

Walter Lammi

# Gadamer and the Question of the Divine



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# Gadamer and the Question of the Divine

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# Foreword

As a teacher in a Middle Eastern multicultural environment, I have long recognized that intercultural encounter comes down to a meeting of spiritual perspectives or religions that mandates dialogue. But there are major obstacles to such dialogue.<sup>1</sup> One is the fact that in the West, atheism, whether explicit or in the form of indifference to religion or the question of the divine, has come to rule a large portion of the intelligentsia, the 'verbal classes' most engaged in public conversation. This is certainly the case at my school in Egypt, where students deeply resent their teachers' condescending attitude toward religious faith. Of course religion often takes dogmatic or ideological form; but to oppose dogmatism is not equivalent to opposing religion. This is an obvious yet critical distinction that many 'enlightened' intellectuals, who are unaware of their own dogmatic predilections, seem unable to grasp. Another obstacle is the quality of interfaith dialogue, which tends either to degenerate into moral and intellectual pabulum or to ride off into faith-destroying relativism – or, the more common reality, simply not to take place. A third obstacle is the massive fact that swiftly or more slowly we are all becoming one world now, but what we find together tend to be the lowest common denominators of popular culture whereas what we really need is to elevate our discourse. What is this great good, 'dialogue'? If it is to mean anything more than palaver, it must involve a mutual listening and with listening, a mutual elevation. Gadamer's famous dictum that one must 'risk oneself' in dialogue means that one puts one's views into the open to be challenged, refuted or refined. Argument deepens through thoughtful disagreement. Dialogue then entails *Bildung* in the sense of liberal education. In a time of increasing polarization worldwide, the decline of liberal education is cause for serious concern.

Western technology is primarily responsible for bringing the cultures of the world together. What is the relevance of Western philosophy to this process of amalgamation? The field of anthropology has shifted from study of individual cultures to study of intercultural contact, influence, domination and diaspora. Philosophy, meanwhile, seems to have drifted toward a kind of irrelevance in which the most exciting news is the proclamation of its end. This is not to argue that one should require the same kind of relevance of philosophy as of the social sciences. Indeed it is the well-known honour of philosophy that it does not seek to be edifying. But I do think that philosophy has a role to play. Not as a replacement for religion or alternate means to personal salvation, to be sure;



this is a misunderstanding made by many students that necessarily results in disillusionment and cynicism. Philosophy is not a mystical tool, although I believe that it should be respectful of mysticism. It is rather, as Gadamer puts it, a conversation, or 'the infinite conversation concerning human destiny',<sup>2</sup> and therein lies the key to its social and educational role in the coming world civilization. That role is to serve as a counterbalance to the hegemony of global technology, economism and their complementary spiritual obscurantism by (1) fostering respect for spirituality and religion while combating fanaticism and dogmatism, (2) helping to preserve some semblance of high culture in degenerate times, and (3) holding open the intellectual and institutional legitimacy of serious thinking about perennial questions of life and death.

I believe that Gadamer's thinking has a special relevance to these tasks. Gadamer's study of the divine is an application of phenomenological hermeneutics. His approach to the question is phenomenological in his descriptions of the experience of art, but it is also hermeneutical in that the interpretation of the work of art provides access to phenomenologically inaccessible experience that becomes the object of religious faith. We do not need a complex theoretical discussion of the relation of hermeneutics to phenomenology to grasp this central point. By way of the temporal constitution of the work of art, philosophical hermeneutics makes possible a genuine but *indirect* phenomenology of the divine. Gadamer expresses all of this quite clearly, and it is a matter of some bemusement that this remarkable contribution to religious discourse has escaped the attention of mainstream philosophy of religion.

This book is intended as a work of scholarship in that I provide considerable evidence of being faithful to Gadamer's thinking, for I am more interested in (hermeneutically) ferreting out what is 'there' than going 'beyond' him. Also, as a service to the interested reader I have provided both English and German citations wherever possible.

