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Critical Theory and Religion

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Introduction

Published nearly a hundred years ago, Max Weber’s synthetic contribution to the sociology of religion (known as the Religionssozioologie, included in the posthumous edition Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, 1921–1922) contains insights that remain of tremendous value to the contemporary reader today. Most impressive is the author’s capacity to relate religious beliefs or formal doctrines to social conditions without mechanistic reduction. Because Weber’s interpretative method takes seriously the meaningfulness of human conduct as seen from the agent’s own point of view, the external logic of causality in sociological phenomena persists only as modified by a theory of affinity or “relation” that allows internal consciousness to appear as a motivational force for action. But this method generates a paradox when the author turns to the historical process of disenchantment (Entzauberung) in which he assigns particular importance to the role of the intellectual. According to Weber, it is the specific burden of the intellectual to transform the world into a problem of “meaning” (“Sinn”-Problem): the intellectual seeks “to endow his life with a pervasive meaning...to find unity with himself, with his fellow men, and with the cosmos.” The thirst for meaning may of course afflict other social strata as well, but in traditionalist cultures the practical uses of magic and lack of education leave less room for a theoretical drive for holistic explanation which “extends to infinity.” This ambition results in a historical irony: because intellectualism “suppresses belief in magic,” the processes of the world are gradually “disenchanted” until eventually they simply “are” or “happen” but “no longer signify [bedeuten] anything.” Intellectuals thus bear a special if not unique responsibility for generating the modern impression that life experience offers no metaphysical solace, even though the articulation of meaning in “the total pattern of life” was originally the intellectual’s own raison d’être (Weber 1963: 125).

This Weberian paradox anticipates the self-sabotaging pathogenesis of modern reason as theorized in Dialectic of Enlightenment. From Weber, Adorno and Horkheimer borrow the basic contours of a process of world-rationalization and disenchantment that betrays its own promise of emancipation and ends in an experience of unreflective fatalism or “myth.” Unlike their predecessor, however, Adorno and Horkheimer do not fasten their attention on the problem of “meaning” per se, nor do they seem especially concerned with the dissolution of religious meaning in particular. Weber traced the loss of meaning in modern society specifically to the breakdown of holistic religious schema and the emergence of uncoordinated value-spheres (thus creating the normative disorientation he called “modern polytheism”). But critical theory at least in its first-generation or “classical” phase assigned little explicit
importance to the phenomenon of secularization. On those rare moments when Adorno and Horkheimer appeal to a lost plenitude of “meaning” in the human past, they more often portray it in naturalistic rather than metaphysical-religious terms: on their view the dialectic of enlightenment begins not with the dissolution of religion but with the rise of an instrumental-rational attitude that breaks up the human being's communion with nature. For them, the expulsion from Paradise begins not with the loss of religious meaning but with the loss of humanity’s noninstrumentalist and mimetic bond with nature.

Despite some notable exceptions, however, critical theory has been and remains committed to a program of secularization. It is true that Adorno alludes to a “messianic light” in the concluding section to _Minima Moralia_, but this does not permit us to imagine him as a partisan of religion. Critical theory abjures the idealist attempt to see the world _sub specie aeternitatis_. On the contrary, it invokes redemption only to underscore the cognitive necessity of viewing the world from a wholly negativistic perspective that refuses to accept its imperfection as eternal: the final sentence of the book announces that for critical theory the reality or irreality of redemption “hardly matters” (Adorno 1974: 247). This figurative appeal to a messianic viewpoint must at least be squared with Adorno’s later claim in _Negative Dialectics_ that philosophy can only overcome its idealistic hubris if it performs a “disenchantment of the concept” (Adorno 1970: 23). It is true of course that at the last years of his life Max Horkheimer awakened to the possibility that theism might serve as a possible resource for critical resistance. Atheism, by contrast, had lost its earlier enlightenment-era status as an ideology of opposition to the sacred union of State and Church, and it was all too often in his view an ideological license for conformity. For a philosopher who had been raised in an observant Jewish home but whose pessimistic attitude toward this-worldly political transformation betrayed an enduring debt to Schopenhauer (alongside of but in tension with Marx), the religious appeal to God as the “wholly other” obviously held an important biographical meaning (Schmidt 1977). But whether this late reprisal of religious themes in Horkheimer’s final essays signifies something more general about the dialogue between religion and critical theory seems doubtful. The most intensive attempt to forge this dialogue can be found in the work of the Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz, who (drawing upon Walter Benjamin’s thoughts on the remembrance of past suffering) urges us to deploy “anamnestic reason” as a critical force against oblivion and leveling rationalization (Metz 1992: 189–194).

