ADORNO
and Theology

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Adorno *and* Theology?

It is becoming fashionable to hail a 'return to religion' in contemporary philosophy and critical theory. Philosophers as diverse as Richard Rorty, Gianni Vattimo, Slavoj Žižek, and the late Jacques Derrida have turned to the subject of religion in their recent work.[1] Jürgen Habermas made some notable shifts in his position towards religion since 11 September 2001, going so far as to engage in a dialogue with Joseph Ratzinger shortly before he was elected Pope.[2] At the same time, this seeming re-emergence of interest in religion within North Atlantic societies has also produced a counter-reaction. A so-called 'New Atheism' movement, involving outspoken intellectuals like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and others, has made impassioned appeals to exclude the supposed 'irrationality' of religion from any serious consideration within secular society.[3] This perspective, far from calling for a renewed study of religion and for greater attention to how it shapes the lives of its practitioners, warns that religion is inherently dangerous and inimical towards democracy.

In such an intellectual climate, the thought of Theodor W. Adorno has much to contribute. For Adorno's philosophy does not fit into either faction of this contemporary engagement with religion, which enables it to offer a fresh perspective on a debate that is increasingly becoming polarized and reduced to rhetoric and stereotype. Theology, as this book will demonstrate, plays a significant role in his articulation of Marxian philosophy, despite his being a materialist and an atheist. Although Adorno developed a scathing criticism of rationality and the traditions of the Enlightenment, his references to theology do not serve to replace the ideals of modernity, or to uncover some postmodern trace of

the 'other-of-reason'. Instead, Adorno is interested in theology because he thinks it reveals important insights into existing social conditions. His use of theological concepts is intended to help realize the ideals of Enlightenment reason, not overcome them. In the context of contemporary debates over 'post-secular' reason, the relationship between traditional moral values and scientific knowledge, and the complex nature of increasingly pluralistic and multi-faith societies, Adorno's thought represents a significant resource.

Adorno and Theology

In November of 1934, having quickly relocated to Oxford from Hitler's Germany, Adorno wrote to his friend Walter Benjamin (who had himself fled to Paris): 'If I can contribute any aspirations of my own to [your] work, without you taking this as an immodest suggestion, it would be this: that the work should proceed without qualms to realize every part of the theological content and all the literalness of its most extreme claims.'[4] A month later, Adorno writes even more passionately in this regard: 'it seems to me doubly important that the image of theology, into which I would gladly see our thoughts dissolve, is none other than the very one which sustains your thought here – it could indeed be called an "inverse" theology. This position [is to be] directed against natural and supernatural interpretation alike.'[5]

'Theology' is a word found throughout Adorno's writing, but its role within his critical philosophy remains surprisingly neglected and misunderstood. When his references to theology do receive attention from his readers, it is generally only to lament it as an unfortunate lapse in his work. Why would an atheist materialist make positive references to theology, unless it is evidence of 'pessimistic resignation' or 'privileged ivory-tower quietism'?[6] His most famous student, Jürgen Habermas, suggests that Adorno's interest in theology was merely a product of despair brought on by the dark years of the Second World War, in which he lost confidence in human rationality and modernity, and history for him 'faded into the Golgotha of a hope become unrecognizable'.[7] Demonstrating a more nuanced and appreciative

understanding of Adorno's references to theology is the principal task of this book.

Theodor W. Adorno

For those unfamiliar with Adorno's thought, a brief introduction to his life and work will serve to put this discussion into context.[8] He was born Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund-Adorno in Frankfurt am Main on 11 September 1903. His Jewish father was a successful wine merchant, and his Catholic mother an Italian opera soprano. After completing his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Frankfurt in 1924, Adorno moved to Vienna to study music composition with Alban Berg. He began a career as a musicologist and composer, while starting his *Habilitation* (or post–doctoral dissertation) in 1926. After a dispute with his supervisor in Frankfurt, Hans Cornelius, Adorno completed a study of Kierkegaard under Paul Tillich. It was published in March 1933, on the very day that Hitler came to power.

Adorno collaborated with a close circle of left-wing academics who were associated with the Institute of Social Research, an interdisciplinary collective of Marxist intellectuals in Frankfurt. The Institute brought together the disciplines of philosophy, sociology, psychology, economics and the study of culture, in order to determine how progressive politics might be nurtured within the Weimar Republic. After the war, as it grew in reputation, the Institute came to be known as the 'Frankfurt School'.[9] Adorno and his friend and colleague Max Horkheimer were the Institute's most prominent figures, along with other notable intellectuals including Herbert Marcuse, Friedrich Pollock and Erich Fromm.

