Heidegger and the God of Hölderlin

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“To hold God in his distinct Purity, is the task entrusted to us.”
—Hölderlin

“The poetry of Hölderlin is everywhere kept under the behest of the Sacred.”
—Heidegger

It is clear that Heidegger grants an extraordinary importance and decisive primacy to the dimension of the Holy in his interpretation of Hölderlin. For him, the Holy is not an emanation of divinity, but the original and inaugural light, the native soil that makes possible the advent of a God or of the gods. For him, without a preludial Holy—conceived as the Spared, the Wholesome (das Heilige [the holy] is derived from das Heil [the hale]), or that which has the power to save—no god can appear. The Holy is to any god what Being is to beings: that which gives while withdrawing. Now, in light of this profoundly innovative and complex reflection on the holy, the analyses of God are strangely elliptical and incomplete. Epiphany of the original light, god, he says, “indeed has the ability to make the highest shimmering of beauty appear, and thus he comes closest to the pure appearing of what is omnipresent (EHĐ, 54).”1 This god conceived as the quintessence of manifestation is quite distant from that singular God that Hölderlin evokes so often in calling it the “God of Heaven,” “the Father,” “the Most-High.”

Likewise time and again Heidegger’s commentary points out the theme of the “flown gods,” or of “holy mourning,” and silently omits the poet’s
celebration of the gods as ever again present. Besides melancholy and nostalgia which are associated with the lost gods, above all the gods of Greece, it is with enthusiasm that Hölderlin hails the Celestial Ones, the Divine Ones, the "messengers of the Father," "the divine, prodigious forces," among which are the demigods, the rivers—forces which never cease to move upon the earth. The "Most-High" does not lack celestial messengers: "If it were not so, how could he come down here?" (Der Ister, 2,191). As to certain radiant, favored instances, the distance of the Divine is reversed into an intense proximity which is not explainable or justifiable.

Near
And difficult to grasp, God.
(Patmos, 2,165)

It is not at all obvious that for Hölderlin, as it has been said, there was an absolute break which would cleave history into an epoch in which the gods were present (in Greece; during the life of Christ) and an epoch in which they are absent:

The Heavenly Ones
And man are for all time on earth next to each other!
(Der Einzige, [Third version] 2,163)

In short, in Heidegger one does not find any analyses of the Hölderlinian Christ, despite its being a central theme and the subject of such disconcerting poems as Patmos and The Only One. And it is the teaching and the life of this rather unorthodox Christ—indeed he is named "the exhausted Son of the Most-High" (Patmos, 2,170) of whom he affirms: "Christ still lives" (Patmos, 2,171)—that Hölderlin evokes in Patmos without mentioning his passion and his resurrection. In a Dionysian manner he points to the institution of the Eucharist as "the mystery of the stock of the vine"! This ought to merit a few questions!

It is clear that Heidegger's hierocentrism springs from a desire to break with the overly pious or didactic, "rehashings" of the nineteenth century, but even more profoundly, to break with Judeo-Christian theocentrism. The insistence on Hölderlin's Hellenism, the importance of which certainly should not be underestimated, does not justify the effacing of the themes that obviously derive from Christianity and the biblical tradition. The idea of a genesis of gods from the Holy is patently one-sided and excessive, for the Heideggerian thesis relies entirely on one passage, probably the only one in Hölderlin's oeuvre, where the Holy—identified with Nature—presents itself as prior and superior to the gods. The passage in question is the third strophe of the renowned poem As on a Holiday (Wie wenn am Feiertag . . ., 2,118):

But now day breaks! ( . . .)
And what I saw, the Holy be my word.