But the true locus for any assessment of this relationship is the work of Jürgen Habermas. If critical theory is to retain its relevance in contemporary debates over the place of religion in modern society, it must build upon the enduring foundations that Habermas has laid, though in the self-reflexive spirit of critical theory it must also examine these foundations without falling back on the complacent trust in the legacy of the Frankfurt School as an ahistorical or settled doctrine. In Habermas’s systematic contributions to philosophy and social theory, we can detect a renewed interest in Weber’s distinctive approach to the historical sociology of religion. But Habermas also offers an important corrective to Weber. Although Weber disavowed any interest in metaphysical teleologies of history, he nonetheless saw in rationalization a nearly irresistible world-process that would eventually dissolve most forms of traditional religion throughout the Occident and (by inference) across the globe. Such historical meta-narratives, however, no longer conform to the empirical data. Most sociologists today dispute the classical theory of secularization or at the very least they offer so many counterexamples of persistent and novel modes of religiosity that the classical theory resembles a man condemned to death by a thousand cuts.

From a political rather than empirical perspective, the expectation of religious decline also nourishes an unhelpful attitude of intellectual condescension. In the present moment of global and cultural fracture too much is at stake; especially when confronted with the
bewildering persistence of a religious piety that assumes the form of dogmatic and even violent militancy, intellectuals can no longer afford to play the role of a mirror image to the dogmatism they condemn. The attitude of a privileged cognitive insight that once inspired Voltaire to satirize the religion of les classes inférieures seemed valid only as long as philosophers still claimed for themselves a metaphysical vantage superior to the rest of the social world. Once intellectuals began to shed this illusion of an eternal perspective, the confidence that religion itself is a mere illusion without a future began to lose its plausibility. This is one of the important lessons in what Habermas calls the turn to “post-metaphysical thinking.” No longer excluding itself from a conversation among diverse perspectives philosophy must commit itself to the challenge of speaking with, rather than above or against, its religious interlocutors. The urgent and admittedly provocative question, however, is whether this shift to post-metaphysical thinking also demands a cognitive shift in the way intellectuals conceive of their own critical work: does an intellectual practice that no longer aims to dismantle the religious belief of others as illusory entail a self-reflexive attitude that also injects doubt into one’s own atheistic premises? In other words, does critical theory presuppose or logically require a cognitive commitment to atheism? In what follows, I will (1) reconstruct Habermas’s argument concerning the prospects for religion in modern society and (2) offer some controversial thoughts on the question as what the shift to post-metaphysical thinking may entail for critical theorists themselves in their ongoing encounter with religious fellow citizens.

The Earlier Habermas on Religion

In his 1962 habilitation, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit)*, Habermas offered a stylized sociological-historical analysis of the rise of “publicity” or Öffentlichkeit, as a defining “category of bourgeois society.” The chief purpose of the book was to trace the gradual emergence of publicity both as a philosophical ideal and as an ideological instrument by which the rising bourgeoisie gained both social legitimacy and eventually political power against the traditionalistic authority of the ancien régime. For the absolutist monarch, publicity meant chiefly the public “display” of divinely sanctioned authority through spectacles that were performed “before” a politically subordinated assemblage of notables. With the bourgeoisie, however, this notion of publicity gave way to the ideal of a social or discursive space, whether in newspapers, cafés, or literary salons, in which inherited social power counted less than the critical power of unconstrained communication. This ideal also served an ideological function insofar as it helped to justify the bourgeois claim to act as the representative of universal “reason,” even while this claim obviously stood in contradiction with the property restrictions and educational privileges that made access to the public sphere possible. Habermas shows how this ideal nonetheless pointed to an unrealized image of genuinely universalized and pour l’art has not entirely liberated nonhierarchical communication: publicity was at once ideology and more than ideology. In the twentieth century, however, this ideal suffered further deformation as unidirectional forms of communication and institutional power inhibited the rational practice of public criticism. In homage to the theory of the “culture industry” as presented by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Habermas showed how publicity had devolved in mass society into a “re feudalized” performance. Publicity was once again a kind of spectacle enacted “before” rather than “within” a public that was beginning to lose its sense of democratic agency (Habermas 1989: 200).

In this argument Habermas devoted hardly any attention to the phenomenon of religion. But he did take note of the fact that feudal publicity was a kind of “status attribute” that adverted to the aristocrat or monarch, who “presented himself as an embodiment of some sort of ‘higher’ power.” In this pre-bourgeois system, the function of publicity was to make
“something invisible visible.” The typical categories of feudal esteem such as “highness, majesty, fame, dignity, and honor” all presupposed that the public power of the ruler derived from the intangible but irresistible phenomenon of an “aura” that surrounded his person and were displayed through personal conduct in the “Christianized form” of the classical virtues. Officials in the Church exemplified in the most overt form the sacred character of this aura in religious rituals such as the High Mass but also in public processions. The fact that the Mass was conducted in Latin rather than a language accessible to the great mass of Christian believers drives home Habermas’s claim that feudal publicity chiefly assumed the form of publicity “before” rather than “within” the public itself (Habermas 1989: 7–9). The explicit reference to a feudal “aura” may help us to appreciate the way in which Habermas followed Walter Benjamin’s argument that in traditional aesthetic experience the artwork comes wrapped within an “aura” of uniqueness—a sign, Benjamin claimed, that even the bourgeois cult of l’art pour l’art has not entirely liberated itself from its religious and ritualistic origins. Like Benjamin, Habermas implied that the public could only gain genuinely political agency once the aura of feudal performance was dissolved. But for students of Habermas’s generation in the German Federal Republic, this argument also carried a further and quite specific historical resonance: the memory of fascist spectacles with their auratic rituals of modern power left Habermas with a deep aversion to any practice of modern politics in which authority carried even the slightest hint of the sacred.

