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# GADAMER: INCARNATION, FINITUDE, AND THE EXPERIENCE OF DIVINE INFINITUDE

Patricia Altenbernd Johnson

This paper examines the importance of the concept of Incarnation for the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. The first section traces the role of the Incarnation in his work on the center or medium of language. The second part examines the threefold description of human finitude that Gadamer develops and shows the continuing importance of the concept of Incarnation. The third part discusses the implementation of this understanding of human finitude for the experience of divine infinitude. The final section outlines implications of Gadamer's work for contemporary work in the philosophy of religion.

In the third part of *Wahrheit und Methode*, Hans-Georg Gadamer writes,

Something new arises in the middle of the penetration of Christian theology by the Greek idea of logic: the center of language, in which the mediation of the incarnation event is first brought to its full truth. Christology becomes the pioneer of a new anthropology, which mediates in a new way the human spirit in its finitude with divine infinitude (WM p. 405; TM p. 428, Translation mine).

While Gadamer is not usually treated as a religious philosopher or a philosopher of religion, this quotation is indicative of the importance of religious concepts for his philosophical hermeneutics. In this paper, I will trace the role of the concept of Incarnation in Gadamer's formulation of the center of language as the place of human finitude. I will then sketch the description of human finitude that Gadamer develops showing the threefold structure that his description suggests. I will discuss the implications of this understanding of human finitude for the experience of divine infinitude, showing that Gadamer's description of finitude guides his understanding of the human experience of divine infinitude. Finally, I will suggest some implications of this reading for some contemporary work in the philosophy of religion.

## *Incarnation as Guide*

In developing philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer makes use of what he calls guides (*Leitfaden*). These are concepts that are present in our tradition that can lead us to understanding and to self-understanding if only we take the time to follow them. In using these guides he is, of course, taking the approach that Heidegger developed with his emphasis on pathways. While



Heidegger, in an interview given to *Der Spiegel* in 1966 and printed after his death in 1976, suggests that our era awaits a new saving event (“Nur noch...”), that is, a new way of gaining entry to an experience of the infinitude, Gadamer begins with the Incarnation, an event within Western tradition. The task is to follow the Incarnation to see if it can lead us to a position that facilitates an experience of the infinite that is appropriate to us. In following the Christian idea of the Incarnation, Gadamer focuses on its close connection with the concept of the Word. He believes that the idea of Incarnation has prevented Western thought from completely forgetting the nature of language and thereby completely forgetting our own finitude. Gadamer finds the basis for his explorations of language as the medium of human finitude in the medieval discussions of *verbum* and of Trinity which focus on the problem of the Word (WM p. 395; TM p. 418).

These discussions emphasize that the Christian understanding of Incarnation is not the Greek notion of embodiment. If incarnation were embodiment, it would be a movement of the divine showing itself in human form while retaining all of the superhuman capabilities of divinity. Rather, the Christian understanding of Incarnation stresses the event structure of this movement. The Incarnation is the historical unity of finite and infinite. What is significant about this event, indeed, what is miraculous, is in part what it is not. “The act of becoming...is not the kind of becoming in which something turns into something else” (WM p. 397; TM p. 420). It is not a process that separates the finite from the infinite, nor is it a process in which the infinite is diminished by becoming finite. The Incarnation event presents the divine as incarnate as consubstantial with the divine as creator. Gadamer says, “That the Word is with God from all eternity is the victorious doctrine of the church in its defense against subordinationism” (WM p. 397; TM p. 420).

Gadamer contends that the Incarnation adds an important dimension to philosophical understanding. “If the Word became flesh and if it is only in the (I)ncarnation that spirit is fully realized, then the logos is freed from its spirituality, which means at the same time, from its cosmic potentiality” (WM p. 396; TM p. 419). The spiritual is no longer viewed as ahistorical, perfect in its separation from the material and historical realm. The Incarnation is the Word as pure event. Because of this event structure, Incarnation provides philosophical thought entrance into the mysterious unity of the finite and the infinite through the phenomenon of language.

