Jürgen Habermas

Religion and Rationality

Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity

Edited and with an Introduction by

Eduardo Mendieta

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Introduction

The question of religion is once again at the forefront of critical thought precisely because it crystallizes some of the most serious and pressing questions of contemporary social thought: the relationship between social structure and rationality; between reason as a universal standard and the inescapable fact that reason is embodied only historically and in contingent social practices; that reason as universality was, if not discovered, at least enunciated as a teleological standard by religions;[1] that in an age of secularization and scienticization, religion remains a major factor in the moral education and motivation of individuals uprooted from other traditions; and at the very least, in an age of accelerating homogenization and simultaneous manufacturing of difference, what sociologists of globalization have called *glocalization*, religions are articulated as the last refuge of unadulterated difference, the last reservoir of cultural autonomy.

Jürgen Habermas' work over the last four decades intersects sometimes directly and explicitly, sometimes tangentially and suggestively, with many of these questions. The impetus is to make explicit what to many is implicit and unthematized. The goal, thus, is to foreground those resources in Habermas' immense intellectual contribution that may aid a critical confrontation with the new intellectual and social challenges that are entailed by new forms of obscurantism, fundamentalism, anarchical mysticism, religious irrationalism, and the like. Most importantly, this collection should make evident how those resources in Habermas' work were forged from the very sources and traditions that have shaped the identity and structure of Western

societies. Habermas' "methodological atheism" is not a rejection but a response to and a dialectical sublation of the Jewish-Christian tradition that suffuses so pervasively the work of all of his precursors.

Another goal of this collection is to make explicit, if the question was ever posed, how Habermas' work inherited, appropriating and transforming it, the critical tradition of Jewish utopian messianism of the early Frankfurt School. In what follows, therefore, I turn to a brief and broad characterization of this Jewish messianic utopianism. I then proceed to reconstruct the main elements and strains of Habermas' treatment of religion. The central thesis of this later section is that Habermas' treatment is not correctly characterized by the image of a temporal rupture between an early positive and a later negative appraisal of the role of religion. Instead, textual evidence will be elicited that suggests an ever present appreciation of religion that fluctuates with the angle of approach, or lens of analysis. In other words, it will be suggested that Habermas' statements, whether positive or negative, are determined by whether he is broaching the question from a philosophical and critical perspective, or from a sociological, political, and legal perspective.

Religion as Critique

Albert Schweitzer began his classic work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, with the statement, "When, at some future day, our period of civilization shall lie, closed and completed, before the eyes of later generations, German theology will stand out as a great, a unique phenomenon in the mental and spiritual life of our time."[2] He wrote this shortly after the turn of the century, in 1906. In parallel, today, as we look back over the century of extremes, as Hobsbawm called the twentieth century, we may claim that Jewish thought will stand out as a unique social and intellectual phenomenon. The secular, apocalyptic, utopian and pessimistic messianism of the Jewish thinkers of the generation of 1914 crystallized some of the most painful lessons of the age of mass extermination and mass culture. After Auschwitz, as Adorno put it, "[a] new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen."[3]

Nonetheless, following Michael Löwy, we should seek to be less evocative and more precise.[4] It was the Central European Jews who were able to achieve the most creative and lasting synthesis and transformation, of both Judaism and Christianity, in the twentieth century. But we would have to go beyond Löwy, and suggest that the height of this creative upsurge was best embodied in the work of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, in the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm and Leo Lowenthal, to extend legitimately Gershom Scholem's list.[5] Their work, it should be noted, was deeply influenced and guided by the work of Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, and also Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber.[6]

