealed by the importation of Greek metaphysics by the Fathers." At least in this period, it "was an important part of Heidegger's project to 'save' original Christianity from its subsequent falsification" (18). Such facile judgments would be liberal Protestant commonplaces in Weimar Germany, the kind a recovering Neo-Thomist would latch on to. But we learn from Crowe that in this period "Heidegger actually lectured on Luther on two occasions," displaying a impressive depth of knowledge of the sixteenth-century Reformer. The lectures moreover present "a paradigm of a thinker whose problematic was motivated not by theory but by concrete human life, by the 'basic experience' of being a fallen, corrupted human being. Luther's *theologia crucis* aims at opening up the possibility of an alternative mode of existence through relentlessly exposing the corruption of human nature" (42–3).

The opening paragraph of Luther's—at the time newly rediscovered—*Commentary on Romans* declared that the "chief purpose of this letter is to break down, to pluck up, and to *destroy* all wisdom and righteousness of the flesh" (*LW* 25:135, emphasis added). Crowe picks up the specific terminology: "*Destructio* is a name for a way of doing theology that attempts to block the influence of humanity's pervasive urge for self-glorification . . ."; in noteworthy detail he goes on to demonstrate how Luther's program of *destructio* inspired Heidegger's development of his own philosophical counter to "the tendencies toward complacency and conformity that encroach upon an individual's attempts to live as 'authentic life'" (38). For this

purpose, Heidegger seized upon the Heidelberg Disputation's contention that faith is a state of being grasped, so that consequently theology, as the thinking of faith based on revelation, is not a disinterested, contemplative science on the model of Aristotlian *theoria* (41). He tried then to proceed from this theological stance to a new conception of philosophy.

Some have taken Heidegger's *Destruktion* as a notion serving theoretical interests, "helping secure the proper theory about human life by critically examining traditional ideas." Crowe contends that this overlooks the deep motivations stemming from Luther. "In Luther, 'destructio' is a term that sometimes refers to the critical work of a 'theologian of the cross.' This work is not motivated by a theoretical concern with truth so much as a [*sic*] by a practical concern with the human good, namely, salvation. This concern survives Heidegger's translation of 'destructio' into 'Destruktion'" (47-48). "'Destructio' is Luther's name for God's dismantling of the idols of human egoism . . . Learning from Luther, Heidegger called this philosophy, 'Destruktion'" (66). Along these lines, Crowe finds that Luther's critique of metaphysics in the Romans Commentary anticipates Heidegger's well known, if less understood critique of onto-theology. This, Crowe claims, "does not refer to theism as such, but to a very specific version of it. Here, 'God' serves as a justification for human pride and presumption, a kind of clandestine self-congratulation. 'God' serves, in an onto-theological scheme, to ground an all-embracing explanation of reality, a project which has little to do with proclaiming an experience of salvation" (49). But a *theologia crucis* "has as its duty the critique of the 'prudence of the flesh' in all its forms" (58), whether in the form of Romans 1:20 or of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

The inspiration then is evident. The more interesting question concerns the *cost* of Heidegger's appropriation of Luther's *destructio*. As Crowe writes: "to 'save' Christianity was not to defend or to clarify the dogmas of a historical faith. Heidegger wholeheartedly rejected dogmatic orthodoxy and . . . shared his contemporaries [*sic*] interest in reviving the eschatology of the early Church" (131), that is, the existentially authentic state of living between the already and the not-yet. The critical move taken here is, obviously enough, the one from Luther's faith in the unique revelation—*vera theologia*

et cognitio Dei in Christo crucifixo sunt—to Heidegger's philosophical appeal to primitive Christianity and its authentic proponents as exemplary *Grundefahrungen*, that is, to the generalization that "life contains moments that, despite their rarity and strangeness, provide insight into the basic character of life" (29). Such experiences interrupt "the normal trajectory of an 'inauthentic' life, thereby enabling a kind of clear-sighted vocational commitment that he calls 'authenticity'" (32). Primitive Christianity is taken here as illustrative of just such a *Grundefahrung* (32); it has a "kind of paradigmatic status for Heidegger" of "the idea of a life that has been radically interrupted and permanently reoriented" (161). "One *wakes* up to the fact that one must *account* for one's own life" (159).

In dialogue with Bultmann (35, 37), Heidegger articulated the two Pauline possibilities of life according to the flesh or the Spirit: "the path of identification with this world, with what is visible, and this is the 'wisdom of the flesh' . . . the possibility of identification with what is not of this world, with what is invisible, and this is the 'wisdom of the spirit.'" Heidegger then saw the "radical nature of Luther's theory" of Pauline theology "in the fact that these possibilities are not qualities that can be added or subtracted from the substance of the person, but are instead totally distinct ontological orders . . . [Aristotle, by contrast] 'is concerned only with temporal matters . . .'" (51). Pauline paranses to 'wakefulness' (97, 100, 180, 223) to the new order gravitates to the center of interest, since authentic existence is not a "once for all achievement . . . [rather] one must continually return to this root commitment . . . [with] constant vigilance about the way that this decision plays itself out in one's life" (160). This is akin to Luther's teaching that "the cross continues until death" (161).

