CHAPTER FIVE
THE RETURN OF THE GODS

THE CLASH BETWEEN MONOTHEISM AND POLYTHEISM IN
GERMAN ROMANTICISM

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Polytheism: A Phenomenon or a Question?

The recent interest in polytheism within Western culture is in itself a complex event. The wish to get rid of intolerance and of a biased approach to other religions and cultures, if not of a wholesale condemnation of them, partly explains this growing interest. Monotheism is supposed to be the culprit of many serious deteriorations of Western culture, such as intolerance, superiority, colonialism, racism and antifeminism. A certain complicity of certain forms of monotheism with all these deplorable manifestations of narrow-mindedness cannot be denied. In the last century, Christian theology has increasingly recognized this problem. The discovery of the interrelatedness of colonialism and Christian mission calls for a genuine interest in those other cultures, hidden for centuries behind prejudice and discrimination. In addition, a waning interest in Christianity itself, which for the first time in centuries has become a minority in Europe, may have caused a spiritual vacuum to be filled by religions of a more exotic extraction.

The rise of the study of religions in the nineteenth century marked the struggle of Western society with its own prejudices and feelings of superiority. The axiom of this approach, to put one's own religious conviction between brackets in the study of other religions, was not only motivated by a desire to maintain a scholarly attitude, but had an ethical component as well: to do justice to other religions without imposing one's own ideas upon them.

However, this approach, understandable as such, tends to avoid an important confrontation, which lies at the heart of our research: the confrontation between monotheism and polytheism. Precisely by putting one's own conviction between brackets, this phenomenological
approach will never go beyond a mere description of religions and comparing them from an outsider's perspective. It will be our task to steer between the two extremes of putting one's own (Christian) conviction between brackets, and taking the Christian conviction from the outset as the yardstick by which other religions can be measured. Undoubtedly, this last approach has been the usance in the history of religions until modern times. However, even in the earliest layers of Christianity, this approach did not always lead to a wholesale condemnation of all other religions, but betrayed sometimes a certain appreciation as well. To be more precise: official rejection of other religions could go together with unconscious adaptation and integration of elements in those religions.

The clash between monotheism and polytheism is an ancient phenomenon. Even in the days of Antiquity, this confrontation cannot be understood as a categorical monotheistic rejection of polytheism without further ado. Already from the first centuries of Christianity and even earlier in Hellenistic Judaism, it was acknowledged, be it in a naive way, that the divine revelation could have reached other cultures and religions in a miraculous way. This would explain how these cultures could display remarkable similarities with divine Biblical history. There have been attempts to integrate certain polytheistic connotations into the monotheistic framework by assigning to the gods a lower place in the divine hierarchy. Thus, all the peoples of the earth were supposed to possess a genius of their own, a guardian angel as a metaphysical expression of the differences between them.\(^1\)

Other early Christian writers considered the gods a demonic manifestation, but by doing so could not help to acknowledge some sort of reality in them.\(^2\) From the Greeks, the Christian West inherited the rationalistic approach to the gods, described as euhemerism: the gods were nothing but ancient heroes who had been divinized in the collective memory of the peoples.\(^3\) As such, euhemerism is another attempt to integrate the polytheistic experience by acknowledging some reality in it while denying its metaphysical essence.

All these approaches to polytheism are marked by a double movement of recognition and of denial. Hence, although Christianity reacted to polytheism from an inner perspective, it should be recognized that polytheism as a genuine theological question to Christian belief has not been dealt with here. One has to wait until the rise of comparative religion to testify to the first attempts to an unbiased recognition and description of polytheism, unmarred by derogatory statements. However, this development as described above, important in itself, fails to answer the question what polytheism means to the monotheistic believer. This question, falling as its does outside the domain of comparative religion, can be answered neither by a relativistic approach to all religions nor by a dogmatic affirmation of the sole truth of monotheism by equating polytheism with error as such. In order to face the challenge of a real confrontation between monotheism and polytheism, we turn to German Romanticism.

Why German Romanticism?

At first sight, it may seem that this period offers no more than a Romantic longing to the gods, a nostalgie de la Grèce,\(^4\) which cannot satisfy modern man. The famous poem of Schiller, Die Göttler Griechenlands, may be an example of such an uncritically embracing the Greek gods and deploring the Göttlerdammerung (the twilight of the gods).\(^5\) For Schiller, the twilight of the gods meant the decline of beauty and of life. What remains is merely the soulless word.

Ja, sie kehrten heim, und alles Schöne,
Alles Hohe nahmen sie mit fort,

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\(^1\) This concept is known both in Jewish and in Christian sources. Compare E. Peterson, "Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem," in Theologische Fraktale (1994), 23–81.

\(^2\) E.g., Justin Martyr (second century CE) who explains similarities between Zoroastrianism and Hellenic influences upon the latter, whereas in other texts, Jewish influences.