This creative furor during the first decades of the twentieth century, which has been called the Jewish generation of 1914, in Germany in particular, and in Frankfurt and Berlin even more specifically, could be analyzed sociologically.[7] Jewish assimilation had reached its zenith in Germany at the very moment when industrialization, urbanization, and secularization had reach their most extreme levels of acceleration. The German-Jewish question had found its answer in the dissolution of the Jewish into the German without residue or trace. Simultaneously, a young generation of secular and assimilated Jewish intellectuals began to discover and make explicit this one-sided assimilation. They found themselves to be both pariahs and unwanted, marginalized and excluded, as Jews. Despite their confession of Germanness, they remained suspect: once a Jew, always a Jew. Assimilation is unmasked as a pyrrhic victory, as an asymmetrical and non-reciprocal immersion into a polis and culture that still resents their identity, as dispossession and abandonment of a tradition that at least offered a cultural and moral compass. At this very moment, the promise of modernity turns into a malaise: alienation, reification, rootlessness, superficiality, crassness, qualitative leveling for the sake of quantitative maximization, i.e. massification, and so on. It is thus that a romantic critique of capitalism, and modern society in general, begins to be enunciated. This anti-capitalist romanticism, to use Lukács' apt expression, does not fit the traditional taxonomy of responses to modernization: left, centrist, or conservative. It is not easy to associate a particular political attitude with a particular philosophical and epistemological perspective. Elements of so-called conservative ontology and metaphysics are deployed with the intent of enunciating a radical and

leftist critique of capitalism. Mostly committed to the values of the Enlightenment, which had catalyzed their incomplete assimilation, and set adrift from their traditions by centuries of secularization, de-assimilation, and religious amnesia,[8] Jewish intellectuals were poised in a unique social position from which they could seek to salvage and refashion their religious traditions while at the same time trying to save the best of the Enlightenment from the corrosive effects of capitalism. It was out of this dialectical tension that a unique type of Jewish messianism was articulated by Central European Jews, and Frankfurt assimilated Jews in particular.[9]

Philosophically, and conceptually, the Jewish messianism of these Central European and German Jews could be said to be composed of four elements, always present with varying degrees of emphasis in different thinkers. Following Anson Rabinbach, we can differentiate them in the following way. First, this Jewish messianism is profoundly characterized by a restorative element. This has to do with anamnesis as a fundamental aspect of rationality. In contrast to the idea of the restitution of an Arcadian past, or golden age, this messianism seeks to restore by way of an apocalyptic re-enactment. Second, this messianism is utopian in that it projects a new age that is not brought about by the progressive accumulation of improvements, through a quantitative meliorism. This utopianism is unlike Enlightenment utopianism, which sees the future as the mere actualization of the present. Instead, the truly utopian is to be seen as an irruption into the historical continuum by a trans-historical agent. With Benjamin, we may say that progress is catastrophe, and utopia is ahistorical. The third element, already alluded to, is the apocalyptic dimension of this messianism. The restoration of wholeness, *Tikkun*, and the irruption of utopia, two aspects of one and the same process, are only conceivable as a radical discontinuity with the present. The past, as the past of injustice, is not to be superficially reconciled in the present, and the future is not imaginable from the present, lest it become a mere mirror image of what that present can alone think and project. Radical reconciliation and utopia are only possible on the assumption of temporal discontinuity. Fourth, and finally, the restorative, utopian, and apocalyptic elements converge in the ambivalent image of messianism. This messianism, most importantly, is not personalizable. It is not the waiting or announcement of a messiah, but the call and discernment of the messianic forces and elements that, like fragments of utopia, break into the continuum of history. To this extent,

this messianism is a priori undecidable, indeterminate. In other words, this messianism, which rejects the present and the possibility of meliorative progress, is ambiguously pessimistic and passive, but also wildly expectant and vigilant. Expectation, readiness, wakefulness, but also profound passivity, humility, and patience – these are the extremes between which the Jewish messianism of these turn-of-the-century Jewish pariahs wavered.[10]

A careful reading of the work produced by the members of the Institute for Social Research, as well as the people attached to it, reveal a sustained and in-depth concern with questions of religion, theology, the sociology of religion, theological metaphysics, and the history of religious ideas.[11] Max Horkheimer himself contributed a series of essays in which the theme of religion is substantive if not central.[12] Yet it must also be acknowledged that a study of the particular critique of religion developed by the first generation of the Frankfurt School has remained unexecuted, because of the trans-disciplinary, or adisciplinary, character of such a critique.[13] In other words, the work of the early Frankfurt School on religion has remained elusive because of the difficulty of placing it within the traditional disciplinary boundaries we associate with the study of religion. Their work did not fall within the category of the study of religions, sociology of religion, or even philosophy of religion. Nor could it have been assimilated to theology, notwithstanding repeated accusations that Critical Theory was really masked theology.[14] What makes the contributions of members of the early Frankfurt School, like the early Fromm, Marcuse, even Lowenthal, Horkheimer, and Adorno, so unique is precisely the way they developed a *sui generis* approach to the question of religion. For them, the issue of religion had to be approached philosophically, historically, sociologically, psychologically, even from the standpoint of metaphysics and ontology. The point, in fact, was to rescue from theology and religion that which is in danger of being extinguished and desecrated by their attempt to render positive that which can only be ciphered negatively.[15] As Horkheimer put it in a letter that became the foreword to Martin Jay's history of the Frankfurt School, "The appeal to an entirely other [*ein ganz Anderes*] than this world had primarily a social-philosophical impetus. It led finally to a more positive evaluation of certain metaphysical trends, because the empirical 'whole is the untrue' (Adorno). The hope that earthly horror does not possess the last word is, to be sure, a non-scientific wish."[16]

