**On Horkheimer, Religion, and the Normative Grounds of Critical Theology**

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Abstract

This essay examines how the legacy of Marx's emancipatory commitments continues to be intertwined with his critique of religion. This is illustrated with reference to Raymond Geuss's claim that Marxism's political failure is related its lack of an adequate moral theory, a view that leads him to suggest that Marxism needs to function more like a "pseudo-religion." These issues are analysed by drawing from Max Horkheimer's writing on Christianity, which imply that materialist critical theory will be resourced by attention to particular historical expressions of religion. The paper argues that such an approach requires a distinction between two strands of Marx's critique of religion – an "eliminationist" and a "descriptive functionalist" perspective – and involves privileging the second strand over the first. The implication is not that religion resolves the question of the ground of Marxism's normative critique; rather, what is advanced is view that the critical theory can be supported and resourced by a critique of the "religion of everyday life."

In a recent assessment of Marxism in the twentieth century, Raymond Geuss (2014, 46) offers a curious aside. He raises the often-repeated accusation that Marxism can be described as a "pseudo-religion," but rather than challenge such a view, he instead laments that Marxism in fact failed to achieve such status. This striking remark by a materialist atheist philosopher is notable for two reasons: First, because Geuss's offers this assessment in response to the ongoing debate within contemporary critical theory over the relationship between the normative dimension of the Marxian tradition and its scientific empirical dimension; second, due to the way in which Geuss links this debate to the question of the Marxian critique of religion.

Geuss argues that Marxism's political failure is related its lack of an adequate moral theory, in the sense that it fails to establish a universal foundation or ground for its ethical critique of capitalism. As Guess understands it, this leaves Marxism unable to confront Nietzsche's critique of universal morality, or ground itself in some account of a trans-subjective authority. While he admits that the notion of a "trans-subjective authority" is

problematic, Geuss nevertheless suggests that some such universal perspective is required to "effectively structure the basic functions of society around itself, endowing it with meaning" and issuing "recommendations that stick" (p. 46). Without a vision and over-arching goal that exceeds the cycle of need-production-consumption, Geuss continues, Marx's "productivist" tendencies (his propensity to view power as an end-in-itself) undermine his concern to criticise ideological "false need" (p. 59). Geuss argues that Marx's failure to provide an account that clarifies whether or not a need is false is due to the latter's view that establishing such a distinction between true and false needs would require a return to some form of religious belief (see also: Heller 1976; Fraser 1998).

These remarks illustrate how the legacy of Marxian critical theory's emancipatory commitments often continues to be intertwined with Marx's critique of religion. In an account such as that offered by Geuss, the quest for some normative ground for the moral and political commitments of Western Marxism presses on debates over the dangers of ideological mysticism, metaphysics, as well as the temptation to substitute empirical science with the evocation of moral values.[1] This problematic emerges in Geuss's own response to the issues he describes in Marx. After having highlighted the question of the moral ground of Marx's theoretical framework, Geuss appears at a loss to suggest any clear resolution to the issue he describes. He concludes his essay with a vague appeal for "some conception of collective self-identity" (Geuss 2014, 66), which he suggests can only be conceived along the lines of Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God. The possibility of a coherent moral vision for emancipatory politics, Geuss says, can only be compared to what medieval Christians "had in mind when they considered the possibility that the fool might say in his heart that there is no God." Such an appeal is not only vulnerable to Marx's critique of utopian socialism; it is also open to the rebuttal offered by Anselm's contemporary, Gaunilo

[1] For accounts of such debates over the normative ground of Western Marxism see: Cannon, 2001; Devenney, 2004.

de Marmoutiers, who dismissed the former's ontological argument by noting that, if it is to effectively prove God's existence, it would also have to prove the existence of all other perfect things, including islands, women, or unicorns (Gaunilo, 1962).

The complex puzzle with which Geuss wrestles illustrates the poignancy of Alasdair MacIntyre's criticism of Marx, when he argued that, whenever Marxists take explicit moral stances, they fall back on either Kant or utilitarianism (MacIntyre 1985, 161-2). This essay picks up the problem with which Geuss wrestles and the way in which it highlights an overlap between the ambiguous nature of Marx's treatment of morality and the difficulties inherent to his critique of religion. The discussion first identifies reasons to revisit Marx's critique of religion: the persistent presence of religion in many societies across the globe and an ongoing debate over the relationship between emancipatory critique and some form of normative moral foundation. After identifying and overlap between the debate over morality in Marxism and the critique of religion, an engagement with the critical theory of Max Horkheimer demonstrates how there exists two distinct strands in Marx's writings on religion: a 'eliminationist' account that presumes religion as such is "false consciousness" and will inevitably disappear, and a less dismissive 'functionalist' account that focuses on a materialist analysis of particular religious communities in their historical location.

These differing features of Marx's critique of religion are brought into view by revisiting Horkheimer's writing on Christianity. The discussion examines Horkheimer's interest in the significance of the "idea of God" for materialist thinking, and suggests that, rather than presume that all expressions of theology are "false consciousness," such expressions can be reconceived as a site of class struggle, like other forms of human cultural production. The paper concludes by briefly illustrating how Horkheimer's perspective illuminates Geuss's curious remarks about Marxism as a "pseudo-religion." To begin,

however, the essay turns first to issues that encourage such a revisiting of Marx's critique of religion.

## I. Marxism and the 'Return of Religion': the problem of moral motivation

One current challenge confronting Marx's theory of religion is the fact that, contrary to Marx's apparent expectation, religion shows little sign of disappearing any time soon. As Marx wrote in a letter to Arnold Ruge, "religion in itself is without content, it owes its being not to heaven but to the earth, and with the abolition of distorted reality, of which it is the theory, it will collapse of itself" (quoted in Breckman 1999, 278). He argued similarly in an interview with the *Chicago Tribune*: "as Socialism grows, religion will disappear" (Marx & Engels 1991, 576). If the failure of Marx's prediction of the collapse of capitalism has brought his political analysis into question, what is one to make of his critique of religion in the face of the persistence of religion in the twenty first century?