\(^3\) This theory is named after Euhemeros of Messene (330 BC) and was adopted by the Christian writer Tertullian (third century CE).

\(^4\) J. Taminiaux, La nostalgie de la Grèce a l'aube de l'idéalisme allemand, Kant et les Grecs dans l'itinéraire de Schiller, de Hölderlin et de Hegel (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1967).

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² Compare Apollonius of Tyana (second century CE) who explains similarities between Jesus and Mithras, the latter belonging to a Scythian-Greek-Bactrian tradition, whereas the early Christians were influenced by the same source.

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Alle Farben, alle Lebenstöne,
Und uns blieb nur das entseelte Wort.
Aus der Zeitflut weggerissen schweben
Sie gerettet auf des Pindus Höhn:
Was unsterblich im Gesang soll leben,
Muß im Leben untergehn.\textsuperscript{6}

However, on closer scrutiny it is in this same period that the first critical debates about monotheism versus polytheism took shape. It was Hegel who recognized that twofold alienation separated us from the beauty of the Greeks: the Biblical prohibition to make images of God, and the dictates of reason. A naive return to Greece would come down to a denial of these values that have stamped Western culture profoundly.\textsuperscript{7} Is this also Schiller’s conviction when he paradoxically states that “whatever lives immortally in songs, should decline in real life?” Ironically, only the alienation between the Greek gods who have died and us, would allow for a genuine poetic expression of their meaning. Be it as it may, it is our conviction that the Romantic period has been the first to face the question of the confrontation between monotheism and polytheism.\textsuperscript{8}

The juxtaposition of monotheism and polytheism is a serious topic for writers of this period, who do not resort to a serene pantheon nor simply abstain from the Biblical or Christian perspective (which might be a post-modern solution of our days), but instead fight the battle without being sure of the outcome. German Romanticism both accepts and challenges earlier solutions that view polytheism as the most primitive phase of civilization to culminate in Christian monotheism. The question whether Greek mythology should be seen as a genuine reality that might be never exhausted and superseded by the Logos of reason, continued to haunt Romantic thinkers.\textsuperscript{9} In Hegelian perspective, the aestheticism of the Greeks who attached divinity to material forms (sculpture being the eminent manifestation of art), is transcended by the Jewish-Biblical idea of iconoclasm. However, this development is not without its ambiguities. The lofty idea of a transcendent divinity disconnects itself from the appreciation of divine beauty as the Greeks had it. Thus, the Christian idea of Incarnation can be understood as a reconciliation of both positions. It is clear that in this (here highly simplified) philosophy of religion, there is neither a categorical rejection of polytheism nor a naive embracing of Biblical monotheism. Still, Christianity is seen as the culmination of religion by bridging the gap between the monotheistic idea of transcendence (Erhabenheit) and the Greek idea of divine beauty in material form, between transcendence and sensorial perception.

Other approaches in German Romanticism face the question of the origin of religion in a curious mixture of historic critical research and of mythical thinking. Has there been a polytheism that developed towards a dualism to culminate into monotheism? Or was there an original monotheism that only later on deteriorated into dualism and polytheism that calls for a development toward a restoration of the origin. Schelling (1775–1854), who shared rooms with Hegel (1770–1830) and Hölderlin (1770–1843) in Tübingen in 1790, appreciated mythology as the collection of stories about gods and men and about the origin of the world. He rejected a rational approach to reduce mythology to what it is not: a primitive attempt at physical science, a kind of poetry or allegories of something else.\textsuperscript{10}

Mythology is not allegorical but tastegorical and should be explained by itself, not by elements that are foreign to it. Myth lies at the origin of culture, not vice versa. According to Schelling, the tower of Babel is the account of crisis and of judgement. Mutual understan-


\textsuperscript{7} This is our main objection to the Belgian philosopher Samuel IJsselbroeck who pleads for a revival of the Greek gods, but without accounting for this twofold alienation. See Bert Blans and Marcel Poorthuis. “Ijsselbroeck pleidooi voor het polytheisme nader bekeken,” \textit{Tijdschrift voor Filosofie} 60 (1998) 3: 580-591.


\textsuperscript{9} H. Anton, “Romantische Deutung griechischer Mythologie,” in \textit{Die Deutsche Romantik. Poetik, Formen und Motive} (Ed. H. Steffen, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 277-288. W. F. Otto, \textit{Die Götter Griechenlands} (Beuron: Cohen, 1929) forms the culmination of the tendency to attribute real life to the gods. The political overtones of such a hardly innocent return of the gods e.g. in Nazi-Germany should be taken into account as well.