Scholarly apparatus aside, the book does not presume extensive prior study of Gadamer's works. One of Gadamer's great strengths is accessibility: he writes not only for professors of philosophy, or 'philosophers' (whoever they may be), but for all of us. I have tried to build on that strength. However, it should be added that his fluid and accessible writing style tends to be misleading, for he is a philosopher, not only an essayist, and his work rewards careful reading. One can ask questions of his texts and they will respond. This book is intended to be a careful reading, drawing from scattered sources including *Truth and Method* that reflect the full range of Gadamer's life's work. However, I only claim to provide an introduction to his thinking on the divine. This book only 'scratches the surface'. I would point in particular to his work on poetry, from the Greeks through Goethe and Hölderlin to Celan, as a major lacuna. There is repetition in his writings, which I often point to in my notes, but it is always repetition with a purpose. In my experience every essay 'fills in' something that was left unsaid from another essay, and in this way Gadamer turns out to be, not perhaps a

‘systematic’ – for he denies the philosophical validity of any ‘system’ – but rather a ‘thorough’ thinker; but to treat his study of the question of the divine thoroughly would require a comprehensive study of his life’s work.

More often than not, the Gadamer scholarship helps us to understand his philosophical virtues by delving into one or more topics in detail, and I owe a large debt to this growing literature in my general study of Gadamer. The question of the divine, however, is so far out of the mainstream of Gadamer scholarship that previous studies have provided only limited assistance and most of my references are directly to Gadamer’s works. This is not a study of philosophical hermeneutics *per se*. Such familiar topics of Gadamer studies as the fusion of horizons, hermeneutical circle and consciousness of effective-history are touched upon, if at all, only in passing. Instead I am focusing on a subject matter designated by this provisionally, and perhaps inherently, vague term ‘the divine’.<sup>3</sup>

## Acknowledgements

This study has been long in gestation and longer in accomplishment. I wish to thank The American University in Cairo for a 1998 summer research grant in Heidelberg, where I met Gadamer and began formulating the idea for this project. I also wish to thank the Earhart Foundation for a research grant in 2000 that allowed me to begin work, with particular appreciation to John Moore, a just man. Portions of several articles written over the years have been incorporated into this book, and I wish to acknowledge the following publishers for their permission: Springer Verlag, for 'Gadamer and the Cultic', in Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, ed., *Passions of the Soul in the Metamorphosis of Becoming, Islamic Philosophy and Occidental Phenomenology in Dialogue Bookseries*, Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka and G. A. A'awani, eds, 135–44 (originally published by Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), and 'Gadamer's Debt to Husserl', in *Passions of the Earth in Human Existence, Creativity, and Literature, Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LXXI (originally published by Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 167–79, with kind permission from Springer Science and Business Media; the International Pragmatics Association for 'The "Linguistic Turn" in the Hermeneutics of Ideology', in Jef Verschueren, ed., *Language and Ideology: Selected Papers from the 6th International Pragmatics Conference*, Vol. 1 (1999), 309–16; *Philosophy Today* for 'Hans-Georg Gadamer's Platonic *Destruktion* of the Later Heidegger', Vol. 41, No. 3 (Fall 1997), 394–404; and Heldref Publications for 'The Hermeneutics of Ideological Indoctrination', in *Perspectives on Political Science*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Winter 1997), 309–16.

Among my teachers special appreciation is due to George L. Kline, who treated a confused post-1960's graduate student with extreme kindness and taught me the craft of scholarship, and to Terence Marshall, who introduced me to the Great Tradition and thereby set my path to ideological recovery. There is also my old friend and computer guru Peter Batke, who made Gadamer's works available to me and has provided many conversations replete with religious insight.

Finally and above all I thank my wife, Mulki Al-Sharmani, and son, Adam Lammi, for making this project possible by making my life worthwhile.

This study is dedicated to the memory of my parents.