One obvious Marxian explanation on offer is to conclude that unjust social conditions persist, and thus religion, as the "expression of real suffering" (Marx & Engels 1844/1974, 3), necessarily continues as the "heart of a heartless world." Yet the sociological discussion of the 'return of religion', which has been popularised over the course of the last two decades, has problematized such a sweeping generalization (McCaffrey 2009). This revived scholarly interest in religion has largely been in reaction to two phenomena: the surprising vitality of neo-Pentecostalism, Islam, and new religious movements, as well as the threat of religiously-motivated terrorism. Such sociological and political concerns have led many to reconsider the assumption that modern societies are witnessing an inevitable process of religious decline. Some scholars go so far as to argue that the ongoing vitality of religion in many regions of the globe represents a decisive rebuttal of Marx's theory of religion (Miller/Yamamori 2007, 12). In response to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, for example, Michel Foucault concluded

that the event demonstrated that religion was no longer "the opium of the people" (Foucault 1979/ 2005, 187), but rather a significant form of counter-hegemonic political mobilization.

The fact that religious communities have often been "deprivatized" and become engaged in political action in recent decades (Casanova 1994), however, does not necessarily challenge Marx's basic theory of religion, at least insofar as the sociological phenomenon remains to be fully explained. Nor do these recent observations about "public religion" fully resolve the debate over the accuracy of the secularization thesis (Bruce 2002; Davie 2015), or decisively falsify Marx's prediction of the gradual disappearance of religion. Yet such phenomena are sufficient reason to return to the study of religion with greater attention, and to engage in concrete analysis of particular religious communities and concepts in ways that advance beyond the sweeping generalizations Marx offers about "religion" as such. For the generic concept of "religion" is increasingly recognised to be problematic, out of recognition of the very distinctiveness of the different historical religions, and how different social contexts given rise to different expressions of particular religions (Asad 1993; Masuzawa 2005). The Marxian critique of religions thus needs to attend in a deeper and more sustained manner to the concrete nature of distinct religious communities than it often the case.

Although there remains very little evidence of any kind of religious revival in Europe at the sociological level (apart from rising concerns over the social integration of immigrant communities), it is notable that in recent years religion has nevertheless become the focus of significant philosophical discussion. In response emerging anxiety over cultural uncertainty and contingency among citizens of the Global North, which has emerged in response to processes of bureaucratisation, migration and mobility, globalization, and de-traditionalization, a number of European intellectuals, worried about what they interpret as a decline in moral commitments and political engagement among European citizens, have begun exploring the extent to which religion presents a potential resource for re-invigorating

moral and political agency. This version of a return to religion is curious for the way in which self-declared atheist intellectuals ambivalently engage in a non-religious recovery of religion. It takes many forms: from Giorgio Agamben's (2000/2006) deployment of the Apostle Paul's conception of identity to render the law and its power over 'bare life' inoperative, to Slavoj Žižek's (2001) interest in 'belief' as a "Pascalian wager" that makes possible a radical "ethical Act, or his interpretation of the crucifixion of Christ as illuminating that there is no "big Other" (2009).

This interest in elements of religious tradition is fuelled by a concern to identify cultural resources that support human agency, moral imagination, and political engagement, in the face of intellectual and social challenges resulting from the expanding scope of global capitalism, multicultural urban societies, the reflexivity of deconstruction and psychoanalytic theory, and the epistemological challenges presented by biotechnology and cognitive science. The perception of a growing political apathy among middle-class citizens in the societies of the Global North, as well as the loss of shared universal moral and cultural reference points, motivates such philosophers to return to an analysis of religion in search of a motivational logic or moral impulse that might resource contemporary social and political engagement and understanding. The reflection offered by Geuss on the legacy of Marxism that began this essay is but another example of such theoretical wrestling.

This renewed attention to religion is perhaps most clearly illustrated with reference to the work of Jürgen Habermas. Although he remains clearly within the orbit of a methodological atheism, Habermas's later work grants considerable attention to religion as a social and cultural phenomenon. He suggests that religious communities contain elements of meaning that remain beyond the reach of philosophical reasoning, which have "been lost elsewhere and that cannot be restored by the professional knowledge of experts alone" (Habermas/Ratzinger 2006, 43-44). This is noteworthy because, in Habermas' earlier work,

he expresses little positive interest in religion. He describes the task of modern moral philosophy, as well as democratic politics, as a process he calls the "linguistification of the sacred" (Habermas 1981/1984, 77). Experiences that currently surpass human understanding, he argues, ought not to be assumed to be beyond the scope of rationality. At this stage of his career, religion is largely treated as a form of pathology or primitive thinking. Here his position would align with the strand of Marx's theory of religion that conceives of it in terms of "false consciousness."

In more recent texts, however, Habermas (albeit for the rather un-Marxian concern of reinforcing the liberal democratic state) has become preoccupied by the worry that many religious citizens increasingly express a sense of marginalization and are not being effectively integrated into democratic norms and values. He argues that, by marginalizing religious citizens, the liberal state ''cannot be sure that secular society would not otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity'' (2005/2008, 131). Commenting on the loss of what he understands to be the religious roots of Western socialism, Habermas continues, ''It is a question whether we can still expect these kinds of social movements, which I think are necessary to shift our basic value system, whether these sorts of social movements will work without religious motivations. I'm not sure about it, but I have my doubts'' (2011). Such remarks suggest that Habermas has come to conceive of the moral vision encouraged within religious communities as offering something to emancipatory social movements that other cultural resources increasingly appear to lack.

Critics of this shift in Habermas' work aside (McCarthy, 2013; Bernstein, 2013), what is noteworthy here is the way in which Habermas provides yet another example of a turn to religion as a way to try to resolve pressing issues in his thought. In similar fashion to the assessment offered by Geuss in his essay on Marxism, Habermas suggests that critical theory lacks a sufficiently resilient foundation for moral motivation. Moreover, it is intriguing to

observe how this ambivalent reference to religion resonates with other debates over the status of morality in the Marxian tradition. In such deliberations, in similar fashion to the example of Habermas, the issue revolves around the question of the normative foundation of emancipatory critique. Once again, in these debates, the difficulty of clearly establishing such a moral foundation has curiously led to comparisons of Marxism with religion.