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dining becomes confusion, unity dispersion. Here it is that monotheism is replaced by polytheism. Still, Schelling distinguishes between relative and absolute monotheism. The last one excludes any form of polytheism, but cannot then have preceded polytheism. Schelling pleads for a religious (tautological) explanation of myth in order to take mythology seriously. For Schelling, myth can never be resolved by reason: demythologizing myth means not understanding it, but destroying it. As such, polytheism can be considered as a stage in the theogonical process of history with its own significance. Original monotheism should be distinguished from the monotheism of existing religions. For some of Schelling’s contemporaries, this original monotheism ranks high above polytheism. Others consider this monotheism even as the ideal form, of which present religions, including the monotheistic ones, are mere fragments. Again others maintain that polytheism is a necessary stage in the development of the human mind in order to arrive at a conscious monotheism, distinct from the unconscious monotheism of Paradise. Schelling displays affinities with the latter standpoint, although he is anxious to assess the significance of polytheism as such and even acknowledges the limitations of monotheism in that respect.

Whereas for Kant, monotheism remains by far superior to polytheism, it is Nietzsche who, with his accusation of Christianity to have emptied life of its multiform manifestations by propagating monotonousness (Anti-Christ, §19), takes the other extreme position. For Nietzsche, monotheism was the greatest danger that confronted humanity (Fröhliche Wissenschaft, §143). Goethe preceded Nietzsche in condemning monotheism as poetically poorer than polytheism. The philosopher Schopenhauer likewise condemns monotheism for its supposed interconnectedness with intolerance.

In the same period, the question of evil in the world in connection to what might be called “the dark side of God” revived interest in Gnosticism, in the mysticism of Eckhart and Boehme and in Jewish and Christian Kabbalah, that were studied not only for the sake of scientific curiosity but to clarify one’s own belief. Our exploration of Romanticism utilizes two distinct moments of confrontation between monotheism and polytheism, both condensed in a literary form rather than in a theoretical discourse. The first moment consist of Eichendorff’s well-known story Das Marmorbild (The marble statue), in which the protagonist of the story encounters the goddess Aphrodite. Her seductive appearance occasions reflection upon the difference between the goddess and the virgin Mary, between “pagan” and Christian sexuality. The story as such dates from Medieval times, but characteristically the statue coming to life is not merely a magical exterior phenomenon for Eichendorff, but roots deep into human existence. The ensuing struggle displays an antagonism in the Romantic soul itself, between pagan sexuality and Christian sexuality, or, according to some interpreters, between pagan sexuality and Christian asceticism. Unlike some of his contemporaries, such as the philosopher Nietzsche who embraces pagan Dionysiac sexuality while blaming Christian asceticism and monotheism for a gross denial of life and joy, Eichendorff’s story seems to remain loyal to Christianity, but at what cost remains to be investigated.

The second moment of confrontation brings us to the poems of Hölderlin. In it, Christianity and polytheism seems to be some sort of neighbours, Christ appearing as Heracles’ brother. In a concluding paragraph we sketch the significance of these literary expressions for the relation between monotheism and polytheism.

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11 At Pentecost the reverse takes place, according to Schelling: mutual understanding is possible because of the unity of the One God in the spirit of Christ.

12 See especially his reflections inspired by Kabbalah and esoterism on the names of God, the Tetragrammaton being the ineffable uniqueness of the biblical God (without denying the existence of other gods), and Elohim denoting the plurality of the divine. See Schelling, “Der Monotheismus,” in SW XII, 47-48.

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Eichendorff’s Das Marmorbild or the Coming to Life of the Goddess Aphrodite

Das Marmorbild (1819) relates how the young man Florio meets the famous singer Fortunato in Italian town of Lucca. The latter sings his first song, addressed already to Bacchus and Venus:

Frau Venus, du frohe,
So klingend und weich,
In Morgenrots Lohre,
Erblick Ich dein Reich.15

However, suddenly the tone changes:

Die Klänge verrinnern,
Es bleicht das Grün,
Die Frauen stehn sinnend,
Die Ritter schaun kühn.16

The song ends with an evocation of the youth from heaven whose beauty is praised. Although not explicitly stated, there is no doubt that here Jesus is meant.

In the inn, Florio comes to sit next to a beautiful girl with dark glowing eyes and in the merriment of drinking and singing he steals a kiss from her lips. During the night he wanders around and comes across a statue of Venus. The next day he decides to search for the place again but arrives at a lonely palace. There he meets a beautiful woman playing music on a lute, making him forget everything else. Then he recognizes an old acquaintance, the knight Donati, who, however, looks pale like a dead man. He follows him and the two of them arrive at a place full of celebration and joy. Again he meets the beautiful woman, but also recognizes the girl from the inn. During the days after he feels depressed and lonely, but to his relief Donati introduces him again to his beautiful lady. Now he recognizes her from a picture familiar to him in his childhood. Then, in a flash of lightning, she becomes pale as a statue. Florio discovers to his horror that other statues in the palace come to life and that even the flowers begin to move around like serpents. He flees and outside he gets a glimpse of Fortunato, but he runs to the city. There he learns that nobody is known by the name of Donati and that from the old palace nothing remains but a meadow with a statue of Venus. He decides to leave town. Fortunato keeps him company and a few other men. It turns out that the youngest of them is not a man but the girl from the inn, named Bianca and dressed in men’s clothes! Initially, she is angry of him because of his disloyalty. Gradually, both understand that the nightmare is over.