“Die Mitte der Sprache und ihre spekulative Struktur” is the section of *Wahrheit und Methode* that contains Gadamer’s most complete outline of the experience of human finitude. This section begins with the recognition that explorations of language have, since Plato, taken a theological direction. That is, language is viewed as the expression of the relation of thought and being. “In considering the being of beings, Greek metaphysics regarded it as a being

that fulfilled itself in thought” (WM p. 432; TM p. 456). Human thought takes its fulfilled potential to be “the infinity of this presence” (WM p. 432; TM p. 457). This way of thinking, a way that Gadamer rejects, holds that humans are potentially divine, potentially infinite. Achieving this divine infinitude is understood as the highest human possibility.

Gadamer notes that Hegel, too, follows this way of thinking. Hegel also maintained that the infinite Idea of the Incarnation can be termed the speculative midpoint. It is the center from which the divine relation to the world, including humanity, can be understood. But Hegel follows the Incarnation event very differently than does Gadamer. For Hegel, the Incarnation makes explicit the divine presence such that knowledge of God becomes possible as does the infinity of human existence. This infinity is achieved, however, at the cost of leaving human finitude behind. Hegel writes:

Thus finite spirit is itself posited as a moment of God. Humans themselves, therefore, are comprehended in the concept of God, and this comprehension may be thus expressed—that the unity of human beings with God is posited in the Christian religion. But this union must not be superficially conceived, as if God were merely human, and humans were likewise God. Rather, humans are God only to the extent that they transcend the naturality and finitude of their spirit and elevate themselves to God (VGP p. 392, translation mine).

For Hegel, the incarnation event is the actual occurrence in which humans perceive “the immediate certainty and presence of divinity” (TCR p. 171). God is known as living Spirit. In this concept of God as Spirit, humans come to understand what it means for them to be spirit. Hegel says, “the divine and human natures are not intrinsically different: *God appears in human form*. The truth is that there is only one reason, only one Spirit. We have seen that Spirit does not have a genuine or truthful existence as finite” (p. 177). The Incarnation is the concrete example of what this means. There must be death of finitude as “something alien to God” (p. 213). Natural finitude must be sublated. In the resurrection, finitude is put to death in its independence and is recognized only as a moment of God. This is a change in the human condition such that it is “thoroughly altered and transfigured by the Spirit” (p. 217). Finitude is a disappearing moment in God. For humans to exist in truth, they must acknowledge this reconciliation and join in the community of Spirit which expresses the consciousness of truth for human nature. This community is the Christian community which is in its beginning stages the Church and then is ethical life or community. The reconciliation that begins with the Incarnation comes to its fullness when the ethical community recognizes and realizes its truth as infinite and no longer rests in the satisfaction of finitude.

Gadamer follows the guide of the Incarnation in a very different manner. The Incarnation does not primarily serve to free humanity from finitude; rather, it is far more the freeing of logos from spirituality. If the Word is fully

infinite, it is also fully finite. Following the Incarnation as a guide, Gadamer enters language and articulates an understanding of human finitude.

### *The Center of Language and Human Finitude*

Following the guidance of the Incarnation, Gadamer rejects the idea that language is the place of discovering and achieving our infinitude. Rather, language is “die Spur der Endlichkeit” (WM p. 433; TM p. 457); it is the trace or record of finitude. In language our historical nature and our relation to world is mediated to ourselves. Gadamer describes finite humans as situated in the *Mitte*, the center or medium, of language. A preliminary understanding of this situatedness helps set the context for Gadamer’s reconstruction of human finitude. This position is a center where the paths for ordering and structuring our experiences cross, have their origins, and find their connections. It is also a medium, not a foundation, in which our finite nature is mediated to us. Our finitude is not something that is immediate. Rather, to understand our finitude we must begin in this centered position. It is a position in which we find ourselves. We do not pick up language as a tool of self-understanding to be transcended. Rather, language is the medium in which we are and in which we must remain. It is, however, a position of opening towards a whole. It is the position from which and in which we are related to the totality of beings. Recognizing this finitude, however, does not separate us from the infinite. “Every word carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and indicating” (WM p. 434; TM p. 416). In tracing our finitude, we not only reconstruct our human finitude, we also trace our relation to divine infinitude. The final lines of A. R. Ammons’ poem, “Un-said,” illustrates the position that Gadamer describes:

what is missing: it is only that what is missing  
 cannot  
 be missed if  
 spoken: read the parables of my unmaking:  
 feel the ris-  
 ing bubble’s trembling walls: rush into the domes  
 these wordy arches shape: hear  
 me  
 when I am  
 silent: gather the boundaried vacancies.