## II. Marx and the Foundations of Morality

Jeffrey Reiman (1991, 144) summarises the basic moral question at the heart of Marx's philosophy as follows: "Does Marxism condemn capitalism because of a moral principle … [such as justice] or does the condemnation simply reflect concern for the self-interest of the workers?' The issue, of course, is that, if it is the former, then what precisely is this moral principle and how does Marx account for it? If it is the latter, then what distinguishes Marxism from the mere pursuit of personal self-interest on the part of working-class people? Insofar as Marxism appeals to a certain practice (as opposed to the achievement of a certain understanding), many interpreters highlight how this agenda implies some sort of normative moral perspective (Blackledge 2012; Peffer 1990). If that is indeed the case, then the question arises: what is the basis of this moral perspective?

Two main streams of interpretation of Marx on this issue present themselves. The first argues that his position denies the validity of anything resembling a universal moral principle, on the grounds that morality is rooted in the existing economic social conditions. Recent proponents of this reading, however, conclude that this implies that Marx's emancipatory philosophy is grounded on nothing more that self-serving decisionism. G.A. Cohen, for example, has accused Marx of an "obstetric" conception of political practice, which eschews ideals and is content merely to pursue the course of history (Cohen 2000, 43). Cohen

concludes from this that, given the way in which a number of Marx's predictions have been falsified by recent human history, the only option to repair his refuted position is to embrace what Marx would have considered to be "utopian socialism."

The difficulty here lies in deciphering Marx's view of moral theory. For Marx himself did indeed make statements which would seem to abandon the concept of a moral principle altogether: "The Communists do not preach morality at all" (Marx/Engels 1976, 247). Marx and Engels rejected the arguments of those who urged the adoption of socialism on the grounds that it was morally superior to capitalism. Such socialists, in Marx's view, were merely "utopian" due to their faith in abstract "principles," and fell far short of a "scientific" position, which intended to demonstrate the necessity of socialism as the inevitable outcome of tendencies within capitalism itself. Reiman (1991) highlights, however, how such an interpretation of Marx's position risks undermining moral agency and motivation. For if communism is destined to inevitably replace capitalism, then why would the commitment and sacrifice of particular human beings be required to accomplish this goal? A stringently deterministic reading of Marx, in other words, would seem to make the call for emancipatory praxis redundant.

In a second stream of interpretation of Marx's treatment of morality, therefore, a number of scholars argue that, despite a tendency to offer sweeping dismissals of ethical principles, Marx's position actually implies some clear moral commitments. Indeed, such readings of Marx suggest that moral commitment is one of the conditions of possibility for the Marxian drive to achieve human emancipation. On this point, David Harvey (2005) offers a view similar to that of Reiman, emphasising that although current socioeconomic developments support Marx's basic critique of the problems inherent to capitalism, at the same time these very developments also erode the collective agency that Marx thought would

spark capitalism's demise. Harvey highlights how this problem is precisely why Marx resisted talk of moral principles:

> the neoliberal insistence upon the individual as the foundational element in political-economic life opens the door to individual rights activism . . . by focusing on these rights rather than on the creation or recreation of substantive and open democratic governance structures, the opposition cultivates methods that cannot escape the neoliberal framework (2005, 176).

This is to say that the concepts of individual dignity and autonomy, which underwrite the call to respect human rights in response to economic oppression, are themselves made possible by the very economic structures that are being protested against. Despite this analysis, however, Harvey also suggests that it is next to impossible to challenge the fragmentation wrought by neoliberalism without reference to some sort of concept like universal justice. Thus the debate over how to solve the puzzle of the ground of Marxian emancipatory critique has continued to trouble interpreters of Marx.

For some, the moral foundation of Marx's position has proven so elusive that they are led to describe Marxism as a "pseudo-religion." Robert Tucker (1961) offers such a reading of Marx's early work based on parallels he discerns between it and Christianity, particularly for the way in which both offer narratives of salvation and redemption. Joseph Schumpeter (1947/2006) equates Marxism with religion on the grounds that the former offers a "system of ultimate ends that embody the meaning of life and are absolute standards" (p.5). While resisting such interpretations for being overly simplistic, David McClelland (1987) suggests that Marxism "obviously contains the idea that history has a purpose that is being relentlessly worked out" (p.161), and concludes that this "eschatological dimension … has strong religious roots." Geuss thus stands in a long line of scholars who have concluded that the

moral foundations of Marx's emancipatory theory share at least some resonance with those of religious traditions like Judaism or Christianity.

Of course, many Marxian moral philosophers disagree with such an association. Paul Blackledge, for instance, challenges what he calls the perceived "moral deficit" in Marx by arguing that the latter cannot be described as either a nihilist or a moralist. Instead, Blackledge suggests that Marx's materialism surpassed both of these outlooks, while also providing a basis for individual agency. This is achieved on the basis of Marxism's standpoint in support of the "social humanity" that is evidenced by collective working-class struggles against alienation (2012, 195). Marxism presupposes, Blackledge continues, the struggle of working classes against exploitation, and it "wagers" that these struggles can be unified into a force capable of overthrowing capitalism. On this basis, he argues that Marxism is thus grounded on an "ethic of freedom." Key to his position, however, is an emphasis not on some abstract principle of individual freedom (which, as Harvey has shown, is powerfully reinforced by neoliberalism individualism), but on the rootedness of Marx's position in the concrete struggles of the contemporary worker's movement:

> Marx's politics is best understood, therefore, not crudely in opposition to morality but as an expression of a practice that overcomes the opposition between materialism and idealism. Working-class solidarity points to a need and desire for association through which social duty, initially as class solidarity and eventually as human solidarity, can cease to be an abstract moral imperative (p. 198).

This is a compelling interpretation of Marx's own position; yet, left at that, it would seem to offer little by way of a response to the recent concerns raised by scholars such as those mentioned above, regarding the seeming decline of the moral motivation and political engagement among the general population of many societies. The drive towards the class solidarity evoked by Blackridge to ground Marx's moral stance - not to mention the even

more elusive goal of general human solidarity – seems even more elusive now than it was in the nineteenth century. One might well ask, therefore, whether Blackledge's "wager" on the future unity of working people is really any more concrete than principles like "justice," which Marx dismissed as an example of abstract idealism.