Fortunato sings about Venus who haunts the old places in spring. Then he sings about another lady with a child in her arms appearing on the rainbow. She is the one who chases away all nightmares.

Eichendorff availed himself of at least two older stories to compose this novella. One story deals with an enchanted palace in the town of Lucca, the other story with a statue of Venus coming to life.17 However, the Romantic re-use of this older material is not just a slavish imitation, but as it were an anatomy of the soul. The tension between Christianity and Venus is no longer an external affair or a temporary visitation by demons, but is a permanent struggle of the Romantic artist himself. Hence the demonic and the temptation are never totally external forces, but belong to man, both as an evil and as a “blessing in disguise” that should be recognized instead of denied.

Analysis

The fascinating thing in this piece of literature is its multilayered tissue. There is the dichotomy between Greek culture and Christian belief, between eros and agape, between man and woman, between the ideal and the real, that all play their role without coinciding. Clearly, the story is not just an allegory of sensorial perception over against transcendence in the Hegelian sense nor of physical pleasure versus Christian asceti-

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15 Venus, o joyful woman, / so melodious and soft, / in the glow of the morning, / your kingdom I perceive.

16 The sounds fade away, / The green becomes pale, / The women stand musing, / The knights look brave.

17 See for the first story (Happelli, Größeste Gedenkwürdigkeiten) the references in J. K. B. von Eichendorff, Werke 2 (Ed. R. Dietz, Leipzig, Bibliographisches Institut, 1891); the second story is Medieval and circulated in several versions, e.g. in William of Malmesbury (1125) and in the Kaiserchronik (1150). Compare the important study of B. Hinz, Aphrodite: Geschichte einer abendländische Passion (München: Hanser, 1998), 116-122.
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trachery device leading Florio to a necrophilous embrace of a cold marble statue while forgetting the young girl. She, on the other hand, is alive and beautiful and not to forget, faithful.

If our interpretation is correct, the antagonism of this story would come down to the tension between faithful love to the one beloved woman (which includes mutual bodily attraction), over against a vain search for the pagan Bacchantic desire for the female body as such (which excludes faithful love). To put it dialectically: the marble statue is the fate of the Greek gods in the present, i.e. under the aegis of Christianity. Only in their own domain, which is out of reach for us, they lead their life. In spite of that, even when the statue comes to life, there is no element of a warm-blooded relationship but rather of a mirage, a demonic spell that lures the hero into a life of aimless wandering and hideous temptation.

No doubt—and this is relevant for gender studies—we deal here with a male phantasma, the endless search for the ideal beloved always leading to new horizons and to alienation of the woman here and now. Das ewig weibliche, the eternal female, lures man into domains without horizons, where he no longer knows whether he follows the Other or merely a dreamlike projection of his own desires. Initially, the Romantic male hero may have cherished the illusion to meet the eternal beloved in every woman, but this illusion might be explained as follows. Initially he perceives in her the phantasma of his own desires and projections (das ewig Weibliche), but gradually the woman reveals herself from behind that phantasma which inevitably leads to disappointment and alienation. The Romantic disappointment is the disappointment of the hero who only loves his own dreamlike ideal. Eichendorff's story can be read as a warning against that ostensibly loving but in reality petrifying and killing attitude. The hero is wrong in considering his ideal dream something far greater and more impressive than the woman he encounters in reality and who offers him her love and loyalty.

The Romantic writer Novalis describes in a similar story a young man whose faithful love concerns a girl from his youth.

A young man grows up in a village together with a girl. The two of them are destined for each other from the outset. Although he had promised her eternal love, one day he feels a deep desire to wander over the earth in order to discover the secret of the veiled Isis. He real-

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cism. Eichendorff’s Nostalgie de la Grèce, his fascination for Greek beauty and sensual divine forms, is highly complex. The critical stand toward Christianity that would deny the enjoyment of life and love in favour of an otherworldly asceticism that is implied in Schiller’s poem, is not Eichendorff’s conviction. After all, the hero of the story is redeemed from a spell, be it by a song alluding to the virgin Mary.