Hitler's rise to power had immediate impact on Adorno and the Institute, as all of its members at the University immediately lost their jobs on political grounds. Adorno was able to secure a position at Oxford University as an advanced student until he and he wife Gretel were able to immigrate to New York in 1938, with the help of Max Horkheimer. There they sought to continue their work, eventually moving to Los Angeles during the war. In 1953, after considerable wavering, Adorno and Horkheimer agreed to return to Germany and take up professorships at the University of

Frankfurt. The Institute of Social Research was reconstituted, and became a prominent voice within West Germany during the period of reconstruction. After a lively career that would make him a household name within Germany, Adorno died of a heart attack on 6 August 1969.

A Brief Introduction to Adorno's Philosophy

Adorno is perhaps best known for three elements of his thought: the concept of the 'dialectic of Enlightenment', his project of a 'negative dialectics', and his frequently quoted remark that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. For the purpose of this introduction, it is useful to briefly summarize these aspects of his work, and attend to how misunderstandings of each have contributed to the view that Adorno's philosophy results in a pessimistic despair that seeks refuge in an otherworldly theological escape.

The manuscript *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was written collaboratively by Adorno and Horkheimer in 1944.[10] This complex text is famous for one of its primary arguments: the assertion that, in its attempt to grasp and understand nature in its entirety, Enlightenment reason forces its object into a rigid schema, and so ultimately fails to comprehend what it seeks to know. Because it is driven by fear of nature and myth, rationality continues to be shaped by nature and thus continuously dominates its object of inquiry rather than successfully understanding it. The 'dialectic' contained within the Enlightenment, then, is that it continuously transforms into its opposite. Reason turns itself into a self-generated myth: believing that it possesses perfect knowledge and pure objectivity.

Adorno's conception of the dialectic of Enlightenment is related to his commitment to what he calls 'negative dialectics'. If reason does indeed impose a false structure upon objects in the world, so that it is unable to grasp what does not comply with its artificial ordering, Adorno argues that a more adequate form of thought must become aware of its own dominating nature, and ruthlessly criticize itself. He calls the manner of reasoning that is blind to its own dominating impulse a form of 'identity thinking'.

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Negative dialectics strives to achieve a form of non-identity thinking. Although all thought, to even conceptualize something, must identify it in some way, non-identical thought remains conscious of this dilemma, and refuses to imagine that its present representation of an object is adequate to its reality. Adorno contrasts his approach with that of Hegel and Marx, for whom dialectical thought involved the weighing of opposing positions and contradictions with the goal of achieving an increasingly progressive conceptualization of truth. Distrustful of the notion of inevitable progress, Adorno insists that thought is never adequate to its object, and so truth can only be approached negatively – through the act of an ongoing immanent self-criticism.

A common accusation against Adorno and Horkheimer's description of the dialectic of Enlightenment is that their criticism of reason is so thorough that it effectively undermines the very idea of rationality itself. In the influential view of Habermas, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* embodies a 'performative contradiction' through its paradoxical criticism of reason on the basis of reason.[11] A similar interpretation leads Albrecht Wellmer to conclude that such an 'aporia' reduces Adorno's philosophy to a 'negative theology', with the result that his work conceives of human experience 'in ecstatic terms rather than as a real utopia; the happiness that it promises is not of this world'.[12]

Similar charges are made against Adorno's articulation of negative dialectics. Susan Buck-Morss asks, 'Did the perpetual motion of Adorno's argument go anywhere?'[13] Critics frequently accuse Adorno's work as collapsing into mere negativity, trapping his philosophy in a hopeless nihilism. Such a view suggests that Adorno's anti-foundationalism leaves him without any firm grounding upon which to confront existing social injustice, so that his work has no recourse but to invoke a longing for some otherworldly deliverance that might arrive from outside of history.

Those who read Adorno's philosophy in such a fashion frequently cite a third element of his thought as evidence to support this interpretation. Not long after returning to West Germany from his wartime exile, Adorno made the provocative statement that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.[14] In his writing, Auschwitz is not only a symbol of catastrophe for the Jewish people; it also represents a damning condemnation of modernity.