It is at this point that debates over the moral ground of Marxism intersect with the question of religion. For the suggested similarities between Marxism and religion, as well as the call for greater attention to concrete practises of those who struggle for human emancipation, imply that the analysis of particular religious communities may serve to deepen critical theory's analysis of its own normative foundations. Blackledge's emphasis on the concrete struggle of working people against exploitation, for example, would be complemented by sustained analysis of the concrete practices and commitments of those religious communities that are in pursuit of the same.

On this point, is instructive to recall a development within Western Marxism in the aftermath of the First World War. For as the first generation of scholars at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt began studying the German working class's nationalistic abandonment of class solidarity, they became increasingly interested in religion. Chief among these members of the Frankfurt School was Max Horkheimer.

## III. Horkheimer and Marx's Critique of Religion

Horkheimer's work developed chiefly in response to three dramatic challenges to Marxism in the first half of the twentieth century: the collapse of the solidarity of the worker's movements of Europe in 1914, Stalin's purges in the 1930s, and the devastation of the Holocaust. In an early project conducted by the Institute for Social Research, Horkheimer and his colleagues concluded that the authoritarian nature of many of the leftist political parties in

the country was such that there was little ground for confidence in the revolutionary potential of the workers: “Unlike the prewar proletariat, these unemployed . . . [respond] only in the mere repetition of Communist party slogans” (Horkheimer 1934/1978, 62). Horkheimer was particularly dismayed by what he understood to be the dogmatism of the German socialists (SPD) and the communist (KPD) parties, as well as by their nationalistic tendencies.

It is curious to note that, following immediately upon this discussion of “the Impotence of the German Working Class,” Horkheimer’s reflection turns to a discussion the relationship between atheism and religion. These remarks illustrate why religion was becoming a significant concern of his as he sought to articulate a Marxian theory of society in response to the social conditions he was witnessing: “The complete emancipation from any and every belief in the existence of a power which is independent of history, yet governs it, is a lack that is part of the most primitive intellectual clear-sightedness and truthfulness of modern man [sic]. And yet it is enormously difficult to avoid making a new religion of this very absence” (p. 65). According to Horkheimer, the absence of reference to any divine being or religious tradition does not resolve the essential problem of religion, for communities continue to demonstrate a persistent tendency to merely replace one authoritarian religion with another, often by relocating the position formerly occupied by a divine being with some new authority (be it the state, a political party, or a new cultural norm). His subsequent work thus wrestled with questions such as the following: Why does progressive thought and rationality so easily revert to myth? Why is one false notion of the absolute so quickly replaced by another false notion of the absolute?

To be clear: Horkheimer agreed with much of Marx’s criticism of historical religions like Christianity for their ideological support of the nation state, and for encouraging people to passively bear injustice in the hope of attaining reward in the afterlife. However, what he criticizes in historical religions he also observes in numerous socialist movements: a

dogmatic oversimplification of social ills, and the idealization of the "revolutionary potential" of certain groups (for example, the "proletariat," and one is tempted to mention here the current emphasis on the "multitude"[2]). From Horkheimer's perspective, these supposed socialist and atheistic theories resemble the abstract and otherworldly elements that Marx identified as belonging to religion. Horkheimer criticizes Marx, therefore, for assuming that once human beings recognize that consciousness is dependent upon material conditions, they will inevitably come to master these conditions and become free.

This failure to escape the problem of mythic authority, Horkheimer continues, is made all the more problematic by the way in which he thinks developments in modern technology have begun to colonise all fields of life, so that utilitarian calculation trumps all forms of emancipatory ideal. In his analysis of this dominance of "instrumental reason," Horkheimer laments, "[n]ow that science and technology have destroyed belief in paradise, not much remains of earthly paradise either" (Horkheimer 1934/1978, 222). These remarks demonstrate how Horkheimer increasingly appreciates Christianity for the way in which it often maintains a vision for a better life, in opposition to presently existing conditions. In such a vision, he identifies a goal similar to that of Marxian social theory, while at the same time suggesting that he had become unconvinced that many Marxists were able to sustain their commitment to these goals in a society dominated by instrumental rationality.

In Geuss's account of the state of contemporary Marxism (to which the beginning of this essay referred), he singles out two achievements of Horkheimer and the other members of the Frankfurt School: First, the way in which the concept of instrumental reason illuminates Marx's tendency to conflate 'praxis' and industrial 'production' (particularly how Marx speaks of the "domination over the natural powers of our own nature"); second, for their rehabilitation of the distinction between true and false needs (Geuss 2014, 60-61). Geuss

[2] (Negri/Hardt 2009)

has little sympathy, however, for any gesture that opens the door to reconsidering religion as a resource for emancipatory politics. He writes, "if Marx is right, forms of rationality are bound up with social forms in a way that does not permit simple extraction of a substantive universal form of 'Reason' [of the sort often presupposed by Christian theology]" (p.167). It is reasonable to assume that Geuss would offer a similar criticism to statements such as this one by Horkheimer, "Without God one will try in vain to preserve absolute meaning" (Horkheimer (1967/1994, 47). But Geuss's own lament for Marxism's inability to function as a "pseudo religion," and his call to continue to seek some form of collective "universal," is warrant to at least give Horkheimer's reasons for revisiting religion a more careful hearing.