In a penetrating analysis of this story, Christian Begemann interprets these strophes as the ascetic victory of Christianity over Eros. Christianity would have freed Florio from his juvenile fascination for pagan Bacchantic eroticism, blindfolded by sexuality, in order to educate the senses toward contemplation of the higher world.\(^\text{18}\) Although the general pattern is unmistakably that of Christianity that is victorious over the spell of pagan eroticism, still we would like to challenge Begemann’s interpretation somewhat. Florio does not end up by becoming a monk! Hence we should not assume that Eichendorff’s story merely advocates Christian asceticism by condemning the lust of sensual pleasure and eroticism in favour of an apologetics that denies beauty and female attraction. The way he portrays the girl from the inn at her first meeting is not devoid of eroticism, considering that Florio, seeing her beautiful longing eyes, steals a kiss from her red warm lips. In contrast, the chill marble statue can be associated with some type of rigid necrophilous sexuality. At the end of the story, the girl from the inn reappears on the scene, dressed as a young man and named Bianca. According to Begemann, both her “hermaphroditism” and her name Bianca (“white”) emphasize her asexual status, underlined by her disembodied and soul-like appearance. In a way she becomes the petrified marble statue, according to Begemann. However, this interpretation is not wholly convincing. Florio’s first meeting with her did not announce any demonic fear of women. Bianca’s status at the end should be understood as Eichendorff’s ideal of Christian love between man and woman that we might call sacramental, both saintly and bodily. True, the bodily attraction of Venus threatened to destroy this sacramental love, but this does not imply a wholesale condemnation of eroticism and of bodily attraction. On the contrary, Venus’ promise of bodily love turns out to be a treacherous device leading Florio to a necrophilous embrace of a cold marble statue while forgetting the young girl. She, on the other hand, is alive and beautiful and not to forget, faithful.

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izes that he has to leave and after a long journey over hills and mountains, he finally arrives at the Realm of the Veiled Isis. He takes away the veil . . . to discover the face of the girl from his village.  

Apparently, Isis symbolizes for our hero the eternal mystery of woman, or the universal truth, in the light of which his relationship with the young girl from his youth turns into oblivion, at least initially. At the end however, the universal and the individual are reconciled, the arrival at the end of the earth turns out to be a homecoming and the eternal mystery of woman shines through the face of his beloved from his youth. There is a personalistic element to this story: in the encounter with one single individual, the whole world can be met. The plot of this story is more conciliatory than Eichendorff’s, as the dichotomy between the goddess and the girl is overcome. For Novalis, the dichotomy symbolizes the individual truth versus the universal truth. The opposition between classical Antiquity and Christianity is not explicit in Novalis’ story that rather seems to opt for an eschatological coinciding of faithful love for the individual and the search for universal mystery.

Still, the initial opposition between the goddess and the girl are central to both stories. According to Eichendorff, this opposition cannot and must not be bridged, for Christianity itself contains the synthesis of bodily love and faithfulness in its sacramental idea of marriage. Obviously, Novalis’ story displays less confidence in the Christian solution.

Let us return to Eichendorff’s story once more. The girl from the village appears three times on the scene and does so in highly antagonistic roles. First she is the girl in the inn, whose dark glowing eyes do not fail to arouse passion in Florio. Then she is the double of the goddess Venus herself at the party in the magical castle. The third time she appears dressed as a boy and named Bianca, destined to become Florio’s bride, as we assume.

It would be tempting to see a development in these appearances as well, more or less parallel with Florio’s own Werdegang. Still we prefer to interpret her appearance at the beginning not as a misdeanour, to be sublimated in an earthly purity, symbolized in an asexual white. We

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rather recognize here Eichendorff’s own ideal of love: from the initial falling in love to the consummation in marriage. Be it as it may, there is no complete serenity reached. Undoubtedly, Eichendorff betrays something of the highly ambiguous Romantic attitude to woman in these three highly antagonistic manifestations of the female protagonist: in the falling in love, in the double of the goddess Venus and in the white bride.

The Goddess Venus as Symbol of Greek Culture

In a less dialectic reading of the same story, pagan culture, embodied in the statue of Venus, appears as the strange temptation. Venus as symbol of sexuality is ambiguous, embodying, as she does, physical love and negating the immediate and sincere love to a specific young woman. This young woman embodies the honesty of youth and of simplicity and the “faith of our baptism.” Curiously, the Biblical prohibition of idolatry turns out to be a choice for the physical warmth of love and against the chill marble statue. In poetical vein, the ensuing statement is similar to what we noticed in Hegel’s explanation of the Incarnation as the Christian rehabilitation of the body by reconnecting it with the divine while respecting the prohibition of idolatry. Sensory bodily existence and the sublimity of the divine are simultaneously affirmed. It is not too far fetched to see here a connection with the rediscovery of the Song of Songs as a bridal song between man and woman in German Romanticism. Although the Song of Songs had always been part and parcel of the religious heritage, the affirmation of bodily love as genuine divine expression was largely obscured. As is well-known, the Song of Songs, for centuries considered as a mystical song about love between God and His people, has been rediscovered in German Romanticism as a love song about the sincere erotic love between man and woman, and this nearly for the first time in history. The different stages of love: attraction, despair, loneliness, fear of infidelity, passion and mutual tenderness, are all there as human emotions without having to resort to mysticism to account for the erotic. This rediscovery of the Song of Songs was not just a secular reading that robbed the story of its divine