The commitment to secularization as a prerequisite for the critical-rational procedures of modern democracy became a more explicit theme in The Theory of Communicative Action (1981), especially in the chapter in Volume II on the “linguisticization of the sacred” (die Versprachlichung des Sakralen). Here, Habermas claimed that a social theory can trace the emergence of communicative rationality historically by reconstructing the historical path of disenchantment. Borrowing from Durkheim as well as Weber, Habermas argued that the “socially integrative and expressive functions” that in traditional cultures were once managed by “ritual practice” gradually lose their ground as rational criticism broadens its domain and penetrates into what were once “sacrally protected” contexts of normative authority: “The disenchantment and disempowering of the domain of the sacred,” Habermas wrote, “takes place by way of a linguistification of the ritually secured, basic normative agreement.”

What this means is that social solidarity, which according to Durkheim retains its force only when a culture adheres to certain values as sacred and beyond criticism, ultimately transforms in character.

The aura of rapture and terror that emanates from the sacred, the spellbinding [bannende] power of the holy, is sublimated into the binding/bonding [bindenden] force of criticizable validity claims and at the same time turned into an everyday occurrence. [Die Aura des Entzückens und Erschreckens, die vom Sakralen ausstrahlt, die bannende Kraft des Heiligen wird zur bindenden Kraft kritisierbarer Geltungsansprüche zugleich sublimiert und veralltäglich].

For Habermas, this stylized narrative describes an important shift in the nature of social solidarity: “the authority of the holy is gradually replaced [ersetzt] by the authority of an achieved consensus” (Habermas 1985: 77).

Despite its impressionistic quality, the basic contours of this narrative might be corroborated with evidence from the history of religion. The cult of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi offers an intriguing illustration. During the era stretching from the seventh to fourth centuries B.C.E., the Pythia or high priestess (whose name derives from the pythein or smell of decomposition of the monstrous python that was slain by Apollo) served as the Delphic Oracle, whose prophecies made her one of the most authoritative religious figures in ancient Greek
society. One account of this ancient cult suggests that the high priestess put herself into trancelike or frenzied state brought on from breathing the fumes of the decomposing python, and her inchoate cries were then rendered into intelligible and poetic form by an assembly of priests (Osioi) (Farnell 1907: 189). A more recent account with strongly feminist implications suggests that the High Priestess spoke intelligibly on her own and that her words, rather than the second-order interpretations of the male priests, remained authoritative (Fontenrose 1978: 196–227; Maurizio 2001: 38–54). In either case, this example of an archaic religious practice serves as a helpful illustration for the basic phenomenon of linguistification: a sacred source of normative instruction may originate in mystery but eventually it must somehow communicate its lessons to the religious collective. In committing itself to a linguistic form, however, the sacred eventually leaves itself vulnerable to interpretation and conceptual dispute. A similar process of linguistification is evident in many world religions, e.g., the transformation of the Mosaic revelation into the elaborate argumentative systems of the Talmud; or the process by which the parables and miracles associated with Jesus Christ in the New Testament served as inspirational material for the highly sophisticated metaphysical systems of medieval scholasticism. All such cases demonstrate how an originally aural experience must eventually become linguistified and will then be exposed to critical deliberation and disagreement. But this process, once begun, cannot easily be stopped; its ultimate effect is to fragilize and even dissipate the power of the sacred. Habermas quotes Durkheim: “One begins by putting articles of faith beyond discussion; then discussion extends to them. One wishes an explanation of them; one asks their reasons for existing, and, as they submit to this search, they lose part of their force” (Habermas, TCA, II, 84).

The Theory of Communicative Action is not, of course, primarily a contribution to the philosophy or history of religion. But the theory of a linguistification of the sacred shows us that critical theory has typically sustained a strong commitment to the paradigm of secularization, even when it has taken care to acknowledge the historical relevance of traditional religious phenomena for the emergence of modern social norms. Critical theory derives much of its original impetus from the left-Hegelian practice of rational demystification, whether the object of its demystifying practice is institutionalized religious doctrine, as in Feuerbach’s critique of Christianity, or the reified structures of the market economy and its ideological supports, as in Marx’s critique of capitalism. Such a demystifying practice cannot easily dispense with and perhaps even presupposes the regulative ideal of a wholly demystified explanation: when Marx seeks to reveal the real mechanisms of an exchange system that presents itself in social experience only in the mystified guise of commodity fetishism, he already aligns himself with a rational practice of disenchantment. Even the metaphor of “fetishism” (despite its admittedly condescending attitude toward aboriginal religious customs) suggests that the mature author of Capital still drew inspiration from Feuerbach’s critique of religion as the reified projection of purely human capacities. Seen in this light, Marx appears as a proponent of thoroughgoing secularization.