It would be a mistake, for instance, to conclude from Horkheimer's remarks that he neglects the Marxian recognition that human beings "make religion" (Marx/Engels 1975, 3) or that he is not mindful of the fact that human thought is shaped by its socio-economic environment. In his writing on morality, Horkheimer is generally in accord with Marx's position: "The needs and desires, the interests and passions of human beings change in relation to the historical process" (Horkheimer 1933/1995, 33). It is precisely Horkheimer's attention to the changing nature of historical contexts, however, that encourages him to take the specific form of Christianity in his own time more seriously. He emphasises this point particularly in response to what he perceives to be an erosion of both the moral and political commitments of the working class in the face of the intensifying power of individualistic market capitalism. To offer an example of this, Horkheimer points to the shifting dynamics between atheism and theism relative to moral commitment: "Those who professed themselves to be atheists at a time when religion was still in power tended to identify themselves more deeply with the theistic commandment to love one's neighbor" (Horkheimer 1967/1974, 49). With the decline of the linkages between religion and state political power, however, the roles of the two polarities have been reversed: "Nowadays atheism is in fact the

attitude of those who follow whatever power happens to be dominant, no matter whether they pay lip-service to a religion or whether they can afford to disavow it openly" (p. 50).

In this account, it is not religion *as such* which functions as the ideological expression of capitalism; rather, it is proximity to power that Horkheimer identifies as the key factor shaping specific cultural forms. On this point, it is instructive to step back from the many decades of polemics between Marxist theorists and Christian theologians and take note of a telling observation offered by John Brentlinger (2010, 242). He highlights how attempts to forge a Marxist-Christian dialogue following the Second World War tended to be scuttled by the party that was located closest to political power. In Poland, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia, it was the Christians who sought a dialogue with leading Communists, only to be met with distain. In Italy, Spain, and France, however, it was the Communists who reached out to leading Christian leaders in an attempt to forge political alliances, only to be given the cold shoulder.

An anecdote offered by Žižek captures the basic point from a different angle. He recalls the way in which the Communist authorities in Poland slackened measures restricting the availability of illegal drugs during the 1980s in response to the challenge of the Solidarity movement. In response, Žižek remarks, "Today the opium of the people is: opium" (Žižek 2014). In this situation in Poland, it was the Catholic Church that was largely in support of the civic resistance offered against the state by *Solidarność*, while the officially atheist Communist authorities were seeking to distract the suffering workers with escapist narcotics. Thus, the "opium of the people" is not the essential purview of religion, but rather might come in other cultural forms in certain contexts. One such alternative "opiate" highlighted in particular by Horkheimer is nationalism: "In the last few centuries, an incomparably greater number of believers have staked their lives for their country than for the forbidden love of its enemies" (Horkheimer 1967/1974, 40).

Horkheimer's sensitivity to the shifting function of Christianity in differing historical moments is one key factor influencing his interest in the emancipatory potential of religion. While in profound agreement with Marx that religion is often inverted word consciousness, functioning to divinise oppressive social structures and legitimise ruling authorities, at the same time, Horkheimer does not see how the early Marx's call for the "abolition of religion" in any way necessarily enables the abandonment of the "condition which requires illusions" (Marx/Engels 1975, 4).

A second consideration that leads Horkheimer to revisit the Marxian critique of religion is the way he thinks Christianity in some contexts has encouraged human beings to resist the dominant ideological norms of their age. He describes this basic attitude as a "longing for something other than this world" (Horkheimer 1967/1974, 50). Such a perspective, he argues, can serve to open and sustain the human imagination to the possibility that what presents itself as the natural order of things is not the fullness of what might be. Such a concern for truth beyond the immediately given, he continues "cannot as such be separated from theism. The only alternative is positivism" (p. 47). In the face of what he perceives to be the increasing dominance of instrumental rationality, consequentialist calculation becomes the order of the day, which, he think, fuels both the profit drive of the capitalist system, as well as proliferation of consumerism. In such a context, Horkheimer argues, religious belief and practices may serve to interrupt this closed system. And so he laments his sense he has that religion in very much in decline; "God is dead. It would be truer to say that thought has died" (Horkheimer 1933/1978, 156).

It is noteworthy that this position is not so distant from some of the implications of Marx's own thought. In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx shows how the capitalist system develops its own ''religion of everyday life,'' which becomes so natural that people ''feel completely at home in these estranged and irrational forms'' (Marx/Engels 1998, 279). This

recognition that capitalism can itself come to function as a 'religion' has been subsequently developed by a number of Marxian thinkers, including Walter Benjamin (1921/1996). In similar fashion to the way in which Christian theology functioned during the age of the 'Divine Right of Kings', the discourse of economics now serves as a hegemonic form of interpretation and mystification (Miller 2003; Nelson 2001). While Marx recognises this danger, his critique of religion does not take into account the possibility that traditional religious traditions might offer some resources to help human beings challenge the 'religion' of the capitalist market. In this sense, Horkheimer encourages the Marxian critique of religion to further develop such a consideration.

The novelty of this direction should not be over-emphasised, however, since Marx's own writing contains fragments that imply a similar line of thinking. For example, Horkheimer's suggestion that "religion can mean altogether different things for different classes and different ways of life" (Horkheimer 1935/1995, 215) is clearly consistent with the basic way Marx interprets patterns of human life. This is to say that Horkheimer is not being inconsistent in his commitment to Marx on this point, but rather than Marx's tendency to offer sweeping dismissals of religion regardless of its social and historical location is in some real tension with the implications of Marx's own philosophy. It is to this possibility that the discussion now turns.

## IV. Marx's Critique of Religion Revisited

It is noteworthy that a number of recent interpreters of Marx carefully distinguish between two distinct strands in Marx's discussions of religion (Boer 2012; Brentlinger 2010; Rehmann 2010; Toscano 2010). The first "eliminationist" strand consists of those moments in Marx's writing where he exhibits scornful distain for religion, along with the prediction

that religion will vanish with the achievement of socialism. This stream defines religion as "false consciousness." Such a tone is evident when Marx describes the role of the worker's party in *The Critique of the Gotha Program* as being to free the workers from the "witchery of religion" (Marx/Engels, 1875/1989, 94). Likewise, this attitude is evident when Engels insists that religion is "incapable of serving in the future any progressive class as the ideological garb of its aspiration" (Engels, 1886/1974, 59). This strand finds its strongest articulation in earlier works like *The German Ideology* and *The Holy Family*, but is also present in many of Marx's letters and papers.