In order to further characterize the unique aspects of this critique of religion, and given our purposes in this introduction, it should suffice to focus on Max Horkheimer's and Theodor Adorno's relationship to the previously demarcated Jewish messianism. Evidently, in their religious atheistic, to use an expression of Lukács,[17] or non-secular secularist, to use an expression of Scholem,[18] response to their Jewishness and the challenges of modernity, as well as to the crisis of Marxism in the early decades of the twentieth century, we find developed and summarized the critiques of religion which are exhibited in their two most extreme forms in the works of the key figures of Ernst Bloch and, of course, Walter Benjamin. The former stands for the utopian and forward-looking while the latter stands for the redemptive and anamnestic. Although both remained institutionally peripheral to the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research, they remained central to the intellectual constellation that configured that unique cultural phenomenon called Frankfurt School Critical Theory.[19]

It must be made clear from the outset that Max Horkheimer's work was marked by a continued and unwavering interest in religion.[20] From his earliest aphorisms, to his last writings, interviews, and obituaries, there is an ever present confrontation, treatment, and concern with the question of the role of religion in contemporary societies.[21] The best-known example of this preoccupation with the so-called demise of religion, i.e. the secularization thesis, is to be found in Horkheimer's essay written for a *Festschrift* for Adorno, "Theism and Atheism." In this essay we find the statement which became the focus as well as the title of one of the essays by Habermas included in this book. The statement reads:

> Without God one will try in vain to preserve absolute meaning. No matter how independent a given form of expression may be within its own sphere as in art or religion, and no matter how distinct and how necessary in itself, with the belief in God it will have to surrender all to being objectively something higher than a practical convenience . . . The death of God is also the death of eternal truth.[22]

The other statement comes from an interview Horkheimer granted in 1967 on the occasion of Paul Tillich's death: "I believe that there is no philosophy to which I could assent which did not contain a theological moment, for it relates indeed to the recognition of how

much the world in which we live is to be interpreted as relative."[23] Evidently, there are numerous analogous statements. A wonderful collection of aphorisms by Horkheimer on the need for the totally other, the entirely other, as a social, anthropological, and even metaphysical need could be easily edited.[24]

These, and many, many more assertions, however, are marked by two central motifs. First, that religion retains an ineradicable philosophical and conceptual importance, without which criticism of actuality and society is unthinkable. And, second, that insofar as religion means belief in an absolutely transcendent God who hovers above history as ultimate judge, then the promise of justice and hope that is not exhausted by any social institution is kept alive. Indeed, as he suggests at the end of his essay "Theism and Atheism," our relationship to religion remains an index of resistance. In times of atheism and the glorification of terrestrial powers, theism becomes an act of defiance and nonconformism, of not going along with the powers that be. In times of theism, when again the powers that be are legitimated with reference to some projection of the divine, atheism becomes an act of resistance, precisely in the name of that which must always remain unrepresented. The Jewish ban on the representation, even in writing, of the holy one is in Horkheimer's view not only a theologumenon, but even a fundamental concept of the dialectic. That we cannot say anything absolutely about God is assimilated into one of Critical Theory's foundational presuppositions: that the absolute is unrepresentable.[25] In Adorno's words, it is not that we have the identity of the identical and the non-identical, but the non-identity of the identical and the non-identical. A thought that would claim to present the totality as representable in any form whatsoever would have already succumbed to the logic of identity thinking. But, as Horkheimer notes, the rejection of the possibility of the representation of the absolute is to be preserved for the sake of the individual, the singular, that which has suffered the ignominy of a history that has been lived hitherto as catastrophe. In Horkheimer's work, then, the yearning for a wholly other is a figure of thought that seeks to preserve the "longing that unites all men so that the horrible events, the injustice of history so far would not be permitted to the final, ultimate fate of the victims."[26]