Critical theory obviously extends this practice of disenchantment and directs its rational power against all forms of reification, whether in the realm of economics, culture, or consciousness. In his 1958 lecture, “Revelation and Autonomous Reason” (Offenbarung und autonome Vernunft), Adorno summarized this commitment to secularization in programmatic fashion: “Nothing of theological content will persist without being transformed: every content will have to put itself to the test of migrating into the realm of the secular, the profane” (Adorno 1959/2005: 392–402). It could be argued that in The Theory of Communicative Action, Habermas intensifies the demand for a thoroughgoing secularization of historically religious contents and even implies their irrelevance to secular modernity: only this can explain his claim (quoted above) that over time the transcendent authority of the holy is “replaced” (ersetzt) by the mundane authority of an intersubjectively stabilized consensus.
Religion and Translation

At least since the publication of the essays in Post-Metaphysical Thinking (1988), Habermas appears to have slackened the secularist requirement that modern society must reach a point of normative independence that leaves its religious origins behind. The question as to whether this signals a genuine change in Habermas’s thinking or merely a shift in emphasis is a matter of some controversy (Bernstein, 2016; Calhoun, Mendieta, and VanAntwerpen 2013; Gordon 2016: 466–481). But it is at least clear that in his more recent work Habermas has modified the strong language of “replacement” (with its secularist overtones and its suggestion of epochal discontinuity) and now allows that religion may be “irreplaceable.” In this recent work, he typically uses terminology such as “critical appropriation” that would seem to grant at least the possibility of enduring lines of historical continuity between religious and secular society.

This twofold gesture—(a) the willingness to acknowledge the fact of historical continuity and (b) the proviso that religious contents can only retain present-day validity if they submit to the trial of rational appropriation—runs through much of Habermas’s more recent reflections on religion. In “Metaphysics after Kant,” we are told that even contemporary philosophy cannot wholly shrug off the questions that once inspired theological discourse (Habermas, 1992b). Habermas writes that he does not believe that “we, as Europeans, can seriously understand concepts like morality and ethical life, person and individuality, or freedom and emancipation, without appropriating the substance of the Judeo-Christian understanding of history in terms of salvation.” All of these modern concepts emerge from metaphysical and religious notions regarding a “plenitude of meaning” in the cosmos. Obviously, these concepts may not meet with universal and rational assent from a post-metaphysical perspective that has surrendered the underlying appeal to a plenitude of meaning. Habermas remains confident that a post-metaphysical age can continue to draw normative sustenance from its religious inheritance. But the acknowledgment of a historical genesis (a) does not automatically grant the continued validity (b) of such metaphysical themes within a post-metaphysical age. Although the older metaphysical questions do not simply vanish, they can survive in a mundane form only if they are subjected to a genuinely critical appropriation. The semantic contents of religion may derive from religion but they are not valid as religion. This means that they achieve a new validity only “within the narrowed and sharpened spotlight of what can still convince the daughters and sons of modernity with good reasons” (Habermas 1992b [1988]: 14–15).

The requirement of “good reasons” signals a strong affinity between critical theory and the Rawlsian idea of a “translation proviso.” In agreement with Rawls, Habermas remains convinced that within the bounds of our formal democratic institutions, claims that are grounded in “comprehensive doctrines” cannot be permitted to count as reasons. The diversity of such comprehensive doctrines within modern society means that any such claims could not expect to meet with general assent. In formal institutions of political deliberation, our fellow citizens must therefore be required to provide a rationalizing “translation” of their arguments into a medium of justification that does not rely upon potentially exclusive metaphysical schemes. In a spirit of discursive inclusion that should benefit the rational and democratic public sphere, Habermas believes that the translation proviso must be retained within the bounds of formal democratic institutions, since public servants “have a duty to remain neutral among competing worldviews.” This requirement of neutrality means that the practice of translation still turns “metaphysical” language into “post-metaphysical language,” and in this sense philosophy remains faithful what Habermas has called “methodological atheism.” But methodological atheism does not rule out of bounds all appeals to religion in modern society at large. Habermas has specifically challenged the stricture that the proviso...
should apply to all citizens even within the more informal or noninstitutional setting of the “political public sphere” (Habermas 2008: 128–129). To impose such a constraint, he claims, would only impoverish public discourse. Democratic deliberation should remain free to draw upon a broad range of insights, including the redemptive teachings of the many world religions, which long ago shed their merely local validity and assumed a “post-Axial” or quasi-transcendental perspective with norms of potentially universalizing application (Lafont 2007: 239–259).