Tracing human finitude from within the centered position of the medium of language, Gadamer identifies three fundamental structures of this finitude: *Zugehörigkeit* (belongingness), *Hören* (hearing), and *Sagen* (saying). Gadamer does not specifically label these as the threefold structure of human finitude. However, reading his work in this way emphasizes the influence of

the concept of the Incarnation for both his understanding of human finitude and for his later suggestions about human experience of divine infinitude. His description of these structures again follows Heidegger's approach. These are not characteristics of a human finitude that is structurally more fundamental. Rather, these three are equiprimordially constitutive of human finitude.

Gadamer notes that in philosophy the concept of belongingness has a long history. In the Greek metaphysics of both Plato and Aristotle "there is no question of a self-conscious spirit without world which would have to find its way to worldly being; both belong originally to each other. The relationship is primary" (WM p. 434; TM p. 459). In all thought that is teleological, including the theory of evolution, the whole is understood as more original than the parts. While the science of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries moves away from this notion of belongingness, it is never able to deny entirely the coordination of the subject and the object. Indeed, the issue arises anew in the nineteenth century focus on dialectic, especially in Hegel. Gadamer's brief tracing of this history is done in order to make the point that there is "an internal necessity of the thing itself (Sache)" that moves us "toward the idea that subject and object belong together" (WM p. 437; TM p. 461).

From the hermeneutical position in the center of language, Gadamer describes this belongingness as both encounter and emergence of the new. The finite human neither conforms objectivity to itself, nor is required to conform itself to objectivity. Rather, the experience of belongingness of human finitude is one of encounter. The part of *Wahrheit und Methode* that explores the logic of question and answer provides a more thorough description of encounter.

At the oral examination at the beginning of my doctoral studies I was asked what I most wanted to achieve in the course of graduate work. I answered that I wanted to learn to ask questions. I left that examination thinking that my examiners must think me rather simple to be entering graduate work unable to ask questions. Over the years I have come to recognize the insight of my own simplicity. Gadamer recalls how many of the partners in Socratic dialogues thought the role of questioner to be the easiest until they tried it. Like Socrates, Gadamer emphasizes that to be able to question requires recognition of "radical negativity: the knowledge of not knowing" (WM p. 344; TM p. 362). Moreover, a question places that which is questioned in the open, that is, in a horizon in which it can be explored. What we discover, perhaps most clearly in trying to ask questions, is that it is we who are questioned and that the open in which we are placed is that of tradition (*Überlieferung*), that which is handed down to us. Gadamer writes,

The voice that speaks to us from the past (Das Überlieferte, das uns anspricht)—whether text, work, trace—itself poses a question and places our meaning in openness. In order to answer the question put to us the interrogated, we must ourselves begin to ask questions (WM pp. 355-56; TM p. 374).

As finite humans, we belong to a tradition that always already constitutes our being and that calls us into question.

But the experience of belongingness also shows us that we do not stand in relation to an unchanging fixity that defines us by establishing immutable limits. This belongingness has the character of conversation in which something new emerges. In a genuine conversation the focus is on what is under discussion, the subject matter. When either partner in a conversation shifts the focus from the subject matter to making a point or winning an argument, conversation breaks down. In a successful conversation the sharing and exchange results in the changing of both participants. Gadamer says,

both come under the influence of the truth of the subject matter (Sache) and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were (WM p. 360; TM p. 379).

The conjunction of encounter with tradition and conversation in which there is emergence of the new results in a fluid understanding of the belongingness of human finitude. It is we who are questioned, who are the subject of conversation. As such we already are situated within tradition. But tradition is also our partner in conversation. As we participate in this conversation, as we raise questions, tradition is opened and new parameters emerge, new communion is formed. Both tradition and human finitude, together, take on new dimensions.