# Introduction

At the end of his life Gadamer argued strongly that the fundamental crisis of our times is a crisis of toleration in the globalizing world. From the Roman *imperium* to *dar el Islam* to the European Enlightenment, a self-confident spirit united in common convictions has always been the *sine qua non* of tolerance.<sup>1</sup> Today, however, that spirit no longer obtains. This is due to the triumph of the Enlightenment itself, which entails the worldwide transmission of modern technoscience, the administrative state, and ways of thinking that they engender. Here, where so much power now resides, tolerance may indeed be accommodated, and Gadamer suggests that the humanities may someday owe their continued existence to such toleration. But this leeway is thanks to indifference rather than principle. The tyranny of monolithic religion and absolutist politics against which the Enlightenment struggled has been replaced by the ineffable tyranny of system, of nobody over all. Instead of being unified by the strength of common convictions, we are united only in our common helplessness. This affects subject peoples no less than political authorities. The world today is characterized by the 'intolerance of power that is worried about its power'.<sup>2</sup> Globalization is both inevitable and beneficial in many ways. Nevertheless, it bespeaks a contemporary crisis of impotent rage and incomprehension that threatens us all with destruction. Religion itself is especially infected with that rage, most clearly in the form of religious-political ideology. The tyranny of monolithic religion and absolutist politics rises up again, opposing Enlightenment yet oddly dependent on Enlightenment conceptuality for its own discourse. The secularist dogma of what has been called 'fundamentalist Enlightenment' is unable to respond to these threats because it refuses to take the question of the divine seriously. New grounds for toleration among peoples must be found, or created. 'What can still save us, for we have nothing else', Gadamer says, 'would be a conversation with the great religions', to uncover in every religion 'a moment in the great chain that we call transcendence'.<sup>3</sup> *Religious transcendence*: that, according to Gadamer, is the key issue for developing the dialogue that can develop the mutual respect and understanding, the human solidarity, which can anchor tolerance.

This global dialogue concerning religious transcendence cannot begin as a matter of religious discourse in the sense of theology as explication of a given faith. On its most fundamental level it cannot simply offer a defence of each

faith to others but must be carried on in abstraction from any particular faith or 'persuasion', and indeed from faith as such. It is a conversation that proceeds in concepts. As post-Enlightenment children of the West, Gadamer observes, 'we are compelled to speak the language of concepts',<sup>4</sup> and in a globalizing world we are all becoming compelled to speak that language. This means that the dialogue, insofar as it can take place, will become increasingly philosophical because as Gadamer has pointed out, it is above all the language of philosophy that follows the path of concepts.<sup>5</sup>

But what is a concept? Gadamer approaches this question from variants on the German *Begriff* – grasping and putting together, apprehending, comprehending, appropriating, expropriating. Yet there remains something mysterious and indefinable about the concept of 'concept'.<sup>6</sup> This is a mystery that Gadamer often revisited through the years.<sup>7</sup> Philosophy can build up the common ground of human reason by presenting ideas without ideology, engaging in persuasion without sophistry, and respecting the different faiths from outside the boundaries of each. At some point a dialogue has to involve living people talking to each other, but that may be a very late stage in the process of thoughtful confrontation. First there has to be found or created a common language, that is, a common mode of conceptual discourse and comparable level of conceptual sophistication. If that means drawing on philosophy, the first dialogue for each dialogical partner is with the writings of philosophers, specifically philosophers who have concerned themselves with the question of the divine. The mystery of the concept remains central to our inquiry because most of all, philosophy can contribute to that common ground by *bringing the divine to conceptual language*.

Gadamer's emphasis on dialogue has often been cited in support of cross-cultural understanding; his study of the divine, to my knowledge, never. It is not to slight the former that I argue that the latter is Gadamer's more important substantive contribution to global dialogue. I have come to the conclusion that Gadamer is actually the pre-eminent twentieth-century philosopher of the divine who provides a conceptual basis for dialogue among the educated of all faiths. Not Heidegger, with his profound yet obscure *Ereignis* of 'goddling' and the last god. Nor yet Derrida, with his undecidable traces of the unscarred that are likewise difficult of access, stylistically no less than substantively. Nor indeed the other postmodern thinkers of the divine 'gift', as much as I respect and admire their work. And not the century's many eminent Christian theologians, for all the philosophical depth of their faith. The conceptual basis for dialogue about the divine is not the same as the participation of those committed to any particular faith, although once the basis comes to be, the participation can take place. That is one way to characterize the difference between religion and the philosophy of religion; in this dialogue, as opposed to historically, the philosophy of religion comes first.