Modern philosophy, in other words, must resist the arrogance of a “secularist” ideology. Rather, it must adopt a stance that remains cognitively open to learning from all citizens, including citizens who still subscribe to the various religious traditions that modern philosophy sublated into its critical practice. Such openness is an urgent matter, Habermas suggests, since “religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life” (Habermas 2008: 131). A liberal theory of democratic deliberation that announces itself as merely political rather than metaphysical must not deny at least the possibility that it could take up such intuitions to the benefit of our shared political existence. Habermas makes this point forcefully in his essay on “Religion in the Public Sphere.”

The liberal state has an interest in unleashing religious voices in the political public sphere, and in the political participation of religious organizations as well. It must not discourage religious persons and communities from also expressing themselves politically as such, for it cannot know whether secular society would not otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity. (Habermas 2008: 131)

Habermas has further argued that if we do not commit ourselves to this collective work of rational appropriation (via translation), the “semantic potential” of our various religious traditions could one day become inaccessible and therefore lost. Nor can we rest assured that salvaged religious content will remain available for all time. This potential, he explains, “must be mastered anew by every generation” (Habermas 1992b: 15).

The urgent question that still confronts critical theory today is whether the acknowledgment of historical inheritance itself already implies that secular society somehow remains normatively dependent on the religious norms it has taken up into the medium of an open-ended and critical discourse. In the closing paragraph of “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking,” Habermas offers some thoughts on this question. Although he believes that religion “has largely been deprived of its worldview functions,” he grants that it is “still irreplaceable [nach wie vor unersetzlich] in ordinary life” insofar as it furnishes practices and rituals that bring us into contact with the transmundane or the “extraordinary.” It follows that “even postmetaphysical thinking continues to coexist with religious practice.” It is interesting to notice that in the passage quoted above the older secularist language of substitution from The Theory of Communicative Action (namely, the claim that in modern society the binding power of religion is replaced, or ersetz) has been relaxed. Habermas now admits that religion may not be replaced, that it is irreplaceable, or unersetzh. But here we confront a deep perplexity. Once we acknowledge the possibility of religion’s “indispensable” role in ordinary life and its coexistence with secular modernity, we may be tempted to admit to a far stronger relationship of dependency:

This ongoing coexistence even throws light on a curious dependence [Abhängigkeit] of a philosophy that has forfeited its contact with the extraordinary. Philosophy, even in its postmetaphysical form, will be able neither to replace nor to repress
religion as long as religious language is the bearer of a semantic content that is inspiring and even *indispensable* [unauflgbare], for this content eludes (for the time being? [vorerst?]) the explanatory force of philosophical language and continues to resist translation into reasoning discourses.

(Habermas 1992 [1988]: 60; my emphasis)

This is a striking admission. As I have noted above, critical theory was born from the spirit of a left-Hegelianism that took the demystification of religious or quasi-religious phenomena as a precondition for human emancipation. It presupposed that modern society would eventually reach a point of thoroughgoing normative independence from its religious past. This was a crucial feature of the legacy of German Idealism that (following Kant) defined Enlightenment as the human being’s release from the condition of dependency or “tutelage” (*Unmündigkeit*). The left-Hegelian tradition—from Feuerbach to Marx—sought to disenchant the mystified forms of human experience whether these were manifest in the form of the divine or the commodity. The passage quoted above suggests that once critical theory has taken up the lessons of post-metaphysical thinking this left-Hegelian presupposition must now be discarded as the remnant of an unwarranted metaphysics.

The shift to post-metaphysical thinking thus appears to signal a turn away from the secularist confidence that once characterized the left-Hegelian tradition. The new demarche brings to critical theory a more chastened and pragmatist sensibility; it suggests that a socially and historically situated reason must adopt an attitude toward religion that is: (a) empirically fallibilistic and (b) normatively agnostic. As an empirical matter, it may seem obvious that critical theory (a) cannot presume to know the historical outcome of social processes in which it is itself implicated. This fallibilistic readiness to adapt itself to new historical conditions displaces the old expectation that secularization was the inevitable end point of societal rationalization. Critical theory, in other words, cannot boast of any foreknowledge regarding the future possibility of a society that could stabilize without factual dependency on its inherited religious traditions. We must therefore allow for the empirical possibility that the practice of a secularizing translation of religious insights will continue into a future without limit. But as a normative matter the situation is far less obvious: must critical theory also (b) jettison its self-understanding as a practice that commits itself to the normative goal of secular consciousness? In other words, does the new spirit of fallibilistic reason and its admission of an ongoing and possibly endless dependency on the normative resources of religion also entail a compromise with the left-Hegelian ideal of demystification itself?