Gadamer is again emphasizing the equiprimordial character of the structure of human finitude. No one aspect, in this case tradition or contemporary subjects, has a place of priority or privilege. These structures belong together. The concept of the Incarnation that led Gadamer to language as the place for exploring human finitude continues to be evident. He emphasizes the event character of this belongingness. This event

is made possible only because the word that has come down to us as tradition and to which we are to listen really encounters us and does so as if it addressed us and is concerned with us (WM p. 437; TM p. 461).

The image of the Incarnation as Word remains the guiding image emphasizing the unity of finitude and infinitude.

The listening that this address requires suggests a second fundamental structure of human finitude, *hören*. We are hearers. Gadamer emphasizes that we cannot turn away from hearing in the same manner that we can refuse to see. But to hear is also to experience the world in a "completely new dimension" (WM p. 438; TM p. 462). Moreover, hearing both enables and takes place in language. Gadamer's description of hearing is presented only briefly in *Wahrheit und Methode*, yet is an important aspect of human finitude. Some

simple examples are helpful for illustrating Gadamer's points. Anyone who has lived with a small child as he or she learns language knows how hearing opens completely new dimensions of the world. I remember teaching my son to talk. Taking long walks on the beach in Toronto, my husband and I would say "dog" each time we met someone walking a dog. One day, of course, our son spoke the word and suddenly his world was full of dogs. Learning to distinguish white and blue was more difficult. Our car was both colors, and somehow in the learning process the two became confused. It took several months for him to clearly differentiate the two. This experience is also there for the adult learning a new language. As a young woman just graduated from college, I took a summer job as a chambermaid in a small mountain hotel in Switzerland. I spoke no German, but most of the people with whom I spent my workdays spoke only German. As one who enjoyed philosophical conversation, I was frustrated by my inability to understand and convey even the most simple ideas. I will never forget the day when, sitting at a table for the noon meal, I realized that those at the table behind me were talking about me—and I understood without visible effort and without translation. Both of these examples help illustrate Gadamer's points about hearing as a fundamental structure of human finitude. Hearing is more than the immediate sensory stimulation; it is understanding. But understanding can only take place when one is immersed in the words and is encountered by them.

This requires uninterrupted listening and is, therefore, an undergoing (*Er-leiden*). We must remove our own expectations and allow ourselves to be acted upon. It is difficult to know what expectations children must remove in the process of learning language. Perhaps they learn so quickly because they listen without presuppositions. As with my son's confusion of white and blue, it may only be as we establish expectations that those expectations function as impediments to hearing. Certainly, by the time one is an adult one language serves in part as an impediment to learning another. The expectation of certain sounds makes it difficult to "hear" other sounds.

Yet, that we are hearing beings shows us that our finitude is not something from which we strive to be freed. The more we understand, the more languages we speak, the more possible impediments we bring to any understanding. Yet, the more we understand, the more languages we speak, the more new dimensions can reach us.

The importance of the guiding idea of the Incarnation is again evident in this description of hearing. Incarnation is not an overcoming or escape from the contingencies of historical existence. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, also a German Lutheran and contemporary with Gadamer until his death in 1945, describes this aspect of Incarnation as humiliation. He says, "The mode of existence of humiliation is an act of the Incarnate.... The God-man in history is always already the humiliated God-man, from the cradle to the cross" (p. 111). This

understanding does not posit omnipotence and omniscience as the divine essence or as the goal of human finitude, rather humility and openness are emphasized in the unity of finite and infinite.

Gadamer's description of hearing shows human finitude to have a dialectic structure that he terms speculative. He follows Hegel's use of the term speculative insofar as it is a mirror relation. The mirror has no being of its own, or more properly, its being is to disappear so that what is seen is that which is reflected. Moreover, mirroring reflects not just a being or thing, but a whole. Gadamer notes that Hegel recognizes the speculative character of language in order to rise above language. But, from the hermeneutical perspective, the goal is not to escape language. From within the speculative character of language, we can discern yet another fundamental structure of human finitude. To be a finite human is to speak (*Sagen*). Speaking is a mirroring. In speaking the "finite possibilities of the word are oriented towards the sense intended, as towards the infinite" (WM p. 444; TM p. 469). Speaking, even in its most everyday forms, reflects a relation to the whole of being. Gadamer finds this speculative character intensified in the poetic word particularly as that word does not describe or signify but "opens up to us a world of the divine and the human" (WM p. 466; TM p. 470).