A second strand, however, is also discernible in Marx's discussion of religion. In such writings, a more descriptive and "functional" account of particular forms and expressions of religion is in evidence. This stream attends primarily to incorporating an historical-materialist analysis of religious phenomenon into a theory of the social emergence of different modes of ideological abstraction. Rather than offering sweeping generalisations about religion as such, this strand, most dominant in Marx's later work, is concerned to discover how particular religious expressions relate to specific historical social conditions. Consider, for example, the following footnote from *Capital*:

> It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion, than, conversely, it is, to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestialised forms of those relations. The latter method is the only materialistic, and therefore the only scientific one. The weak points in the abstract materialism of natural science, a materialism that excludes history and its process, are at once evident from the abstract and ideological conceptions of its spokesmen, whenever they venture beyond the bounds of their own speciality (Marx 1990, 493–4, n. 4).

As Alberto Toscano (2010, 13) suggests, statements of this kind resist the simplistic reduction of religious phenomena to some generalised non-religious explanation (either on the basis of some naturalistic anthropology, political ideology, or general economic theory). Instead, Marx implies here that the real task for critical thought is to study "actual relations of life" and their relationship to emergent forms of abstraction. In other words, this stream of Marx's reflection on religion sets the polemics to the side, and instead opens up the possibility of a materialist study of religions in specific historical locations. On the basis of a similar interpretation of Marx, Brentlinger argues, Marxian scholars, "need to see religion in a more dialectical fashion, as complex, conflictual, and historically evolving" (2010, 244).

One can draw from a number of the key features of Marx's thought that characterise this "second strand" of his writing on religion. Brentlinger attempts to press beyond these, however, by suggesting that one might read Marx's materialism against itself, and suggest that it implies greater attention to the concrete lived practices of religious communities than Marxism is generally prepared to offer. Brentlinger points, for example, to the first thesis on Feuerbach:

> The chief defect of all previous materialism . . . is that things, reality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the *object, or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, it happened that the active side was set forth abstractly by idealism, which, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such (Marx/Engels, 1976, 3).

Brentlinger suggests that here materialism is presented, not as something crudely opposed to idealism, but as creative activity, Hegel's concept of *Geist*, which is not merely some natural matter that immediately presents itself, but is given shape and significance through its particular "sensuous" activity (Brentlinger 2010, 246). To conceive of practices and forms of life identified as "religious" as potential examples of such "sensuous human activity" is, he

continues, to locate religion "in real life activity, values, and goals." To suggest that religious practices and cultural expressions can be understood in this way is not to jettison Marx's critique of religion as "false consciousness," but it is to affirm that, some such practices and articulations can have progressive aspects and revolutionary potential, as they are deeply rooted in the struggle against oppression and alienation. This interpretation of Marx's thesis might be said to press beyond what Marx himself intended in this passage, particularly if one focuses on theological concepts or religious symbolism – for Marx's seventh thesis cautions against neglecting the fact that "religious sentiment is itself a social product," and thus cannot be separated from the particular form of a given society (Marx/Engels, 1976, 4). Yet Brentlinger appears to merely be emphasising the point that the practical activity of human beings who belong to religious traditions may well be expressions of creative human praxis. For this reason their actions merit attention and scrutiny, in a manner that is not dismissive from the outset merely because such human beings identify themselves as members of a religious community. Brentlinger's perspective can be understood as encouraging a materialist analysis of religions in particular situations and contexts, rather than a generalised (and thus abstract) conclusion about religion as such.

It is in this light that Horkheimer's attention to the shifting function of theism and atheism in different historical contexts can be understood. For when Marx is in his "eliminationist mode," he is not seeking to carefully analyse the creative activity of human beings who happen to engage with religious traditions; rather, he has already "set fourth abstractly" all there is to know about such individuals and communities in a sweeping generalisation, which is a mode of thought he dismisses as idealism. It is to presume to know what religion is without having to attend to it concrete expression. By contrast, Horkheimer's insistence that critical theory attend to how atheism functions in certain historical contexts brings into view the fact that atheism is just as prone to ideological idealism as theism.

This issue, which Horkheimer's work helps to illuminate more fully, is related to a criticism long voiced by Christian theologians who are sympathetic with Marx's economic analyses and his emancipatory commitment.[3] Helmut Gollwitzer puts it this way: because Marx implies that not only must one accept the criticism of religion, but must reject religion completely, Marxism becomes "dogmatic," a rigid "worldview," and a shifts from a perspective enlivened by a practical commitment to change specific social conditions into a metaphysical commitment (Gollwitzer 1962/1970, 101).

Non-religious Marxists have generally met such criticism by theologians with scepticism and impatience, yet Horkheimer's philosophy offers substantial support for this basic criticism, at least when the first strand of Marx's theory of religion is being emphasized. However, in fairness to Marx, one ought not to neglect the fact that he himself did not insist that atheism is a prerequisite for socialism. For him, atheism represents a late stage of theism, as it needs to continue to postulate God in order to deny God's existence (Marx 1879/1991, 576). Roland Boer highlights passages from *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* to support this point: "Atheism … no longer has any meaning, for atheism is the *negation* of God and postulates the *existence of man* through this negation; but socialism as socialism no longer stands in need of such mediation. It is man's *positive self-consciousness*, no longer mediated by the abolition of religion (Boer 2012, 311 – quoting Marx/Engels 1975b, 306). Also noteworthy is Marx's response to the attempt by the anarchists to get the International to commit formally to atheism and replace faith with science: "As if one could declare by royal decree abolition of faith!" (Marx/Engels 1985, 207).

This recognition that Marx never demanded a commitment to atheism is another reason not to collapse the second strand of his writing on religion into the first strand. Thus,

[3] See, for example, Bulgakov 1907/1979; Dupré 1966.

when Marx writes, "Christianity has no history" (Marx/Engels, 1998, 166), it is just as well to chalk that up to his own personal distain for Christianity, and give greater attention to those texts which encourage a properly more concrete and historical approach to the analysis of particular *Christianities*. Such a line of inquiry is not driven by some generalised assumptions about a generic concept of "*religion*," but is rather attentive to the ways in which differing *religions* are produced by differing expressions of "human-sensuous activity" (Marx/Engels 1976, 4). Toscano (2010) describes such an application of the second strand of Marx's writing on religion(s) as a "critique of the religion of everyday life." This entails emphasising an approach to religion that analyses its roots in particular historical situations, to the conditions in which it emerges, as well as to the real sufferings (but also aspirations) that it gives expression to.