The Weberian Premise

To answer this question, it is crucial to examine the underlying Weberian assumptions that have helped to motivate the recent turn in critical theory to religious themes. In his 1918 Munich address, “Science as a Vocation,” Weber suggests that the gradual process of increasing mastery over nature through “intellectualization” has led over the course of history to a condition of world-disenchantment that is destined to evacuate the world of all “meaning.” For this situation, he ascribes primary if not exclusive responsibility to the modern sciences, both natural and social, which have extended Platon’s original discovery of the concept as a “tool” and have used this instrumental power to unlock the world’s apparent mysteries. It is Weber’s grim forecast that instrumental reason will ultimately create a world in which any belief in an objective “meaning” will “die out at its very roots.”

This well-known “meaning problem” (*Sinn-Problem*) retains its plausibility, however, only if we subscribe to Weber’s original belief that the phenomenon of the world’s objective meaning derives specifically from religion. Although Weber did believe that it remained
possible for modern social actors to decide individually upon their own ultimate value commitments (and hence it remained possible for even the social scientist to find some ultimate sense of value-orientation in the disenchanted practices of science), he nevertheless saw the decisionistic and individualistic value-commitments of modern social actors as pale afterthoughts of the original and socially comprehensive value-orientations that had once united whole societies within the shared experience of a meaningful cosmos. The modern social actor “has to decide which God is for him,” whereas social actors in traditional communities were born into common frameworks of meaning. This is a crucial distinction between the fragmented world of modern “polytheism” and the value-holism of the religious past. In his contributions to the historical sociology of religion and especially in his analysis of the Protestant ethic and its role in the genesis of modern capitalism, Weber saw the strong experience of value-holism as a distinctively religious inheritance. Despite his occasional notes of warning regarding the prospects for a reprisal of “monumental” styles (in the arts, for example), he did not believe that such atavistic forces could survive over the long term. He could not imagine that any remaining sources of normativity in the modern world could offer sufficiently powerful value-orientations to reunite whole communities in the way in which religion once had in the past.

Animating Weber's theory of value was a historically grounded (if ultimately nonempirical) belief that religion is not one source of value among many but is in fact a special or privileged source of normativity that remains in some sense irreplaceable. Only this can explain Weber's belief that the dissolution of traditional religion had brought about an unprecedented “meaning problem” for modern society. At the beginning of this chapter, I alluded to the paradoxical role of intellectuals in Weber's sociology of religion. On the one hand, it is task of the intellectual to explain the meaning of the world, and in religious societies intellectuals therefore devote themselves to creating elaborate systems of theological and metaphysical meaning. On the other hand, intellectuals are inclined to a form of rational reflection without constraint that ultimately conspires to break down those systems of meaning. Weber clearly saw in himself a personal manifestation of this paradox: although he devoted much of his sociological efforts to the understanding of the religious past, he also considered his sociological work an exercise in disenchantment that could only intensify the problem of modern meaninglessness. He saw in religion a special source of normativity that could no longer be recovered.

Critical theory is still haunted by a Weberian belief in the privileged normative status of religion. In Habermas’s work, both the earlier thesis regarding the linguistification of the sacred and its later reformulation as a reappropriation of the semantic potentials of religion (via rationalizing translation) imply a continuity in normative contents even if this continuity is subjected to critical scrutiny. But the thesis of “dependency” appears to go even further. It suggest that religious traditions bear within themselves “key resources” that have grown otherwise scarce and perhaps remain “indispensable” for the construction of meaning. According to this thesis of dependency, modern society has reached a point of normative impoverishment due to the overwhelming dominance of systemic imperatives and the general effects of an instrumental reason that has unshackled itself from human ends. This Habermasian thesis turns back to Weber's idea of religion as a special source of normativity, but it resists his pessimistic view that this source cannot be retrieved: it claims that via translation modern society can still draw upon the semantic potentials of religion for normative instruction and as a resource for the construction of meaning.

Adorno, I suggest, took exception to the thesis of dependency. In “Religion and Autonomious Reason,” he observed that modern societies had the unfortunate habit of admiring religious traditions as if they were preserved behind a “glass case, through whose walls one can gaze upon the eternally immutable ontological stock of a philosophia or religio perennis.”
He saw this attitude not as a genuine homage to religion but instead as symptomatic of a modern condition in which “the belief in revelation is no longer substantially present in people” and can be maintained “only through a desperate abstraction.” According to the classical Marxist critique, religion functions as a compensatory structure that simultaneously expresses and mystifies social oppression. In the Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” Marx called religion “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world.” Adorno reprises the key elements of this Marxist critique when he notes that “the turn toward transcendence” functions as “a screen image for immanent, societal hopelessness.” For Adorno, then, the suggestion that modern society can find in traditional religion its necessary supply of moral and political insights is not so much a solution to contemporary injustice as it is an index of our failure to find a solution. He was especially skeptical regarding the proposal that we apply the ethical precepts of traditional religion to modern life. “[T]he concept of the neighbor refers to communities where people know each other face to face,” he observed.

Helping one’s neighbors, no matter how urgent this remains in a world devastated by those natural catastrophes produced by society, is insignificant in comparison with a praxis that extends beyond every mere immediacy of human relationships, in comparison with a transformation of the world that one day would put an end to the natural catastrophes of society.