As appropriated by Heidegger, then, Luther's *destructio* is no longer the voice of *God* in service of the new creation, as the Heidelberg Disputation climactically enunciates: "It is this that Christ says in John 3: 'You must be born anew.' To be born anew, one must consequently first die and then be raised up with the Son of Man" (*LW* 31: 55). *Destructio* has become the uncanny 'voice of conscience,' which moreover never has anything to say about *what* a new life might be, such as, for example, 'being raised with the Son of Man.'

“Heidegger is more concerned with the fugitive, dissembling way individuals hide from their lives by ‘constructing’ them according to prearranged ‘plans’ than with the particular ‘images’ themselves. In other words, life crafts ‘idols’ so that it can avoid looking at itself in the face” (235). Thus, while Heidegger’s program of *Destruktion* “exposes the darker motivations behind prevailing ideas and practices . . . a drive for security . . . the hegemony of ‘theory’ . . . , carrying out this sort of a project clearly does not involve making any sort of positive recommendations about which aspects of one’s cultural inheritance are worth choosing as the focal points of one’s identity . . .” It only “involves the attempt to *liberate* or *free up* [*uberliefern*] possibilities from the past for the sake of the future” (260). On which possibilities might better be left buried and which retrieved it has nothing to say. “What is at issue is owning up to and taking over life as *one’s own*” (174).

This is no longer Paul, of course, nor Luther, whose paranses always specifies: “You are *not your own*, you have been bought with a price, so glorify God in your bodies” (1 Cor. 6:19). The “call” of God is secularized into “the simple fact that there are moments in life in which a new understanding of our situation is opened up, often unexpectedly” (182). The “call” contains no information about worldly events, but “points toward taking responsibility for oneself as a person who finds herself in a situation not of her own making, yet forced to make a radical decision to be a certain sort of person. It is emphatically not an occasion for detached ‘reflection’ on the nature of human existence. The ‘self’ one is summoned to is a *practical task*, not an *object*” (184). *Tertium non datur?*

As Heidegger likewise rejected metaphysical or theological accounts “that seek to explain the ‘voice of conscience’ in terms of something that is ‘objectively present,’” there can be in any case no *critical dogmatics*, no *testing of the spirits*. Heidegger “simply rules out the usual ‘metaphysical way of understanding the question of ‘who’ does the calling” (185). In the same way guilt is secularized: it becomes the ineluctable tragedy of choosing one possibility, there-with refusing others, in the self-enactment of finite freedom (187). But there can be no talk of guilt for choosing badly or falsely, only inauthentically. Luther’s or Paul’s summons to conformity *with*

Christ similarly turns into *abstract* ‘imitation,’ ‘repetition’ (191–2) of recovered possibilities for existence *whatsoever they may be*. Crowe discusses in this connection Vogel’s critique of Heidegger’s “evaluative nihilism,” namely, “there is no perspective independent of the heritage in which one stands—and the ‘prejudices’ that govern it—to judge whether one set of idols or ideals is better than any others.” Crowe concedes that “this is indeed Heidegger’s position” (195): any possible criticism is immanent to historically contingent traditions, where Christianity speaks as but a factual component of Western history. But then one no longer speaks as did Luther, let alone Paul, as ambassadors of the Word of God.

Be that as it may, the Word of God is mediated historically and consequently there is also a methodological affinity between Luther and Heidegger in the choice for hermeneutics over theory. The talk is pious, the Bible is cited, its words repeated, but nothing is understood. The problem is the fading of meaning in the course of time, its decline into self-evident platitudes, available in slogans, usable in rationalization, passed along in the public discourse of ‘idle talk,’ complicit in inauthentic existence. The object of critique is not then “tradition per se” (256), ‘not on the fact *that* we always stand within a tradition, but rather on the *how* of our standing within that tradition’ (257). Dismantling “begins with ‘today’s situation.’ Indeed, it is the ‘today,’ the public discourse of the present, which is the real target of critical ‘dismantling’” (257). “Heidegger holds that through our own acts of self-interpretation and self-determination, we participate in the transmission of meaning through time. We ‘are’ history [*Geschichte*], or the ‘happening’ [*Geschehen*] of the tradition. But, as Heidegger never tires in pointing out, we ‘are’ history in an inauthentic way. That is, we too often fail to make our history *our own* through clear-sighted vocational commitment, instead opting for the easy path of superficiality and conformity. At issue, then, in the relation between historicity and destruction is that the inauthentic condition of the former is precisely what calls for the critical activity of the latter” (251, cf. 255). Thus the affinity with Luther: “Like Lutheran *destructio*, [*Destruktion*] smashes the idols of self-satisfaction and fugitive self-abdication that have accumulated on life like tumors. On the ‘positive’ side, however, destruction

frees what is 'genuine' in the past so that this might challenge the self-conception of the present and so point toward a new future." Deconstruction asks: What were the motives? What is the genuineness of its own problematic? It is no mere play of negative criticism but "overcomes and rejects confused, half-clarified false problematics only through demonstration of the genuine sphere of problems" (238–9) "by way of a deconstructive regress, penetrat[ing] to the original motivational sources . . ." (256).