In his call for Marxists to be more attentive to the ways in which some expressions of religion support rather than frustrate emancipatory praxis, Brentlinger makes the case as follows:

> My deeper concern is that, limited by enlightenment rationalism, Marxists and secular leftists have failed to see or respect the value of spirituality, as the positive source of their own religious traditions and much progressive politics. Spirituality constitutes a broad basis for unity among all progressives, in spite of ideological differences, and needs to become a necessary component of a transformative politics (2010, 245).

This contribution seeks to build on the second strand of Marx's writing on religion, and to encourage more fruitful dialogue between Marxian atheists and progressive religious adherents. That said, Brentlinger's concept of "spirituality" remains rather vague, and it appears to imply a generalised anthropological understanding of human nature: "Spirituality . . . is the capacity to feel deeply bonded with all beings on this earth; to acknowledge the deep, ultimate value of life and community, among ourselves and with nature. It is expressed

by love and a sense of responsibility for others." He continues by suggesting that the concept "spirituality" is "compatible with both materialism and otherworldly idealism. These alternative ideologies conceptualize the range of spiritual relationships differently, but both arise from a common basis of what might be called a sense of deep connectedness and an affirmation of being" (p. 245).

It is this latter emphasis on a "common basis" found among all people and in all ideologies that might be said to stray further off a path permitted by a Marxian perspective. For this attempt to combine both the category of religion and the moral drive of leftish politics together under the universal category of "spirituality" would seem more a metaphysical commitment rather than an argument based on attention to practical social life. It is thus vulnerable to the criticism Marx levels in his sixth thesis on Feuerbach, which warns against dissolving the "essence of religion into the essence of *man*" (Marx/Engels 1975, 4).

This is not to suggest that Brentlinger's claim that "socialism without spirituality can be as empty and cruel as capitalism" is an unwelcome contribution to the debate over the relationship between Marxism and religion; it is simply to highlight that his concept of "spirituality" is itself a very particular ideological perspective (in the Gramscian sense of that term), rooted in Brentlinger's own context and resourced by particular experiences and narratives. This important clarification is effaced when he seeks to universalise his position by suggesting that "spirituality" represents a "common basis" for all people. Moreover, the concept "spirituality," as Brentlinger employs it, remains quite unspecific: Where exactly does he see it being lived out? By who? What examples or stories illustrate what he means by the term?

Such questions prompt a brief return to the work of Max Horkheimer, for in his writing on Christianity, one encounters occasion fragments that offer more concrete

discussions of specific ways in which he imagines a materialist analysis of particular religious expressions can resource Marxian thought.

## IV. Horkheimer and the Idea of God

Horkheimer's writing is instructive for the way he describes a nuanced dialectic between particular expressions of Christianity and specific social contexts. Engaging with this aspect of his work is also useful because his work has been so controversial and misunderstood. Jürgen Habermas, for example, has taken issue with those statements by Horkheimer discussed above: "With God dies external truth" and "Without God one will try in vain to preserve absolute meaning." According to Habermas (1993), such references to the idea of God suggest that, in despair over an exaggerated fear of the domination of instrumental reason, Horkheimer has succumbed to pessimism and taken refuge in irrational myth.[4] Klaus Kremer suggests that Horkheimer's references to theology reveal that he has abandoned materialism (Kremer 1977, 241-2), while Wiebrecht Ries dismisses Horkheimer's late work of containing an "occult theological element" (Ries 1966, 69-81).

To be sure, Horkheimer is vulnerable here. John Abromeit (2011, 414) argues that Horkheimer's later work became increasing dehistoricized following his adoption of Friedrich Pollock's concept of a universalised "state capitalism." On this point, Abromeit follows Moishe Postone's (1993) view that such a reading of capitalism encouraged the development of the generalised and rigid concept of "instrumental reason," which resulted in the pessimistic tone of Horkheimer later work. For in Pollock's theory of state capitalism, the state is understood to have the capacity to totally manage the economy and determine all spheres of life, so that there is little space to imagine the system being overcome (p.94-5). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/2002) developed this perspective

[4] For a detailed analysis of Habermas's critique, see: Brittain 2014.

to such an extent that instrumental rationality is conceived not only a particular historical form of human reasoning under certain conditions, but as rooted deep in the prehistory of human civilization. Abromeit is correct to note that such a sweeping conclusion, "rests on a transhistorical notion of the domination of nature and not a nuanced theory of the development of modern bourgeois society" (Abromeit 2011, 427).

It is thus understandable that many of Horkheimer's critics have interpreted his references to religion merely as a desperate return to metaphysics fuelled by despair. Yet many of Horkheimer's writings on religion pre-date the emergence of his concept of instrumental reason. To quickly dismiss Horkheimer's references to theology and religion as otherworldly pessimism, therefore, is to view them solely through the lens of the first strand of Marx's critique of religion. For Horkheimer is far from abandoning the Marxian critique of religion. He writes that, more often than not, "the indispensable task of theology was to reconcile Christianity with power" (Horkheimer 1967/1994, 36). However, as discussed above, he also argues that the idea of God has in many times and places served to interrupt self-enclosed ideological frameworks and to spur on emancipatory thought and practice. For Horkheimer, emancipatory thought is nurtured by "a longing for something other than this world" (Horkheimer 1968/1995, 168). A brief example serves to illustrate how he develops such an interpretation of a specific reception of Christianity.

In a discussion of the difficulty of preserving the idea of freedom in an unjust world, Horkheimer remarks, "Has not Christianity . . . represented opposition to the authority vested in the heathen powers? . . . Does not Christianity, thus understood, stand in utter opposition to conformism?" (1967/1994, 149). To be clear, Horkheimer is not simply throwing up his hands in despair and encouraging an escapist embrace of an otherworldly religion. To the contrary, he is pointing to specific expressions of a religious tradition that has – on some occasions – articulated its traditions and beliefs in a way that has nurtured emancipatory

praxis. Horkheimer is attending to a specific example of a creative human cultural response to the conditions of a specific time and place.