(Adorno 1958/2005: 141)

Adorno, then, explicitly rejects as an impossibility the proposal that we translate the language of religion into a modern and secular idiom:

The concept of daily bread, born from the experience of deprivation under the conditions of uncertain and insufficient material production, cannot simply be translated into the world of bread factories and surplus production, in which famines are natural catastrophes wrought by society and precisely not by nature.

(Adorno 1958/2005: 141)

This disagreement regarding the prospects for a continuing dialogue with religion would seem to be a major line of fracture in the discourse of critical theory. On the one hand is the proposal that religion as a stock of normative insights and meanings can still be made available for secular use; on the other hand, we confront a skeptical challenge to this proposal. How is this disagreement to be resolved?

**Feuerbach’s Critique**

In The Essence of Christianity, Feuerbach wrote that “What the human being calls Absolute Being, his God, is his own being. The power of the object over him is therefore the power of his own being.” According to the left-Hegelian critic of religion the divine being that we call God does not reflect a metaphysical reality; it is only “the human being’s very own essence” that has been “set apart from” the human being as an externalized projection of the human being’s own subjectivity (sein entäußertes Selbst) (Feuerbach 2008: 26). The experience of subordination to this externalized projection as an independent power is therefore an illusion; it can be dismantled through a rational critique that permits the human being to reappropriate its own projection. Feuerbach saw in the history of religion a gradual attempt to overcome the distance between God and humanity: eventually he believed that this distance would be sublated completely—the human being would recognize that its relation of dependency to
an externalized being was really an expression of its confidence in its very own purely human capacities. Religion would simultaneously complete itself and be annulled by resolving itself into anthropology. “What yesterday still passed for religion, has ceased to be so today; and what is regarded as atheism today will be religion tomorrow” (Feuerbach 2008: 32).

The critical theorists of the first generation were both heirs and critics of this left-Hegelian perspective. Even while they took up the advantageous legacy of a critique of mystification they looked with skepticism upon its undialectical narrative of human emancipation. For Adorno and Horkheimer, it no longer made sense to celebrate without qualification the anthropological drive for radical independence; they traced the origins of modern social pathology all the way back to the earliest phases of self-assertion when the human animal sought to overcome its fear and dependency on external nature. The thesis of a dialectic of enlightenment means simultaneously a fortification of the ego and a weakening of the bonds that connect the human being to its own natural condition. Although the rise of instrumental reason enables the human subject to gain control over nature, this control is bought at a very steep price: our mimetic-naturalistic relation to our own worldly surroundings is lost as humanity comes to experience itself as merely a force for domination. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the forgetting of mimesis represents a crucial moment in the pathogenesis of the modern subject: already in the story of Odysseus (the “first bourgeois”) they discern the ironic truth that the bourgeois ego can emerge only as a consequence of repression. The modern ideal of liberal freedom as independence walls us off as monads who can enjoy only the most limited and distorted forms of material pleasure. In the drive for radical independence, humanity lost what we might call an experience of responsiveness to the world and to our own embodied and social being.

Feuerbach’s critique of religion points in two directions. (1) In its call to overcome God as the alienated projection of purely human capacities, it contains a triumphalist polemic against any experience of human dependency: on this reading, the turn from theology to anthropology looks as if it only intensifies the model of the human being as an agent of unconstrained domination. But (2) the critique of God as alienated species-being also contains a complaint against religion as a force that obstructs our experience of our own intra-human condition. On this reading, the infinitely rich conditions of sensual existence and the responsiveness to one another that constitute this existence lose their primary significance when we project features of our own humanity upon a being who is seen as (in some sense) exempt from these conditions. This second strand of Feuerbach’s critique of religious alienation clearly informs the left-Hegelian critique of alienated labor. Indeed, Marx’s analysis of the alienation that underwrites commodity fetishism bears a closer resemblance to Feuerbach’s analysis of the alienation that expresses itself as devotion to God:

The more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself.

(Marx 1994: 72)

The major accomplishment of critical theory after the analysis of the dialectic of enlightenment was to develop a theory of intersubjectivity that acknowledged (alongside of but against instrumental rationality) the this-worldly utopia of a noncoercive social solidarity that obtains in the ongoing practices of communicative reason. What we might call the “intersubjective turn” in critical theory both broadens and deepens the anthropological emphasis that comes from the left-Hegelian’s critique of religion: it sees in language itself an experience of purely human responsiveness that remained obscure in the bourgeois model of
thoughgoing independence. But it also takes care to show that this experience of respons-
siveness itself has a rational form, so that the appeal to the sensual aspect of our species-
being cannot be mistaken for a nostalgic appeal to some prelapsarian fantasy of humanity’s
prerational existence.