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We discover here an antagonism between spirit and body, that should be distinguished from the antagonism between Christianity and the Greeks. Romanticism claims to have unearthed the Hebrew foundation of our Western culture, forgotten not only by classical education that focussed instead upon Rome and Athens, but obscured by centuries of Christian preaching as well. The Song of Songs embodies this rediscovery of Hebrew culture, as a document of bodily love, both chaste and passionate, erotic and loyal. The Song of Songs interpreted in Christianity as an allegory between God and his People failed to affirm this love. The Romantics, claiming that sensual love and spiritual orientation should be bridged discovered in this little document of Hebrew culture a real Song of Songs, a cornerstone of Western civilisation, but forgotten and despised. Denial of life in its fullness and asceticism, understood as hatred towards the enjoyment of life, were combated in the Bible itself, the Romantics claimed. Bodily love as God’s gift to humanity could be found in the Bible, but not in its Western garb. The love song could again be heard, provided it would be understood in its Hebrew idiom.

Admittedly, Eichendorff does not fully develop this perspective of full appreciation of life as a divine gift at the end of his story, but remains stuck in a half-hearted affirmation of bodily love. If so, this may reflect the half-heartedness of Christianity itself that professes to accept bodily love but often did not manage to overcome a culture of shame and of denial. Another explanation could be found in the adoption of a traditional folk story itself by Eichendorff with its ensuing constraints. There is hardly a traditional story or Romantic love story on European soil that manages to describe not only the way to a happy bond between lovers but also the consummation of that bond in happy bodily love.

The Christian perspective as an attitude against the nostalgie de la Grece, does not gain an easy triumph in Eichendorff’s story, but remains as it were infected by the confrontation with paganism. The old

Christian equation of pagan gods with demons shines through this story, but at the same time Christianity threatens to become sterile in reaction to paganism. We need not assume that according to Eichendorff the Greek gods are living realities, like Walter Friedrich Otto proposed in his Die Götter Griechenlands. Still, the heritage of Antiquity is like a demon haunting Christianity itself. The difference with medieval predecessors of the story of the living statue of the goddess Venus is the recognition that this demonic appearance is not something outside the beholder, but constitutes the turmoil of the Romantic soul.

No doubt, the artist that has suffered most under the chasm between Christ and the gods, is the German poet Hölderlin. He suffered because he was not prepared to dispel the Greek gods as a demonic trap.

Christ as Brother of Heracles and of Dionysius: The Poet Hölderlin

The German poet Hölderlin worked on his highly enigmatic poem Der Einzige (The Only One) between 1801 to 1804. The unfinished poem exists in several versions that have the first lines in common:

Was ist es, das
An die alten seligen Küsten
Mich fesselt, dass ich mehr noch
Sie liebe, als mein Vaterland?²³

The different versions have grown out of the incessant attempt to answer this question: who is the Only One? Already the question betrays the direction, where to find the “Only One”: on the blessed shores, obviously the Mediterranean. Still, the last strophe of the last version seems to indicate some sort of an answer:

Immerdar
Bleibt dies, dass immergekettet alltag ganz ist


What is it that / Binds me to these ancient / Blessed shores, that I love / Then more than my country? (Hymns and Fragments by Friedrich Hölderlin (ed. Richard Sieburth; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 82-83 Henceforth Haf)
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Bis an den Indus
Gebietend freudigen Dienst
Den Weinberg stiftet und
Den Grimm bezänmte der Völker.\textsuperscript{25}

The beggar is Christ himself, who is introduced as brother of Heracles and of Dionysius. It is the poet’s own fault, he confesses, for he is too much attached to Christ, although Christ himself is the brother of the “other” two gods. To understand this kinship across the barriers of culture and religion, we should explore Hölderlin’s attitude to the Greeks a little further.

\textit{Hölderlin’s Attitude to the Greeks}

In the poem \textit{Der Einzige} and in many of his other works, Hölderlin views Greek life as the ideal life. There and then the gods still appeared to men, in contrast with life in his own country. Still, “both should be learned” (letter to Boehlendorff, December 4, 1801):

ds das Eigene muss so gut gelernt seyn, wie das Fremde. Deswegen sind uns die Griechen unentbehrlich. Nur werden wir ihnen gerade in unserem eigenen, Nationellen nicht nachkommen, weil der freie Gebrauch des Eigenen das Schwerste ist.\textsuperscript{26}

Hence, freedom is not to be found beyond the horizon in the land of the Greeks, but in a new freedom towards what is native. A too profound love for the Greeks can be an obstacle to that. This is apparently the existential struggle of the poet: his sadness that Christ remains remote, perhaps due to his own fault. He exclaims:

\begin{quote}
My Master and Lord, My Teacher, Why have You kept so far away?
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{25} “Der Einzige” (first version) \textit{WÜ}, 169.