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Having himself narrowly escaped Hitler's Germany, he writes, 'Auschwitz confirmed the philosophy of pure identity as death'.[15] The Nazi 'Final Solution', Adorno insists, imposed a new categorical imperative on human beings: 'to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen'.[16] His work, therefore, views existence as 'damaged life', for he is convinced that 'our perspective on life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer'.[17]

It is from such a perspective that Adorno once suggested that poetry ought not to be written after Auschwitz. His intention was to alert his audience against the tendency to paper over the horrors of the Holocaust with simplistic and sentimental recourse to some hidden meaning or purpose behind the event. His slogan is meant to prevent any refuge in theodicy. Furthermore, after living in the United States, Adorno became highly sensitive to the power of advertising and marketing in shaping public opinion and political attitudes. He was concerned that practically any concept or image could be manipulated to serve the purposes of capitalistic ideology or to support egotistical self-satisfaction. In the dynamics of what he calls the 'culture industry', even a symbol as desolate as Auschwitz could be domesticated and used to pacify and console human beings or to assist in forgetting the horrific realities of human history.

Some critics, however, argue that Adorno's slogan against poetry is the clearest sign that his philosophy has thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Traumatized by the horrors of the Hitler era, it is suggested, Adorno refused to allow any possibility for hope or new life. For if there can be no poetry, does this not mean there is nothing left to celebrate or nurture? Such an attitude would be nihilism at its bleakest. Is it not, as some ask, a gloomy version of Gnosticism, which associates all of human history with the forces of evil, and locates the Good, if it exists at all, in some pure heavenly realm?[18] What this impression of Adorno neglects is the often unmentioned fact that he would later withdraw his provocative statement:

> I would readily concede that, just as I said that after
> Auschwitz one *could not* write poems . . . it could equally

well be said, on the other hand, that one *must* write
poems . . . [A]s long as there is an awareness of suffering
among human beings there must also be art as the
objective form of that awareness.[19]

What might the reader of Adorno's work make of this retraction,
and how does wrestling with this reversal relate to his interest in
theology?

Adorno's 'Inverse Theology'

This volume demonstrates that, far from representing a resigned
pessimism, some dark version of Gnosticism, or a desperate long-
ing for other-worldly salvation, Adorno's philosophy is motivated
by a deep and sustained commitment to confront the realities of
human suffering. His criticism of the traditions of the Enlighten-
ment is not motivated by a rejection of the Enlightenment, but
intends to rejuvenate it and defend its ideals. Behind Adorno's
relentless criticism and negative dialectics is an enduring and
determined search for a better world. What remains to be recog-
nized is the role that his concept of theology has in nurturing
this quest.

Robert Hullot-Kentor suggests that 'theology is always moving
right under the surface of all Adorno's writings' and 'penetrates
every word'.[20] This should not be misunderstood as support for
the view that, in the end, Adorno's critical theory represents a
despairing flight from reason into the comforting arms of some
mystical theological consolation. Adorno develops an 'inverse
theology', which probes 'the wounds which this order has and
which . . . it inflicts on us'. For Adorno, these 'wounds' are located
in the tensions and unresolved contradictions found in the present
social order. He argues that 'suffering is objectivity that weighs
upon the subject', and that the task of critical social theory is
to uncover and analyse this weight of objectivity.[21] Theological
discourse is an important object of study for Adorno because he
understands it to be an expression of these wounds and sufferings.
Furthermore, he argues that theology illuminates how thought
and experience constantly reach beyond the limits of the given

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moment. This is to say that, in theological discourse, Adorno observes experiences and expressions that challenge the dominance of the current social *actuality*, as religion both testifies to, and gives expression to, a concern for alternative social *possibilities*.

Adorno's concept of an 'inverse theology' does not engage in correlating present problems with theological themes, in a manner similar to the methodology proposed by the Christian theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich suggested that contemporary society presents the *questions* to theology and the Christian theological tradition is subsequently examined for *answers* to these questions.[22] Responses to such questions are shaped by Christianity, which might sometimes require some revision based on contemporary experience. Adorno's approach inverts the ordering of Tillich's theory of correlation. For him, theological concepts – such as the prohibition of images of the divine ('*Bilderverbot*'), redemption, justice, and the messianic – challenge and question society. It is then human beings, within their social situation, who are charged with constructing the answers to such questions. An 'inverse theology' is thus not a top-down imposition of idealist concepts; rather, the theological element in Adorno's work is employed to crack open existing life; to make room for new insights.

Perils and Clarifications

In addition to the considerable complexity of Adorno's thought, there are numerous perils that a book like this must guard against. The first is that of appropriating Adorno's fragmentary remarks on theology in order to turn him into a closet theologian. Over the course of this volume, illustrations of this tendency will be explored in some detail, but such analyses serve to make plain that Adorno is not a theologian. Any transcendence of existing social conditions is, for him, contained solely within material human history, and resourced solely by human agency. Adorno rejects positive theology, and he also criticizes negative theology. Instead, his deployment of theological concepts defends what he calls an 'inverse theology', which directs our attention, not into the heavens, but deep into the wounds and sufferings among human beings and within present social conditions.