This view of Gadamer is not the received wisdom. In fact his name seldom appears in contemporary philosophy of religion. Hermeneutics is widely regarded as a secular philosophy and Gadamer as a secular thinker. He does not engage in theological debate and expressly disclaims any particular competence in such matters.<sup>8</sup> The words 'the divine' (*das Göttliche*) and 'God' appear in the titles of only four essays in his ten-volume *Gesammelten Werke*. There are only two essays in his *Gesammelten Werke* about Christian thinkers, one on Nicholas of Cusa and the other on the Protestant Friedrich-Christoph Oetinger, and both are considered from a purely philosophical perspective. Moreover, Gadamer is deliberately not forthcoming about his personal religious views, which he considers irrelevant to the actual problems with which he is concerned.<sup>9</sup> His religious background is Protestant Christianity and it is true that his writing is replete with references to Christian concepts such as the *kairos*, the Incarnation and mystery of the Trinity and Augustinian *verbum*. But this is what one would expect from a philosopher who claims that thinking is always situated in context of tradition. There is an essential difference between a philosophical thinker who uses Christian concepts and a Christian thinker; Gadamer uses such concepts not as a believer but as a means to further his thought and explain his thinking.<sup>10</sup> The meaning and importance of the *verbum* in Gadamer's thinking could be elucidated without the *verbum*. His biographer emphasizes that Gadamer claims to have no more than a vague 'religious disposition' in the sense of an appreciation for aesthetic or artistic transgression of the boundaries of reason and science.<sup>11</sup> Discourse about the divine 'is not Gadamer's preferred way', as one commentator has put it,<sup>12</sup> and he has been taken to task for his failure to provide any specific religious or theological perspective.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Gadamer has always insisted on a strict separation of philosophy and religion. His approach to philosophy entails this separation. Throughout his career he has described the method of philosophical hermeneutics as 'phenomenological' and he does not hesitate to call himself a 'phenomenologist'.<sup>14</sup> Gadamer's view of the task of phenomenology may be summarized as the study of temporal constitution of objects in the world and the life-world itself, as given to consciousness.<sup>15</sup> There seems to be nothing in this of the divine. 'Dependence on possible experience and demonstration by means of it remains the alpha and omega of all responsible thought', Gadamer asserts.<sup>16</sup> And in light of the 'absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine', he declares flatly that experience means 'experience of human finitude'. He considers this a 'religious insight – the kind of insight that gave birth to Greek tragedy'.<sup>17</sup> This appears to rule the divine out of order in Gadamer's thinking, for the divine seems by definition, so to speak, to transcend human finitude. Religiously oriented appropriations of philosophical hermeneutics generally make use of one or another familiar theme, such as the fusion of horizons or hermeneutical

circle, for a discourse quite different from Gadamer's own writings.<sup>18</sup> There is nothing wrong with this effort, but it cannot be said that Gadamer has been successfully transplanted in this foreign soil like, say, Heidegger.

This phenomenological limitation means that Gadamer does not directly engage the debates of Derrida, Marion, Chrétien and others over the supra-conscious 'saturated phenomenon', the 'gift', and other tropes of postmodern phenomenological theology.

Yet as we have seen, the language of concepts characterizes philosophy, as opposed to literature and especially poetry. How do we conceptualize the non-conceptual? What happens when we make the divine an object of thought? Gadamer does not answer this question directly. Nor does he engage in theological speculation. It is not surprising that his work has been virtually ignored in the contemporary renewal of negative theology in the 'phenomenology of the gift'. The very locution 'the divine' (*to theion, das Göttliche*) tempts us to metaphysical error by suggesting an object of thought where objectivity is most in question. Gadamer describes it as an expression used above all by the early Greek philosophers for the 'thinking experience' (*denkende Erfahrung*) of 'an incomprehensible, mysterious *nonconceptual* presence and power'.<sup>19</sup>