\textsuperscript{26} But I know, the fault / Is all mine. For I cling / Too close to you, Christ, / Though you are Herakles’ brother / And, I must confess, the brother / Of Eutios too, who / Harnessed tigers to his / Chariot and, commanding / Joyous worship down / To the Indus, / Founded vineyards and / Turned the wrath of the nations. (\textit{HÜ}, 85)

\textsuperscript{24} “Der Einzige” (third version), \textit{WÜ}, 176:

… This remains always, / The world forever chained, totally. / However, often great does not seem to fit / To great. Still, they stand there all day long side by side as at an abyss. / However, the three of them are / like this under the sun / as hunters before the hunt or / A farmer who is relieved from work / His head uncovered, or a beggar. Beautiful / And lovely it is to compare. How sweet / Is the earth, yielding coldness. However for always …
Die Welt. Oft aber scheint
Ein Großer nicht zusammenzutaugen
Zu Großem. Alle Tage stehn die aber, als an einem Abgrund einer
Neben dem andern. Jene drei sind aber
Das, dass sie unter der Sonne
Wie Jäger der Jagd sind oder
Ein Ackermann, der atmet von der Arbeit
Sein Haupt entblöset, oder Bettler. Schön
Und lieblich ist es zu verglichen. Wohl tut
Die Erde. Zu kühlen. Immer aber
24

The answer remains veiled in riddles. The search for the Only One yields a “Trinity,” but of a peculiar kind: a hunter, a farmer and a beggar. In Hölderlin’s perception, imbued as he was with Greek mythology, the hunter stands for Heracles, whereas the farmer is connected to Dionysus or the Evian. Incidentally, for Hölderlin, Dionysus is less the symbol of temptation and of intoxication as for Nietzsche. But who is the third one, the beggar? In order to discover that, we will continue our reading:

Ich weiss es aber, eigene Schuld
Ist! Denn zu sehr,
O Christus! häng’ ich an dir,
Wiewohl Herakles Bruder
Und küehn bekenn’ ich, du
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and:

Why did you fail to appear?

But could on the other hand a too strong attachment to Christ hamper the road to freedom as well? As quoted above, the poet sighs: "I know, the fault is all mine. For I cling too close to you, Christ." The poet admits that Christ is himself brother of Heracles and of Dionysius. So why is it? "That serving the one, I Thereby lose the other."

Hölderlin realized that by invoking, praying, thanking, complaining and praising, he brought the gods to life again. But at the same time he felt an intense love for the Only One. The interrelatedness of both is strongly debated among the commentators of Hölderlin. He felt guilty but because of what?

In his brilliant commentary, the Christian theologian Romano Guardini states that nature is the everything and all encompassing background of Hölderlin’s poetry. Streams, heroes, gods, powers and elements, form the protagonists of nature. Hence, Christ cannot appear otherwise than as one of these protagonists of nature, be it in his own way, Guardini claims. However, the interpretations of H. G. Gadamer,28 Eva Schulz and Ulrich Häussermann29 point to another direction. According to Gadamer:

When we listen to the Hymn of Christ, we are faced with a mystery: not the abundant love for the old gods... is the cause of Christ being remote, on the contrary: the abundant love for Christ is to be blamed for that.30

Indeed, the excessive love for Christ prevents a comparison between him and the gods of Antiquity. How should this be understood? Christ is addressed as beggar, in suffering, as brother, to be approached with modesty and shyness. The suffering does not only concern Christ but the poet as well. He has suffered greatly because of mother Mary and her son:

Viel hab’ ich dein

30 Gadamer, "Hölderlin und die Antike," 3.


For your sake / And your son’s, / O Madonna, / I have suffered much / Since I first heard of him / In my tender youth; / For the seer is not alone / But stands under a fate / Common to those who serve. Because I / And the many songs I had / In mind to sing to the Father / Most High, these / Sadness stole from me. (Haß, 132-33)
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The RETURN OF THE GODS

Und deines Sohnes wegen
Gelitten, o Madonna,
Denn, seit ich hörte von ihm
In süßer Jugend;
Denn nicht der Seher allein,
Es stehen unter einem Schicksal
Die Dienenden auch. Denn weil ich

Und manche Gesang, den ich
Dem höchsten zu singen, dem Vater
Gesonnen war, den hat
Mir wegegezehret die Schwermut.31

The poem Der Einzige (the Only One) relates this suffering as well, here mingled with a deep sense of guilt:

Und jetzt ist voll
Von Trauern meine Seele,
Als eifertet, ihr Himmlischen, selbst,
Dass, dien ich einem, mir
Das andere fehlet

Ich weiss es aber, eigene Schuld
Ists! Denn zu sehr,
O Christus! höng ich an dir32

31 "An die Madonna,"Wb, 208.