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A second peril of a book like this is to fail to illustrate effectively the relevance Adorno's philosophy has for contemporary theology. Although Adorno is not a theologian, neither does he advocate an anti-theology. This volume demonstrates that his work resonates with numerous concerns and issues found in modern Christian theology, including the crisis theology of Karl Barth and Latin American Liberation Theology. Furthermore, it shows how Adorno's writing offers an invaluable critical resource for analysing trends in contemporary theology, including the contemporary interest in 'spirituality' and the use of rational choice theory to support strategies focused on church growth. Moreover, Adorno's debates with sociology and the philosophy of science offer provocative avenues for theology to explore as it wrestles with the other disciplines in the academy. While Adorno does not offer theology a positive foundation upon which to secure a systematic theology, his work offers a rich and fruitful critical lens through which theology can examine and scrutinize present trends within its own discipline.

A third danger to avoid when discussing Adorno's work is the temptation to present his philosophy as a 'system' or 'method'. Adorno insisted on the unsystematic nature of his project, and rejected constructing philosophical edifices upon foundational first principles. His preferred mode of writing was in the form of focused essays, not sustained organic tomes. Summarizing the complexity of his thought into thematic divisions necessarily overly simplifies and misrepresents his work; at the same time, presenting it in an intelligible and digested form is necessary to encourage others to read him. This book will, therefore, seek to establish a careful balance between clear exposition and faithful presentation of Adorno's work.

From Systems to Constellations

Adorno's preferred model for philosophical reflection was not the construction of systems, but immanent criticism of existing structures, as well as assembling together what he called 'changing constellations'. For Adorno, systematic philosophy (and, by extension, systematic theology) represents a form of identity thinking.

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A system's first loyalty is to the rules of logic and non-contradiction, rather than to the objects it intends to describe. It thus inevitably neglects or ignores that which does not conform to its requirements. As Adorno argues in his lecture 'The Actuality of Philosophy', philosophical reason is not sufficient to grasp the totality of the real. Rather, 'the text which philosophy has to read is incomplete, contradictory and fragmentary'.[23] Given this perspective, Adorno suggests that critical thought is left with two alternative strategies from that of system building. First, by criticizing existing systems on the basis of its own premises, an immanent critique helps to uncover hidden contradictions, assumptions, and 'unintentional reality' within present social existence. This serves to bring false assumptions into consciousness, and to foster awareness of the ways in which existing society influences thought. Adorno's second alternative to system building is drawn from the work of Walter Benjamin, who proposed that 'constellations' served as a useful model for dialectical reason, because, 'ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars'.[24] Concepts only proximate the reality they seek to articulate and describe, a fact that the rigid and precise structure of a system has a tendency to mask and forget. Adorno proposes, therefore, that philosophy gather objects and experiences 'into changing constellations' – or 'changing trial combinations' – in order to explore how they illuminate and contrast with each other.[25] This enables it to momentarily break reality open, if only to achieve momentary or partial insights.

Religion and Theology

Some clarification at this point is required to distinguish between the terms 'religion' and 'theology'. Within the academic study of religion, an intense debate rages over whether it is possible to define what is distinctly 'religious' about certain forms of subjective human experience, structures of discourse, or communal practices.[26] Across the vast differences among human beings and cultures, it is indeed astonishingly difficult (if not impossible) to identify a trans-cultural 'essence' within a universal genus of 'religion'. Adorno's use of the term 'religion' is generally in reference to what he took to be the two most prominent expressions

within Western Europe during his lifetime: Judaism and Christianity. This is, thus, how the term will be used in this book. Rather than suggesting a specific theoretical definition for religion, references to 'religion', 'religious experience', or 'religious practices' simply refer to the institutional existence of Jewish communities or Christian churches, or to the experiences and activities of individuals who are practising members of those communities.