Yet as we will see, a central thematic of Gadamer's phenomenology is his little-noted emphasis on discontinuity, which underlies the complex continuity of his thought. In this most important respect, contrary to what is commonly believed, he joins contemporary or postmodern discourse about the divine. Gadamer takes his bearings from the late Heidegger's 'phenomenology of the unapparent' no less than thinkers such as Derrida, Lévinas, Marion, Henry or Chrétien. Even though he has developed philosophical hermeneutics in an independent direction, there exists here a community of thinking. As Gadamer has remarked in regard to deconstruction, such contemporaneous strands of thinking cannot simply go on their merry way as though they had nothing to do with each other. Through the miracle of language one can have a conceptual conversation about the nonconceptual, and in that sense he was able to tackle the paradox of the human and the divine. I would argue that not only does this linguistic allow one to ferret out a 'discourse of the divine' (with all due *caveats*), but also more strongly, that philosophical hermeneutics *constitutes*, ever so slightly beneath its surface, an insightful yet appropriately nonsystematic study of the question of the divine.

Why 'beneath its surface'? The answer concerns Gadamer's devaluation of propositional statements in philosophy and concomitant emphasis on what he calls the 'melody of meaning'. The most important part of understanding always remains beneath the surface. Put this way it sounds mystifying, but actually it is not. It is Gadamer's way of describing the play of concealment in all unconcealment of truth or *aletheia*, and refers to the *verbum*.

Gadamer's separation of religion and philosophy, however strict, is anything but absolute. To connect the human and the divine is the traditional task of

cultic, sacramental and theological forms of religion alike. In its own way, Gadamer argues, the task of philosophy is the same. It is true that Gadamer leaves the afterlife to the authority of religion: Religion answers where philosophy can only question. But the afterlife aside, religion and philosophy have the same concern with the fundamental issues of life and death. There is in fact, Gadamer insists, an essential relation of 'reciprocity' between religion and philosophy.<sup>20</sup> This interconnection of religion and philosophy is a major subterranean theme of philosophical hermeneutics.<sup>21</sup>

This reciprocity complicates the separation of religion and philosophy, and it may even render Gadamer's disavowals of Christian faith problematic. In the words of his Christian-Jewish friend Erich Frank, 'the task which religion imposes upon the philosopher' is to explain the 'full philosophical meaning' of 'religious truths'.<sup>22</sup> Gadamer's references to Christian concepts may constitute elucidation of revelatory truths as well as utilization of his tradition for strictly philosophical purposes. Hermeneutics may indeed be a 'secular' as opposed to 'religious' way of thinking, but it still constitutes, to use a telling quotation, 'a response to the challenge of the not-understood or not understandable – the other, the strange, the dark – and perhaps the deepest that we must understand'.<sup>23</sup> Again: 'Has not the impetus of hermeneutics always been to "understand", through interpretation, the foreign, the unfathomable will of the gods, the message of salvation . . . ?'<sup>24</sup> And once more: '[T]he original hermeneutic task [is] explaining what is incomprehensible'.<sup>25</sup> That sums up the paradox of the endless and ineluctably finite human attempt to grasp something of the nature of the divine. From its historical origins in Biblical interpretation, can a hermeneutical discourse or *logos* be developed about *theos* that is dialogical rather than logocentric and philosophical, or phenomenological, rather than theological?

The global dialogue among faiths has to include a dialogue with those who have lost their faith. Thus the question of God, far from being irrelevant, arguably constitutes a critically important question of philosophy and key to the experience of the divine. Furthermore, the issue of the relationship of God and the divine practically forces itself upon us when we consider that the separation between the two in English is a linguistic aberration, as opposed to German and Greek alike (*Gott* and *das Göttliche*, *theos* and *to theon*).

How then can we speak of God? Here is where Gadamer's reticence about religious matters is most pronounced. The short answer is that we cannot. This echoes Heidegger's observation that experience teaches us to 'remain silent about God' when one is 'speaking in the realm of thinking'.<sup>26</sup> The resolution of the question of God is to turn us away from abstract 'theory' towards the thoughtful *praxis* of living our lives well – while never forgetting that 'theory' is itself, properly undertaken, the highest form of *praxis*. This makes Gadamer naturally sympathetic with negative theology, which has been described as essential to any discourse whatsoever about these matters.<sup>27</sup> Gadamer traces