For your sake / And your son’s, / O Madonna, / I have suffered much / Since I first heard of him / In my tender youth; / For the seer is not alone / But stands under a fate / Common to those who serve. Because I / And the many songs I had / In mind to sing to the Father / Most High, these / Sadness stole from me. (JhG, 132-33)
Apparently, Guardini fails to give account of that feeling of suffering and guilt, when he simply juxtaposes Christ with the other gods of Greece against the background of an all encompassing "nature."

The excessive love for Christ leads to guilt but why? In a curious paradox, it seems to us that Hölderlin wants to say, that precisely because of his exclusive devotion to Christ, he fails to discover Christ as brother of us all. He fails to acknowledge that Heracles and Dionysius and other gods can be approached, not in isolation, but as Christ's brothers and sisters. It is Christ who teaches him the kinship of the whole cosmos, if not his own exclusive attachment to Christ would prevent it. This might explain why the poet explains how important it is to keep measure in the love for the Only One. We quote once more from the poem *Der Einzige*:

Denn zu sehr,
O Christus! Häng ich an dir,
Viehwohl Herakles Bruder
Und kühl bekenn' ich, du
Bist Bruder auch des Eviers, der an den wagen spannte
Die Tiger

Christ appears in between the hunter (Heracles) and the farmer (Dionysius) as a beggar. More than who else Christ is from the earth and belongs to it. This kenosis is referred to in a curious expression: *Christus aber bescheidet sich selbst*, that means: Christ limits himself freely. *Sich bescheiden* might be rendered as: being content, to adapt oneself. Hölderlin has in mind the pietistic virtue of a modest retired existence, which shows affinity with Tauler's mysticism. This kenotic modesty implies a radically world-oriented attitude, not in the sense that the poet should be a man of the world, but in another sense: the poet should not

32 "Der Einzige" (first version), *WuB*, 169.

And now my soul is full of sadness / As if you Heavenly yourself excitedly cried / That if I serve one, / I must lack the other. / But I know, it is my own fault. / For too greatly, / O Christ, I am devoted to you. (Hölderlin Selected Verse (ed. M. Hamburg; Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961; henceforth HSV), 187.)

33 *WuB*, 169.

But I know, it is my own fault. / For too greatly, O Christ, I am devoted to you. / Although Heracles' brother, / And boldly I confess, / You are the brother as of Evius, / Who harnessed tigers to his chariot. (HSV, 187)

Let me mend the error / By singing others. / I never achieve the measure / I wished. But a god knows / When the best I wish comes true. / For like the Master / Who wandered the earth. / A captive eagle, / And many who saw him / Took fright. / While the Father did / His utmost to realize / His best among men, / And the Son was dark / With grief until he rose / To heaven on the breeze), / Like him, heroes' souls are captive. / Poets, too, men of the spirit, / Must keep to the world. (HuF, 87)
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Christ is the captive eagle, wandering upon the earth. It is only after the resurrection that this eagle flies towards heaven. The poem ends with the task of the poet: to remain loyal to the world, even if man of the spirit

Die Dichter müssen auch
Die geistigen weltlich seyn.\textsuperscript{35}

By doing so, the poet follows the tracks of Christ. By avoiding to be consumed by the excessive love for Christ, the poet fulfils his task to be loyal to Christ on earth. The poet is the testifier, the martyr of this divine presence on earth. In this respect, Hierocles and Dionysius, the brothers of Christ, should be invoked as well, in order to maintain this divine loyalty to the earth. In that respect the poet is fundamentally mundane.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Let us summarize: German Romanticism offers an exploration of Western culture and its foundations: Christianity over against classical antiquity. Both are not understood as curiosities from a bygone past, but as “states of mind” that have deeply moulded Western society. Issues of gender, idolatry, eroticism and divine love, as well as the tension between universal truth and individual encounter, are understood within the framework of the clash between these foundations of Western society. When Christ is portrayed as brother of all and true erotic love as divine revelation, the gods appear sometimes in a divine brotherhood with Christ or as His demonic mirror-image. The discovery of the Hebrew foundation of the Bible, that hardly coincide with ecclesiastical teachings, allowed for a reconciliation of body and spirit in the paean to erotic divine love. In Eichendorff, Christianity appeared as the champion of this chaste erotic love, but permanently endangered by a tendency to asceticism and denial of life. The Greek gods do not reveal themselves as brothers and sisters of Christ but here Aphrodite appears as the demonic counterpart of the Madonna. However, both in Hölderlin and in Eichendorff, some sort of reality is acknowledged in the gods, as “states of mind” or as manifestations of the unfolding spirit. No doubt

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{WuR}, 170

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35 WaB, 170

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we are in this “clash of religions” far removed from the dispassionate description of mythologies in the phenomenology of religions, accurate but at the expense of a neglect of one’s own identity. Apparently, Christian identity does not allow for an unbiased relationship with the gods. It might even be that post-modernism does succeed where Christianity fails. It remains the question which one is better off.