In Adorno's case, his work is so permeated by the apocalyptic, utopian, Jewish messianism that some have thrown at it the accusation that it is no more than negative theology, a form of medieval

mystical irrationalism.[27] Here what Benjamin says about his work's relationship to theology might also be said of Adorno's parallel relationship to theology: "My thinking is related to theology as a blotting pad is related to ink. It is saturated with it. Were one to go by the blotter, however, nothing of what is written would remain."[28] Indeed, as Adorno himself wrote to Benjamin in 1935, "A restoration of theology, or better still, a radicalization dialectic introduced into the glowing heart of theology, would simultaneously require the utmost intensification of the social-dialectical, and indeed, economic motifs."[29] It is in the light of this double, dialectical strategy that we must read Adorno's critique of religion.

One may venture the assertion that Adorno's works are not just an attempt to do exactly what he calls us to do at the end of *Minima Moralia*, namely to think from the standpoint of redemption, but further, to exalt the theological content of thought to its extreme. But to do so means to do it negatively: Preservation by negation, refusing to accept the assimilation of the singular into the concept, without relinquishing the means of the concept. The other, as the irreplaceable and unrepresentable singularity, can only be referred to indirectly and through the deciphering of the traces of violence inflicted on the other, the individual, by the concept itself. This is why negative dialectics is a synthesis of a phenomenology of existence that grants us the view from immanence with the dialectics of concepts that traces their genesis by way of determinate negation: how they emerged from a specific societal context. This means, specifically with reference to religion, that that which dwells in the religious can only be rescued and transmitted by way of the critique of the concepts and theologumenon in which it has been preserved. As he put it in his essay "Reason and Revelation": "If religion is accepted for the sake of something other than its own truth content, then it undermines itself."[30] In Adorno's view, we can no more unhinge critical thought from metaphysics, albeit transformed, than we can uncouple metaphysics from theology.[31]

Adorno, like Benjamin and Bloch, practiced the art of philosophizing by way of apothegms, verbal diamonds of refracted wisdom. Here, however, I will not succumb to the temptation to concatenate citation after citation. I will merely gloss over a few.[32] In *Negative Dialectics*, for instance, he writes:

> Anyone who would nail down transcendence can rightly be charged – as by Karl Kraus, for instance – with lack of imagination, anti-intellectualism, and thus a betrayal of transcendence. On the other hand, if the possibility, however feeble and distant, of redemption in existence is cut off altogether, the human spirit would become an illusion, and the finite, conditioned, merely existing subject would eventually be deified as carrier of the spirit.[33]

Transcendence, as the wholly other, the numinous and divine, but also as the element of unconditionality in every human being, is neither to be shabbily represented nor to be skeptically disposed of. Metaphysics, and theology as its precursor, had the intention of capturing this reference to the other by way of the immanent in life and history, while being aware that such attempts were always being put in jeopardy. Thus, the critique of metaphysics is itself an instantiation of the metaphysical impulse to point to the transcendent. As Adorno continues in the same section from the *Negative Dialectics*:

> The idea of truth is supreme among the metaphysical ideas, and this is where it takes us. It is why one who believes in God cannot believe in God, why the possibility represented by the divine name is maintained, rather, by him who does not believe. Once upon a time the image ban extended to pronouncing the name; now the ban itself has in that form come to evoke suspicions of superstition. The ban has been exacerbated: the mere thought of hope is a transgression against it, an act of working against it.[34]

These words echo the sentences that close his already cited essay "Reason and Revelation": "I see no other possibility than an extreme ascesis toward any type of revealed faith, an extreme loyalty to the prohibition of images, far beyond what this once originally meant."[35] We must reject hope for the sake of that which it pointed to, namely truth, but truth as the unconditional that renders everything intramundane something relative and contingent, as Horkheimer put it.

We have to wonder whether in fact Adorno meant to reject hoping, *toto caelo*. After all, he had written earlier in *Minima Moralia*: "In the end hope, wrested from reality by negating it, is the only form in which truth appears. Without hope, the idea of truth would be scarcely even thinkable, and it is the cardinal untruth, having