negative theology behind the Christian tradition of creationism to Plotinus' approach to the thought of the One and the interpretation of Plato's *Parmenides* in Neoplatonic religious thought.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the idea that the presence of God can only be sensed in absence arguably can be taken further back, to the above-mentioned invocation of religious experience in tragedy as the barrier between the divine and the human. Even the denial of God in dogmatic atheism retains concern with the question of God and thereby constitutes a kind of negative theology. After all, in Christianity God's 'existence' cannot be taken literally, but only by analogy with worldly existence.<sup>29</sup> The real problem of atheism to Gadamer is the atheism of indifference.<sup>30</sup> Yet negative theology is a path that he as a non-theologian has chosen not to follow. This is not just a matter of academic specialization or philosophical secularism. Although negative theology avoids the problem of dogmatic statement in regard to God, Gadamer is concerned that its modern use rests on the unexamined assumption of a historically circumscribed concept of reality.<sup>31</sup> Any twist on the positive will twist the negative.

These considerations take the question of God as such beyond the purview of this study. Although he does consider the question legitimate to philosophy,<sup>32</sup> Gadamer is convinced that one can speak meaningfully of '*the divine*' without understanding God.<sup>33</sup> This comes out in Heidegger's discovery of Hölderlin: affirmation of God as absent and elusive whereas, in Hölderlin's words that Gadamer quotes, 'of the divine much remains'.<sup>34</sup> Gadamer's own focus turns in that direction and the question of God is quietly relegated to the background. This constitutes, I submit, a helpful limitation for providing a common conceptual ground for religious dialogue because of the doctrinal questions it obviates.

As we will see, there is in Gadamer's description such a 'realm' (the word is a mere indicator at this point) as the divine and – phenomenologically speaking! – such experience as divine experience. The tension of phenomenological and divine experience is not a contradiction but rather a hermeneutical paradox to which Gadamer responds in a way that joins contemporary debate. In fact Gadamer provides us with a richly textured study of the divine, albeit in indirect ways that have to be ferreted out for reasons having to do with the ineffability of the topic, to which I shall return.

There is clear evidence for Gadamer's recognition of the importance of the question of the divine in his observation that the '*true nature of humanity consists in the comparison to the divine*'.<sup>35</sup> This implies both commonality and contrast.<sup>36</sup> This answer requires us to delve into the 'ineluctable' finitude of human being. Here we find ourselves in the presence of a speculative statement, the general significance of which is emphasized in *Truth and Method*. However, as is consistent with Gadamer's relationship with Hegel, it is a speculative statement with a twist: We can only understand finite humanity in comparison with the presumably infinite divine, and we can only understand the divine in light of finite

humanity. Hegel's classic speculative statement, 'God is One', infinitely mirrors the infinite; Gadamer's interplay of finite and infinite distorts the mirror. Hermeneutics means imperfection. In his studies of the question of death, Gadamer argues that we are always thrown back upon the experience of life. This, I believe, is a key to the question of the divine no less than to historicity. In forcing us to examine the meaning of that presumption of infinity, this puts Gadamer into a more respectful dialogue with metaphysics than is common in our post-Heideggerian age. We who are epigoni living in degenerate times would do well to respect our traditions as Gadamer, no epigone, shows us how to do.

This focus on the divine in terms of life follows from the fact that Gadamer entrusts his thinking to the ancient path of thought. Following Gadamer's example, the relationship of *Gott* and *das Göttliche* will be left open in this study. This is a fundamental demarcation of topics that sets Gadamer's 'religious philosophy', so to speak, apart from virtually every contemporary treatment of such matters. Another way to put this is that against all expectations the divine turns out to be, as I have suggested, phenomenologically accessible – albeit indirectly – while the question of God takes us in the direction the doctrinal disputations of the various 'great religions'.