Among the most perplexing questions for critical theory today is whether it wishes to
retain its bond to the left-Hegelian critique of religion or whether it wishes instead to ac-
brnowledge our enduring debt to religious sources of normativity. Any attempt to answer this
question must confront an unusual dilemma: the left-Hegelian critique sees religion chiefly
as an obstruction that impoverishes our experience of our own humanity; the new thesis
of dependency looks to religion as a rare resource for preserving or even enhancing this
experience.

The Future of Disenchantment

In our contemporary political moment, the dilemma of choosing between these two models
of religion may strike us as especially fraught. On the one hand, the left-Hegelian view tends
to see adherents of religious tradition as victims of an illusion. Clearly this condescending
perspective does not extend the welcoming hand of equal respect and recognition to reli-
gious believers as such; it looks upon them with an attitude of merely prospective recognition
that awaits their advance on the path of secularizing enlightenment. On the other hand,
the thesis of dependency hardly seems any more charitable in its attitude toward religion,
since it saddles the believer with the burden of rationalizing and universalizing translation
as a precondition for participation in institutional politics. Habermas has attempted to meet
this particular objection with the recommendation that the work of translation should be
shared in common by all participants in political discourse irrespective of their religious
or irreligious commitments. This recommendation is supposed to sustain a level terrain of
mutual respect for all those who have a stake in forging a common future in multireligious
and multicultural societies. The difficulty with this recommendation is that it merely masks
without dismantling the secularist verdict on religion. One can require that secular citizens
also participate alongside their religious co-citizens in translating the normative contents
of religion, but this very requirement still leaves intact the secularist assumption that these
contents are of value only if they can be stripped of their religious form. It is here that the
attitude of intersubjective recognition reaches its limit: the translation proviso clearly marks
the point at which religious believers cannot expect wholesale recognition for the substance
of their belief qua belief. In distinguishing between, on the one hand, the potentially univer-
salizable and rational contents of religious traditions and, on the other, their particularistic
and conventional forms, the translation proviso demonstrates its own enduring commit-
ment to the left-Hegelian critique of religion.

If the foregoing conclusion is correct, then the apparent dilemma in critical theory—
between the left-Hegelian critique of religion and the post-metaphysical thesis of
dependency—may be less of a dilemma than we thought. The practice of a critical appro-
priation (via rationalizing translation) of religion’s normative potentials still subscribes at
a deeper level to the left-Hegelian thesis: it holds that the teachings of religion can be of
relevance to humanity only when they can be enlisted for mundane purposes. Here we can
see how translation performs the same task as the overcoming of alienated projection: it too
is a secularizing and disenchanting practice that transforms theology into anthropology.

Translation, however, has at least two distinctive advantages over the older mode of
critique. The left-Hegelian conception of religion subscribes to an undifferentiated univer-
salism: all human beings are expected (eventually) to countenance the mundane condi-
tions of life that are shared across the entire species—religious particularity dissolves into
anthropological generality. The post-metaphysical conception subscribes instead to a differentiated universalism: it takes up the challenge of forging common norms for the species across but not in ignorance of religious distinctions, opening itself without hubris to the unity in diversity of human cultures and faiths. To its opponents, of course, the left-Hegelian conception may look just as metaphysical as the faiths it wishes to surpass: the expectation that humanity must advance beyond religion bears witness to the enduring power of Christian-eschatological thinking. The post-metaphysical conception dispenses with this remnant of Hegel's metaphysics, and it admits at least the possibility that religion may remain a permanent fixture of human society. Translation is supposed to be a mutual practice of communication among all concerned parties, whereas left-Hegelian criticism remains stubbornly monological: it takes up a privileged stance that is external to the faiths it examines. If political liberalism wishes to keep its distance from all comprehensive doctrines, then it has good reason to prefer the modest work of shared translation over the monological practice of left-Hegelian criticism.

But these advantages should not mislead us. The emancipatory spirit of rational demystification belongs to critical theory as its birthright, and this is not a spirit it should be asked to disavow. Even in its new guise of post-metaphysical thinking, critical theory still cleaves to the secular faith in anthropological capacities for mutual recognition and mimetic connection that can be awakened in all human beings notwithstanding the great diversity in our cultures and religious traditions. Translation works only as a reverse alchemy: it undoes the magical bonds of social solidarity and turns the sacred into the profane, secularizing the redemptive lessons from which we may continue to draw instruction. But we should be mindful of the fact that the sources of normativity are not and have never been the exclusive property of our religious traditions alone. Weber's thesis of disenchantment saw human history as a process of normative loss only because he neglected the mundane experiences that persist alongside religion as secular resources for morality and meaning. The notion of a special dependency on religion seems valid only so long as we continue to believe in Weber's thesis. Once we grant the possibility that we can draw instruction from nonreligious experiences the thesis of our curious dependency on religion must collapse. The "methodological atheism" that animates the practice of secularizing translation thus turns out to be more than methodological. It is a name for our regulative ideal of a society that could, at least in principle, achieve normative stability without drawing upon the resources of the religious past.

References


### Further Reading