Gadamer's essay "On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth" is especially helpful for what he means by speaking as a mirroring and for seeing how his description of human finitude is connected to religious experience. In this essay he says that poetry is "language in a pre-eminent sense" (RB p. 106). It shows us the fullest possibilities of human speaking in general. Poetry is autonomous (RB p. 109). This characteristic is also the case with religious texts and prayer according to Gadamer. These texts are autonomous in that they are self-fulfilling. Not only do they not require verification in something beyond the text, they refuse such verification. Gadamer says, "poetic language stands out as the highest fulfillment of the revealing (*de-loun*) which is the achievement of all speech" (RB p. 112). Gadamer terms what is revealed "nearness." What the poem holds up to us, like a mirror, is that we are beings subject to time faced with the task of making ourselves at home in the world. "What appears in the mirror is not the world, nor this or that thing in the world, but rather this nearness or familiarity itself in which we stand for awhile" (RB p. 115). Poetry as language in a pre-eminent sense shows us that as hearers and speakers, as those who belong within the medium of language (PH p. 68), it is language that gives us access to special forms of human experience, including and especially religious experience.

The importance of the Incarnation for Gadamer's description is most evident in this account of saying as fundamental and as equi-primordial with belonging and hearing. Again, Bonhoeffer's articulation of Lutheran Christology is helpful. He explains Christ as Logos as living address. This address

takes place in history and is only accessible when a person speaks. Proclamation, always anew, is vital. Without the proclamation, there is no encounter.

Following the Incarnation as a guide, Gadamer turns to the center of language for an understanding of the new anthropology made possible by the mediation. This new anthropology describes human finitude as a belongingness characterized by hearing and speaking. However, this anthropology with its emphasis on finitude does not exclude experience of the infinite, religious experience. "The mediation of finite and infinite that is appropriate to us as finite beings lies in language—in the linguistic character of our experience of the world" (PH p. 80).

### *Experience of the Infinite Appropriate to Human Finitude*

Gadamer's analysis maintains that the infinite is not to be experienced as infinite mind. The focus must remain on finitude. This has sometimes led to his work being quickly dismissed by religious thinkers. I have tried in the first parts of this paper to show that the focus on finitude is actually facilitated by means of religious concepts, particularly that of the Incarnation. In this final section, I will explore the experience of divine infinity suggested by Gadamer's position. He gives direct sustained treatment to issues of religious experience in only a few essays. However, he makes many passing references which when looked at together constitute a rather significant treatment of religious experience (see Johnson). In looking at some of these references here, I will make use of the three fundamental structures of human finitude as a means of organizing his remarks. This approach seems appropriate since it is within this structure that he claims the finite and infinite are mediated. This approach also shows Gadamer's emphasis on the necessity of beginning in a tradition and shows how essential the Christian tradition is for Gadamer's own philosophical hermeneutics.

Human finitude is characterized by a belongingness to a tradition that encounters us and that is inseparably connected with the emergence of the new. The tradition that encounters Gadamer and which he privileges as a source of religious experience is the Christian tradition, more specifically the German Lutheran tradition. We have already seen the importance of the Incarnation as Word for Gadamer's thought. In developing his understanding of the autonomous character of the poetic word, he calls upon the phrase "It stands written" (*Es Stehet geschrieben*) that is prominent in Luther's translation of the Bible (RB p. 108-09). In trying to understand the nature of the symbolic in art, he again encounters the Lutheran tradition and makes use of the example of Luther's insistence, in the face of Zwingli's challenge, that the bread and wine are the flesh and blood (RB p. 35). Perhaps most significantly, Gadamer at one point says, "the genuine task of hermeneutics arises from the peculiar nature of the Christian proclamation" (RB p. 149). I take

him to mean his own work in hermeneutics belongs to this Christian tradition. These are all examples of Gadamer's encounter with his own tradition. For Gadamer, this tradition provides access to a particularly true form of experience.