The term 'theology' is less clearly delineated in Adorno's writing. More specific than the term 'religion,' the word generally refers to the theoretical discourse of a religious community. But it also has roots in the Western philosophical tradition, where it is more precisely defined as reasoning about God, or at least the ontological structures which give shape to existence. Adorno's usage of the term shifts between both of these elements of common meaning. Although he is often quite critical of the merits of theology as a theoretical discipline, Adorno does treat it as having a rational component. There is no question for Adorno that theology involves processes of reasoning, and, as such, is related to the general philosophical search for truth. Thus, in some instances, Adorno discusses theology in reference to the rational discussion about topics related to the concerns traditionally considered to be 'religious': the existence of God, the purpose and meaning of suffering, the nature of death and the possibility of immortality, etc. However, on other occasions, Adorno's deployment of the term draws on tradition-specific concepts that carry with them some particular content. In particular, he frequently employs specific concepts from the Jewish tradition, such as redemption, the messianic, and the *Bilderverbot* (prohibition on images of the divine).[27]

The Structure of the Book

The presentation of this volume develops according to the spirit of Adorno's approach to philosophy. It will not, therefore, seek to construct a precise and systematic analysis of Adorno's thought for the purposes of a philosophy of religion or a systematic theology. Nor will it seek to locate his work in the history of philosophy and thus identify all of his sources and influences. Instead, the book

brings Adorno's thought and some elements of Christian and Jewish theology into different constellations, in order to explore how they illuminate each other. Furthermore, some contemporary trends in Christian thought will be subjected to an immanent critique, in order to demonstrate how Adorno's writing offers a fruitful challenge to a number of problematic emphases. The primary intention is to offer an example of how Adorno's thought offers a distinct and engaging dialogue partner for theology, while demonstrating that his concept of an 'inverse theology' is at the core of the moral impulse that motivates his work.

The first chapter serves as a further introduction to Adorno's thought, highlighting in particular his understanding of the 'dialectic of Enlightenment'. The chief focus of the discussion is to provide some initial orientation to Adorno's philosophy, as well as to explore his nuanced understanding of 'materialism' by contrasting it with two prominent theological perspectives of the same.

Chapter 2 offers an analysis of the important influence of Immanuel Kant's philosophy on Adorno's work. The examination demonstrates how Adorno interprets Kant's 'block' against knowledge of things-in-themselves. To help clarify Adorno's approach, his treatment of this question is contrasted with that of the Christian theologian John Milbank. The key distinction that emerges is the distinct way in which Adorno conceives of possibility in relation to actuality.

Chapter 3 confronts a frequent charge against Adorno, which is that his work implies a subjectivist access to secret inner knowledge, which renders it an anti-scientific form of abstract Platonism. This accusation is discussed through an analysis of a debate that emerged between Adorno and the philosopher of science Karl Popper. What is particularly striking about this discussion is how both parties in the 'Positivist Dispute' label their opponent's work as being a 'crypto-theology.'

The fourth chapter serves as the heart of this volume, exploring directly Adorno's understanding of theology. This is developed in dialogue with other interpretations of Adorno's work, and particularly with attention to how Adorno's view emerges out of his conversations with Walter Benjamin, and his engagement with the literature of Franz Kafka. What is highlighted by the discussion is the central importance of the concept of the *Bilderverbot* for

understanding the description Adorno himself gives of his work: an 'inverse theology'.

Chapter 5 offers a consideration of the political implications of Adorno's thought. The challenges confronting Adorno's critical theory in this regard are illustrated with reference to his dispute with the German student movement in the 1960s. This is complemented by an analysis of his view of the relationship between theory and practice, as well as a discussion of Adorno's relationship to Liberation Theology. The chapter closes by highlighting the role that the concept of the 'messianic' has in his thought, which is illustrated by placing his approach in a constellation with that of Giorgio Agamben.

A prominent aspect of Adorno's social theory is his critique of the 'Culture Industry'. This is analysed in Chapter 6 and is contrasted with the concept of 'spirituality,' as well as with the prominence of rational choice theory in the contemporary study of religion. This engagement with Rodney Stark's work, along with an illustrative discussion of the film *A Beautiful Mind*, demonstrates how Adorno's critique of ideology relates to the study of religion and society, and opens up new possibilities to explore about the relationship between theology and social science.

Chapter 7 brings this study to a close with some attention to Adorno's aesthetic theory, particularly through an analysis of his philosophy of music and his concern with the question of whether poetry can be written after Auschwitz. Adorno's efforts to 'think with the ears' is linked to his view of prayer as 'attention', and some of his fragmentary aphorisms on the nature of love are explored to help connect his aesthetic insights with a more inter-relational approach to theology. These elements of his thought are explored in relation to different theological interpretations of his work, and particularly through his appreciation of the poetry of Paul Celan.

Throughout the book, Adorno's inverse theology is shown to be rooted in reason and critical thought. It refers to a utopian vision that is attentive to the possibilities for society which remain unrealized, and is deployed to criticize existing life on that basis. In the quest to transcend the bonds that dominate the subject, and in the search to uncover the causes of suffering, Adorno argues that one achieves a glimpse of freedom, along with a trace of

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