In the details just surveyed, Crowe provides a surprising genealogy: from Luther's Latin *destructio* through Heidegger's Germanized *Destruktion* to the post-War French *deconstructionism*. An affinity in iconoclasm is no doubt here to be found; the question, with Jean-Luc Marion, is whether the icon rises from the ruins of the idols and whether we can tell the difference.

Crowe treads lightly on the question of Heidegger's *Kehre* and its relations to his decision for National Socialism. He acknowledges that the young Heidegger who is portrayed in his study lost interest after *Being and Time* in the problem of the 'decline of tradition' and the 'fading of meaning,' as he turned from Luther to Nietzsche, that is, from 'saving' Christianity to the nihilist problem of the 'death of God,' to probing the Pre-Socratics and the ensuing 'history of being' with its 'sendings' culminating in the "modern, subjectivistic, technical understanding of being" (108). He dates to 1929 Heidegger's new critical focus on technology with his adherence to the myth of the German *Sonderweg* between the technological juggernauts of communism and capitalism (207). By contrast Crowe's early "Heidegger appears to have worried more about the comforting platitudes of 'world-view' philosophy and the abstractions of neo-Kantianism than about technology" (208). This Heidegger certainly rejected modeling philosophy on science: "the detached irrelevance of 'scientific' philosophy must be replaced by a way of doing philosophy that is both sensitive to and motivated by life itself." Yet at the same time he "rejected the construction of a 'world-view' as a legitimate task for philosophy" (212), and urged a new conception of philosophy 'which would be totally unrelated to all the ultimate questions of humankind.' . . . 'World-view: this is bringing to standstill! . . . World-view is freezing, finality, end, system.' (213). In other words, the young Heidegger rejected both

neo-Kantianism and *Lebensphilosophie* for the same reason. "Philosophy, Heidegger contends, is 'corrupted' when it becomes ideology" (214). This early Heidegger insists that "orientation to life is not to offer some 'perverted historical salvation,' nor has it any 'cultural mission' as if to preserve the future from its own care about questioning, as if philosophy could presume to pronounce on *the* meaning of life" (215). That would be a "disaster," giving in to a "deep urge for ready made solutions to life's perennial questions, avoiding radical questioning" (216). Neither a philosophy pretending to be science nor a counter-philosophy celebrating the absurd avoids 'ideology.'

But it seems, Crowe concedes, "that this conviction had faded by 1933, when Heidegger publicly enlisted his thought in the service of the National Socialist 'revolution'" (214–5, emphasis added) in the name of *Bodenstaendigkeit*, 'rootedness': "much of his work from the 1930s is congruent in a general way with the 'blood and soil' ideology . . ." (215).

Faded? Crowe's tacit defense of Heidegger seems to me quite unsatisfying here. It is not that Heidegger forgot himself and succumbed to the metaphysical temptation of world-view construction; on the contrary it was Heidegger's megalomaniac illusion that he could free Nazis from such unfortunate entanglements as, for example, their biological racism, and teach them the real meaning of the German people's decision against nihilism. The continuity between early and later Heidegger is far more impressive in this connection. Heidegger's *decisionism* is, by Heidegger's own lights, not an arbitrary act of individual willfulness precisely because of *Bodenstaendigkeit*, 'rootedness.' One finds oneself thrown into existence without rhyme or reason and so taking root in the powerful matrix of the language of one's people, fed on the traditions of their collective life and awakening to the imperative of a critical appropriation. It is cognizance of this situation which makes decision socially responsible. Resolutely 'willing one's own essence' in this *voelkisch* sense is the imperative of authentic existence in face of the nothing from which and to which one exists as an individual. If that is a true account of existence, what matters is not what one chooses (that is chosen for one) but that one chooses oneself. Regarding that as a true account of existence, however, is part of the price paid for secularizing Luther.

One has to *wonder* then whether Luther is so easily secularized. Perhaps *destructio* is just English *destruction* apart from the purpose clause to which it is linked in theology: God kills *in order to* make alive. Perhaps only *God* is wise enough and good enough to execute this judgment—would that the later Luther, as well as the later Heidegger had grasped that better!

This essay is based in part on Paul Hinlicky's forthcoming (Winter 2008, Eerdmans) Paths not Taken: Theology from Luther through Leibniz.