But Gadamer's description of belongingness includes not just encounter with tradition, but also facilitates the emergence of the new in dialogue with this tradition. The importance of this aspect of human finitude for the experience of divine infinitude is emphasized by Gadamer particularly in his explication of the importance of contemporaneity for religious life. Recently in responding to criticisms of hermeneutics by deconstructionists, Gadamer explains some of the stimulus for his own work. He traces the importance of Kierkegaard and Heidegger for his emphasis on dialogue, showing that all of them take their insight from the desire to follow the message of the gospels and the demand of the gospels that "Christ's death on the Cross should not be taken as an event lying far back in the past...we must be contemporaneous with this event" (Michelfelder p. 117).

Gadamer's emphasis of the importance of festival in this context gives further indication of the sort of experience of divine infinitude that he finds appropriate to human finitude. A festival is not a mere repetition of an historical event. Rather, a festival indicates that part of the event is its celebration. He says

The nature of a festival is to be celebrated regularly. Thus its own original essence is always to be something different (even when celebrated in exactly the same way). An entity that exists only by always being something different is temporal in a more radical sense than everything that belongs to history. It has its being only in becoming and return (WM p. 117; TM p. 123).

The festival unites everyone who shares in the celebration and so manifests the uniqueness of the presence that is there. The experience of the infinite is historical and so connected to traditional and human ways of corporate celebration. The individual does not meet the infinite in isolation from a human community. Yet, a celebration requires the participation of each individual. Any individual can withdraw from the celebration by not participating (RB p. 39). So, the experience of the infinite in this context is individual. Each person is encountered and so each person is called into question and is called into the dialogue of hearing and speaking.

As hearing beings capable of uninterrupted listening, we are able to withhold our own expectations and remain open to encounter. Following Kierkegaard and Buber, Gadamer often characterizes this listening in terms of I and Thou (WM pp. 340ff; TM pp. 358ff; PH pp. 65-66). The experience of the infinite is first of all an experience of I-lessness. Notice that this is not a loss of finitude so that infinitude can be achieved. Rather, it is a recognition that hearing is essentially understanding. To hear requires that I not control or dominate understanding. Understanding requires a readiness that participates in

a spirit of openness. Hearing takes place when the will of each individual is held back so that the spirit of the subject matter, in this case of divine infinitude, can pervade. The experience of divine infinitude appropriate to human finitude is one that takes place in a community of listeners open to hearing the word.

For the word to be heard it must be spoken. It is this speaking that is Gadamer's concern in a great deal of his work. His extensive work on aesthetics is fundamentally a description and exploration of this speaking. He maintains that the real being of a work of art is "what it is able to say, and this being reaches fundamentally beyond any historical confinement" (PH p. 96). In the work of art we experience temporality in a radical manner. The work of art—language, music, movement—imposes a temporality on us. Gadamer says that it teaches us how to "tarry" (RB p. 45) and so grants "to us finite beings to relate to what we call eternity" (RB p. 45). So, at one level, the experience of divine infinitude takes place as mimesis. Mimesis is representation where we do not try or need to go beyond the representation to discover the content of what is represented. Gadamer says, "Mimesis does not imply a reference to an original as something other than itself, but means that something meaningful is there as itself" (RB p. 121). So, for Gadamer, the work of art is an appropriate speaking for the infinite because it makes present without requiring us to go beyond the work itself. Gadamer suggests that in the Christian tradition, this is why art in all of its forms is important in ritual.

But for the Christian tradition it is proclamation, the speaking of the Gospel, that results in the fullest experience of divine infinitude. This is at one level a communal experience. Gadamer uses the concept of the symbol to explain this experience. He suggests that a symbol does not so much point to something that is already universally shared, but awakens "a shared consciousness of something" (RB p. 150). What the symbol does is give rise to the experience of "this is You" (again Gadamer is calling on Luther). At the level of symbol, what the proclamation does is enable us to make ourselves at home in the world. It shows us what we can achieve and so disturbs us into the recognition of the demand on us to accomplish such things. And so the experience of the infinite is there in our learning to dwell in the world.