Perhaps my assertion of the (almost universally ignored) centrality of the question of the divine to philosophical hermeneutics is best approached with its own kind of *via negativa*. Clearly it does not mean that the divine provides some sort of hermeneutical 'ground' or foundation, like the role of God in dogmatic religion or metaphysics. Gadamer agrees with Heidegger's objection that traditional metaphysics speaks from the perspective of the Absolute, ignoring the ineluctable finitude of *Dasein*. In this regard he refers to the 'tensions' in the metaphysical concept of God as the highest being, as described in Catholic Church doctrine.<sup>37</sup> The whole idea of a 'concept' of God – the intellectualist error – is of course deeply problematic in Christianity and other religious traditions. The term 'God of the philosophers' has a bad name for good reasons. It reduces the All-Mighty to truncated concepts of reason that can be bandied about in abstraction from life and feeling. There has always been a kind of uneasiness in the relationship of Christianity and philosophy, the Christian assimilation of the Greeks notwithstanding; one need only refer to the mystery of the Trinity, often referred to by Gadamer, which confounds the intellect. One might go so far as to suspect that the 'God of the philosophers' is really nothing more than the idol of the atheists.

The mystery of the Trinity is mirrored in the incomprehensibility of God. The latter is equally true in Islam. God cannot be approached as an 'object' of thought, which raises a real problem with naming because names objectify. Hence, in part, the Muslim '99 names of God'.<sup>38</sup> The Greeks were likewise ambivalent about naming the gods. In Heraclitus' well-known aphorism, 'The one thing which alone is wise is willing and unwilling to be called by the name of Zeus' (Frag. 32).

Not surprisingly, then, language is key. Every chapter of this book returns to the question of language. Gadamer speaks of language as the 'mediation of finite and infinite that is appropriate to us finite beings'.<sup>39</sup> Language is infinite in that there is always more to be said and the being of language is in the activity of that saying, whose endlessness Gadamer likens to the Hegelian 'bad infinity' because it never allows for the satisfaction of a final word. Language is the mark of our finite lives. All speaking gathers an infinity of meaning into finite determination; the 'fundamental finitude of being . . . is wholly verbal in character'.<sup>40</sup> Being sequential, language is always temporal. Anything of which I am conscious only becomes my own through my expression of it in language, whether to myself in thought or to others in conversation,<sup>41</sup> which holds as much for the infinite and eternal as for the limited and mundane. Thus the word 'eternal' itself brings the subject of the eternal to temporal significance for temporal beings, and in so doing the 'eternal' necessarily becomes temporal which means that it changes into its opposite. Similarly, when my consciousness of anxiety or something terrifying or uncanny is made my own by coming to language through the effort of my thinking, the anxiety is calmed, the terror becomes fascination, and the uncanny (*unheimlich*) comes home. Yet when the meaning is understood, something remains of critical importance to human experience.

At issue is not the subjective act of meaning but the right word and its effect. Philosophy in Gadamer's view reflects both critique of language and the search for words at the edge of linguistic failure. It represents the 'most extreme need of language'.<sup>42</sup> Philosophic conceptualization is always more or less inadequate to what is being conceptualized and hence must be endlessly reformulated. This reflects Gadamer's interpretation of the *verbum*. The *verbum* in particular and the role of language in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics in general are well known, and I will not dwell on them.<sup>43</sup> Instead the heterodox topic of this study takes my concern with language in the direction of a phenomenology of religious experience, which includes a phenomenology of silence. Gadamer stresses that the dialectic of question and answer is the universal basis for hermeneutical experience,<sup>44</sup> and the question is always prior to any answer. If the question of the divine is the real beginning, the question, the fundamental question of philosophical hermeneutics, it must be *silently everywhere* in, or behind, Gadamer's phenomenological ontology of language. In speech, then, the speechless realm of the divine, which the Greeks called the *arrheton* or unsayable, comes to world in the belonging of self and world. In the deeply problematic saying of the unsayable, in other words, the divine comes home – home, that is, to us, to the temporally living. That is what Heidegger called 'safe-keeping'.