As he develops this line of thought, Horkheimer labours to make it very clear that he is avoiding the trap of utopian socialism: he warns that simply implying that Christianity embodies the virtues of "brotherly love" is "not exempt from the threats that history brings with it" (p.150). Unjust social conditions threaten to distort any such teaching or values, and reorient them as ideological support for those same conditions. Thus, no timeless truths are being evoked here, or pure kernels of heavenly wisdom. However, he suggests that theological beliefs and religious practices can also leave their mark on individuals and communities in specific ways. To illustrate, he describes the affect that Christian belief might have on a mother: "The love of the Christian mother was . . . sustained by the belief that her child belonged to the elect and had an immortal soul. The heightening and ennobling of natural maternal affection by religion *has at times* affected the lives of those who were loved and cherished as children" (p. 150, emphasis added). Such ways of being raised as a child, Horkheimer continues, "frequently determine whether the person will have a capacity for genuine love or be at the bottom cold and self-centred so that everyone who has to deal with him will be simply a means, never an end." He concludes, "If a loving mother . . . really helps a child at the beginning, then Christianity can become a reality in his life. Mary's role in great religious art, therefore, has a positive value and significance" (p. 151).

This reflection is misunderstood if it is thought to imply a leap into the embrace of the Roman Catholic Church. Horkheimer is quick to warn, for example, that social change has impacted negatively on the family, and has distorted the values he praises in his example. The point he is making is that in this articulation of Christianity, human beings might employ this cultural resource in creative ways to further emancipatory practice. In his account, Christianity took a specific concrete practical form, and functioned in a specific manner, and

in his view, it did so with practical emancipatory effect. For him, this suggests that the contribution of such activity ought not to be dismissed out of hand by Marxian materialists merely on the grounds that it is "religious." This example illustrates what Toscano thinks Marxian analysis should adopt: a "critique of the religion of everyday life."

Roland Boer (2012, 309) offers a helpful clarification that furthers understanding of Horkheimer's references to "theology." First, Boer distinguishes between two forms of ideology: a critical approach in which ideology is understood as "false consciousness, and a descriptive and functionalist approach, in which ideology is an inherent component of human existence. He notes that this second conception of ideology has been elaborated in the work of Gramsci and Althusser, and he argues that it is implied in Marx's later writing. Boer then suggests that differing expressions of religion can be understood as embodying either of these two forms of ideology. It is noteworthy that this account closely parallels the two strands of Marx's critique of religion that this essay has identified.

Based on this reading, Boer argues that Marxists should conceive of theology as ideological in the second descriptive sense, in the same way that philosophy, art, and other cultural expressions are ideological. In other words, he concludes that theology is not inherently "false consciousness." Instead, theology should be conceived of as "a system of thought, with its distinct myths, stories, terminology, modes of argument and lively debate that can operate perfectly well without any external reference-point" (p.310). Although a great deal of theology implies a preoccupation with mythological escape from the earthly to the heavenly realm, religious practice and discourse can equally be focused "just as much with the here and now, with the plight of human beings and their place in a natural and social world" (p.316). As such, he continues, theology can be understood as a site of class struggle – of contested interpretations, competing agendas and allegiances, and shifting degrees of potential to serve as an emancipatory resource.

This reading of Marx's critique of religion helps clarify the approach Horkheimer takes towards religion and theology. In a passage that captures the spirit of the second strand of Marx's writing, Horkheimer writes, "What distinguishes the progressive type of man [sic] from the retrogressive is not the refusal of the idea [of justice, of the absolute] but the understanding of the limits set to its fulfilment" (Horkheimer 1968/1995, 130).

## IV. Conclusion

This interpretation of Horkheimer's writing on aspects of Christianity does not imply that religion in general or Christianity in particular should be taken as essential to Marxism or critical theory. Such an assertion would be as vague and overly-generalised as the notion of "spirituality" criticised above. The implication of the discussion in this essay is also not that religion is the cure for all that ails Marxism's difficulties with the ground of its own normative critique. Instead, what is advanced here is the much humbler suggestion that the concerns and agendas of critical theory can be supported and resourced by a critique of the "religion of everyday life." The persistent tendency among many scholars to link the emancipatory agenda of Marxism to religion surely suggests that there remain some rich theoretical veins to mine in this regard.

Such an undertaking requires setting aside the more generalized (and ahistorical) elements of Marx's theory of religion. On this point, the distinction drawn out in this essay between two strands in Marx's writings on religion offers a helpful corrective on ahistorical and misleading interpretations of the nature and emancipatory potential of religious communities and traditions. At the same time, it serves to clarify the ongoing value and significance of Marx's critique of religion. While the "eliminationist" elements of Marx's attitude towards religion have been seemingly refuted by recent history and foreclose on

recognising the emancipatory function of some religious practices in certain historical contexts, the functionalist materialist analysis of the praxis of religious human beings, along with the necessary ideology critique of religious discourse that Marx calls for, remain as important as ever. More specifically, as the discussion of Horkheimer's approach to religion has made evident, the social function of religion differs at different times and in different contexts.

Having demonstrated the poignancy of Horkheimer's attentive analysis of specific elements of Christianity in particular contexts, it is now possible to return to briefly to the somewhat tortured lament offered by Geuss over the legacy of Marxism in the twentieth century, which opened this essay. Horkheimer's reading of Marx's critique of religion helps us makes better sense of Geuss's reference to the need for a "pseudo-religious" Marxism. It also illuminates his concern to challenge the danger that Marxism might collapse into utilitarian "productivism," as well as his cryptic reference to Anselm's ontological argument. Although Horkheimer's work does not provide a clear route to the achievement of the "collective self-identity" sought by Geuss, his approach to Christianity does at least open up a perspective that may help facilitate new forms of productive collaboration between atheist Marxists and religious individuals seeking to advance human emancipation. Far from advocating one universal "master-narrative," Horkheimer's perspective on religion nevertheless does enable some appreciation for those who experience the idea of God as issuing what Geuss calls moral "recommendations that stick."

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