Yet, Gadamer maintains that in the Christian proclamation there is a further experience of recognition, one that he says has the quality of a sign. This quality of the proclamation is very individual. He says, "It is not something that everyone has been able to see, not something to which one can refer, and yet, if it is taken as a sign, there is something incontestably certain about it" (RB p. 152). According to Gadamer, this is the uniqueness of the Christian message. It speaks to us as individuals and transcends the self-recognition of symbolic speaking. It shows us "what we cannot achieve" (RB p. 153). This

for Gadamer seems to be the fullest experience of divine infinitude. In keeping with the insights of Kierkegaard, the fullest experience of the infinite shows me my finitude and demands of me the individual that I hope against all expectation.

Gadamer's remembrance of Rudolf Bultmann illustrates the experience of the infinite appropriate to human finitude. For his funeral, Bultmann requested that the community gather and that there be singing and the reading of the scripture. The funeral was not a time of eulogizing, but a time of proclamation simply put forward to be heard by those who could look for themselves and see themselves there (PA p. 60).

### *Implications for the Philosophy of Religion*

This reading of Gadamer, beginning with the concept of the Incarnation, leads to several implications. It positions his work firmly in the Christian tradition, especially as it has been received through Lutheranism and through the religious writings of Kierkegaard and the philosophical writings of Heidegger. He should be read as a philosopher who, like most continental philosophers in the modern era, continues to live in and work out the implications of this tradition. As such his articulation of human finitude should be understood as an articulation that emerges from this tradition.

This reading also carries implications for contemporary directions in the philosophy of religion. One of the most important directions in contemporary work concerns the issue of religious pluralism. John Hick in *An Interpretation of Religion* and in the fourth edition of *Philosophy of Religion* is particularly concerned with the dialogue of world religions and with the need for developing a philosophical framework for religious pluralism. He is primarily concerned with developing a framework that helps us schematize the various images and experiences of God or the Absolute. His hypothesis is that "the great religious traditions of the world represent different human perceptions of and responses to the same infinite divine Reality" (*Philosophy of Religion* p. 119). Gadamer's hermeneutics implies a caution and a complication for those of the Western tradition who hope to develop this framework for pluralism. It is not simply our experience and understanding of divine infinitude that is conditioned by our particular traditions. Our traditions also set the horizons for our experience and understanding of our own finitude. Within these horizons we can dialogue with other traditions, but it is this framework that enables us to be open to such dialogue. We will need to address the possibility of a plurality of experiences of human finitude as well as a plurality of experiences of divine infinitude. We cannot arbitrarily move into an experience and understanding of human finitude that has no connections with our tradition. Developing our experience of human finitude by incorporating any insights from other traditions will require long dialogue that will allow

connections to arise. The task is more than that of developing philosophical frameworks. We must take the time to engage in conversation and risk being transformed in those conversations.

Gadamer's work also carries implications for work in philosophy of religion that is concerned with themes of non-domination. Gadamer's rootedness in his tradition should not be taken as a commitment to dogmatic religious tradition. While he emphasizes the importance of tradition, it is tradition with which we are in dialogue and which we question. Only a living tradition can provide the basis for the mediation of human finitude and divine infinitude. Gadamer's work continually emphasizes the importance of "bringing people to a self-understanding of themselves" (RAS p. 149). Fundamental to this self-understanding is the need to rid ourselves of illusions of domination and control. Focusing on the structure of hearing and its I-lessness helps us to withhold our own expectations and impositions. This part of Gadamer's analysis lends strong support to the need to listen to feminist, liberation, and ecological philosophical frameworks. All of these frameworks seek to develop self-understandings that are non-dominating and to reflect on images and experiences of divine infinitude that both open up such self-understandings and are mediated by non-dominating ways of dwelling.

On the other hand, Gadamer's reflections on human finitude and experience of the infinite seem to raise a caution for those who would focus on that part of religious experience that shows us what we can do and emphasizes our emancipatory responsibilities. The experience of the infinite that Gadamer suggests is appropriate to us is one that places us in a spirit of openness to that which confronts us with our own ignorance and a recognition of what we cannot achieve. As such, the experience of the infinite leads to a distrust of "any instrumental attitude toward truth, knowledge, or interpersonal relations" (Misgeld p. 176). We cannot grasp the infinite. Any desire we have to experience the infinite must be given a careful direction. We must not impose but must be open to encounter and recognize that what we experience of the infinite is what is in the encounter. We cannot go beyond this experience.

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