To Gadamer the experience of the divine like all experience comes to language and can be validated in terms appropriate to the quality of language to

which it comes. Poetry provides the clearest standard. In poetic speech the sound or music of speech is most directly connected with its meaning. Its effect is to intensify the impact of language on one who carries with it in a concentrated way; it marks an increase in the liveliness, the being, of speech. Gadamer's well-known and controversial privileging of speech over the written word has much to do with the role of silence – in gesture, emphasis, and in general the rhythm that gives voice to meaning. To Gadamer, rhythm plays a special role as 'intermediary realm between being and the soul', and as such it underlies all linguisticity.<sup>45</sup> The wholes that constitute meaning are created through this interplay of absence and presence, of bringing silence to the accomplishment of speech. Although the meaning of silence is thus a function of speech, there is a sense relevant to this study in which that silence is prior: The culmination of cultic ritual in the epiphany of the divine takes place, Gadamer says, in 'divine silence'.<sup>46</sup>

The question of divine experience is crucial to this study. The relation of cultic religion and philosophy is of course highly problematic. This apparent validation of cultic experience has to be balanced with another observation by Gadamer, that the divine does not imply a transcendent presence somehow coming to consciousness but rather the creation of a transformed state of being. This is an experience which, in Gadamer's view, retains its vitality even today.<sup>47</sup> These contrasting observations raise an interesting problem. Cultic experience of the divine may be in some sense truncated or ephemeral experience that cannot rise to conscious clarity. As Aristotle reputedly said, the essence of the Mysteries lies in 'experiencing (*pathein*), not in learning (*mathein*)'.<sup>48</sup> I suggest that this reflects pre-conscious or *species* experience, a kind of together-with or *Mitsamt* that characterizes the animal, as opposed to human community or *Miteinander*.<sup>49</sup> In a sense that needs to be more precisely determined, if the cultic experience of the divine can be seen as a collapse of distance, it must also mean a collapse of the human. 'Where there are humans, there is distance', says Gadamer.<sup>50</sup> But can a collapse of the human bespeak an elevation of human consciousness? Is it possible that a kind of species-togetherness represents the spiritual peak of human community? What about 'intellectual intuition', *noesis*? How does Gadamer understand intellectual intuition, which for the most part has been either ignored or rejected in modernity? Could there be two kinds of experience of the divine? If so, what does that mean for religious dialogue among peoples?

## Chapter 1

Chapter 1 clarifies Gadamer's appropriation of his own religious tradition against the background of his study of the Greeks. Beginning with his distinctions

among faith, theology and philosophy, I discuss his views on contrasting topics including modern and ancient atheism and Christian Creationism as opposed to the Greek relation of the One and the many and the Good and the beautiful.

Yet such contrasts, while profound, are incomplete. These differences appear especially in their differing ways of understanding the disjunction of human and divine. However, God in Christianity is 'wholly other' or totally disjoined, and Gadamer does not engage in discourse about God as such. In neither Christianity nor Greek thought does the disjunction in regard to the question of the divine have to be taken as simply absolute. Gadamer finds common ground to approaching the divine by way of decentering the self. In the self-overcoming of Christ, Dionysius and Heracles he finds an authentic religious community, first noted by Hölderlin. Moreover, Gadamer shows how both traditions partake of the philosophy of finitude. This is a complex and partial reconciliation on the basis of differences that he does not slight, but in the end Gadamer finds sufficient common ground between Christian and Greek that he can call the famous *querelle des anciens et des modernes* a 'modern construction' that obscures this community of tradition.

## Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, I situate Gadamer with his contemporaries throughout the twentieth century, again with particular reference to the Greeks. The Greeks had no term for 'religion' and no religious requirement for belief, and only developed the term for 'the divine' (*to theion*) with the advent of philosophy. For them the concept of 'the divine' referred to beings as a whole, the unity of which they realized by way of discontinuity in the sudden event of awareness they called *nous*. This is not to be understood as a purely 'intellectual' process but rather as a disruption of our 'natural' attitude, in which passion and intellect are combined.

With Heidegger the analogous event of discontinuity refers to *Ereignis*; with Derrida, a remarkably similar (non-)concept is called *khora*; and with Gadamer the same becomes the Indeterminate Dyad. All are intimately connected to the question of the divine. All three resist definition and description. They all represent a 'beyond' from Being, not in the traditionalist sense of religious transcendence, but of a step behind all appearances, a kind of reverse transcendence, that nonetheless makes the being of mundane beings possible. Each concerns a singular disjunctive relationship that, while certainly not denying monotheism, stands in the way of its realization in knowledge. For each thinker bringing these matters to language explores a basic tension between philosophy and religion, which any conceptualization of the question of the divine must take into account.