Plurality and the Question of God

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As is probably the case for many people of my age and with the same religious background the speaking about God has primarily been given shape in the time we visited elementary school and by learning of the catechism. To this also belonged a question that was meant for children in the third year of elementary school: “Is there more than one God?” It was, as far as I was able to check, the seventh question of the entire catechism. Without any reflection the answer to be given was: “There is only one God!” None of the children in my class, myself included, probably said: “That isn't much!” A child who only has one marble will probably be disappointed. A child who is fascinated by a bag of marbles has not seen the problem of unity and multiplicity. This implicitly means that the child has not posed the philosophical question of God as a question of the unity of everything that is. About the fact that there is only one God, no one was concerned. And that while it was expressly said: there is only one God! In this article I want to address the question of “Is there more than one God?” This question was already posed to me in the third year of elementary school.

With this I want to show that the main question of the plurality of God or Gods is not the question of polytheism, which was a stage before monotheism. I will try to make clear that in the western Christian approach there is a plurality of god-images. So the plurality is not outside and in contrast with the western culture, but is something inside the heart of our philosophical and religious thinking. First and foremost, I want to address the question of what we are talking about when we speak about God as philosophers; it is about the God of the philosophers. Thereafter I want to establish what it means when it is said that this God is dead. Does this mean that what has been called God has also become a worthless thought? Even in a necrology the merits of a deceased are still praised and respected, aren't they? I will end with a consideration wherein God is represented as a moment of interpretation, as a provisional God.

1 The Philosophical Idea of God

What is the philosophical idea of God? To answer this question I consult a long tradition of thinking which, under the name of metaphysics, controls the history of western philosophy. This tradition is usually thought to begin with
Parmenides and Heraclitus and more in particular with Plato and Aristotle. In Aristotle we see that wisdom (*sophia*) is located in the knowledge of the first causes and principles of everything. He emphasizes that it is a theoretical knowledge. “For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize.”¹ In this philosophy what is asked is what we mean with “being.” However, it is very remarkable that in the reference to these thinkers it is usually not remarked that they were very insecure about this. So, Plato writes: “We, however, we used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed.”² And also Aristotle notices that the question traditionally posed to being is still today the object of doubt.³ Still it seems to be the case that these thinkers are especially appreciated in the history of philosophy because of their answers and not of their hesitations. By these answers and not by their hesitation the philosophical concept of God is largely determined.

What is understood in western philosophy with the word “God” and where is the concept of God to be localized? Aristotle assigns a separate domain to this type of knowing.⁴ It is the question after, and the knowledge of the first thing that is. This knowledge is not identical with any other kind of knowledge. He calls it “first philosophy,” because it dwells on the first thing of what is; it is the fact that the things are. The things are, and in so far as they are they have something in common as beings or entities. That is why first philosophy engages itself with the question of being in so far as it is. With this, metaphysics is separated from other forms of knowing and sciences, like physics, medical sciences en the political sciences, but also from sociology and psychology. The pre-eminent first of all that is, is then that which motivates and unifies everything that is. This idea of a first principle gathering everything that is: the world, man, history, and so on. It brings it together as beings. This is the divine according to Aristotle. That is why first philosophy is a theology. As first philosophy, philosophical theology distinguishes itself from all other sciences in its own domain by the question of the last unity of everything that is.

By starting with Plato and Aristotle I have let my concept of metaphysics be determined by what in the prior philosophical tradition has been considered

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² Freely translated from Plato, *Sophist*, 244a; see Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1972?), 1.