

2013

The Critical Theory of Religion: From Having to Being

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Siebert, Rudolf J.; Ott, Michael R.; and Byrd, Dustin J., "The Critical Theory of Religion: From Having to Being" (2013). *Peer Reviewed Articles*. 2.
https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/soc_articles/2

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1(1) 33–42

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DOI: 10.1177/2050303213476109

crr.sagepub.com



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Abstract

In our essay we trace the evolution of the critical theory of religion, or comparative dialectical religiology, out of the critical theory of society of the Institute for Social Research or the Frankfurt School. For us, the history of religions reflects the history of humanity's intellectual and spiritual evolution. As we developed our critical theory of religion, we have tried to supersede concretely the great accomplishments of three generations of critical theorists, particularly in the field of religion. One main theme of our critical theory of religion is the dialectic of two modes of existence: having and being; egoism and altruism. As we determinately negated the critical theory of society into our comparative dialectical religiology, we also penetrated deeper into its roots in the works of Kant and Hegel, Marx and Freud, Judaism and Christianity, particularly into the mystical theology of the great dialectician Meister Eckhart and of his many modern followers. We conclude our essay with the vision of the City of Being.

Keywords

Abrahamic religions, critical theory of society, dialectical religiology, G W F Hegel, Karl Marx, Meister Eckhart

It may be called the irony of the spirit of the times, when in the 1970s theologians, most of them students of the existential theologian Paul Tillich, announced the *death of God*, while

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critical philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists searched for the Infinite, and proclaimed the finitude of man. A gigantic change of fronts took place.

Christians and Marxists

Marxists, such as the Czechoslovakian philosopher, Vitezslav Gardavsky, have asked: *Without God, what does man have to offer* (Horkheimer, 1970: 9)? Catholic theologians, like Johannes B Metz, sanctioned the revolutionary abolishment of an unjust civil society. The conversion of some Marxists was even more astonishing than the *new praxis* of some Christians. Yet, in the perspective of the critical theory of religion, or the comparative–dialectical religiology, this astonishment was valid only as long as Marxists and Christians were looked upon as mere puppets of a worldview that had long become independent, institutionalized, reified, and alienated into an authoritarian and dogmatic system. Already in the 1940s, being informed by Gerhard Scholem, a scholar of Jewish mysticism, as well as by Franz von Baader, the Catholic friend of the Lutheran Georg W. F. Hegel, both of whom were rooted in the mystical theology of Meister Eckhart, Walter Benjamin (1968: 253) had looked with an abyss-like smile on theology as a small and ugly hunchback, and on historical materialism as a puppet in Turkish attire with a water-pipe in its mouth. At the same time, Benjamin nevertheless saw theology and historical materialism cooperating with each other on the chessboard of world history. Theology could legitimate historical materialism metaphysically, and historical materialism could help theology to translate itself into political and historical praxis. Benjamin tried to reconcile Scholem’s mystical theology with Bertolt Brecht’s historical materialism, and found critical resistance on both extremes of the modern continuum between the sacred and the profane. For Hegel, also informed by Meister Eckhart, as well as for Jewish and Christian mystics before, and for Karl Marx and historical materialists, as well as the critical theorists later on, religion was part of the history of human reason. Thinkers from Lao-tse through Eckhart to Marx agreed on the dialectic of having and being:

The Tao [Being] is constant in non-action

Yet there is nothing it does not do. (Lao-tse, 1988: 37)

Men should not reflect so much on what they should do, but they should rather consider, what they are. (Blakney, 1941: 4)

The less you are, the less you express your life, the more you have, the bigger is your alienated life. (Marx, 1964: 150)

Turn toward Marxism

Max Horkheimer was the son of a factory owner and a CEO himself in a factory in Zuffenhausen, Germany, in 1915. Like all the other critical theorists of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, he too was a member of the German middle bourgeoisie before, during, and still after World War I. Nevertheless, Horkheimer turned to anti-bourgeois Marxism after having become familiar with Arthur Schopenhauer, Immanuel Kant as well as with Georg W F Hegel. Horkheimer and his colleagues in the Institute for Social Research, the “*Café Marx*,” at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität in Frankfurt am Main, who all came from assimilated Jewish families, were motivated in their turn to Marxism by *the will to justice*, which had been brought into world-history by the

Hebrew prophets. For Horkheimer and his colleagues, historical materialism was the answer to the domination of the totalitarianism from the Right, fascism and National Socialism, which arose after World War I. The same prophetic will to justice motivated Horkheimer and his friends to become critical of Eastern Marxism, when Stalin began to practice the totalitarian rule from the Left—*red fascism*—long before it fell victim to the neo-liberal counter-revolution of 1989. With the founders of the scientific socialism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Horkheimer thought that the cultural achievements of the bourgeois epoch of history, e.g. the free unfolding of all productive forces, intellectual productivity no longer characterized by violence and exploitation, i.e. genuine *being* in the most emphatic sense, should extend and spread in the world. What the critical theorists experienced during World War I, as well as in between the Wars, and during the restoration after World War II in Germany, Europe, and America, did not leave their thinking unaffected. There was great disappointment that the working classes in Germany and Europe allowed Adolf Hitler and his German National Socialist Party and Movement to come to power. There was great frustration that the workers did not rise up against this employee of the Herren Club and other owners, e.g. Henry Ford, who supported Hitler inside and outside of Germany, and did not remove him and the German ruling class from power. Instead of this, the working class marched with Hitler—3 million of them—into the Soviet Union and killed 27 million so-called communists, and 6 million Jews. There was also the experience during the Cold War that the states which called themselves communistic, and which used the same Marxian categories to which the theoretical and practical efforts of the Frankfurters owed so many insights into civil society, state, history, and culture, were no closer to alternative Future III—the realm of freedom as creative realization of all human potentials and powers—eye, ear, memory, intellect, will, etc., and as full being, beyond the realm of natural and economic necessity. Like the liberal countries, these communist states were not less prone to move toward alternative Future I—the totally bureaucratized society, which is characterized by reification and by the attitude of having, and in which therefore life is not living—as well as toward alternative Future II—a militaristic society, which is continually engaged in wars of revenge or the stealing of land, cheap labor, and resources and in which death prevails and dominates. Around 1933, the critical theorists had the choice to flee from fascist Germany and Europe either to socialist Russia or to the liberal United States. Because personal autonomy of the individual had not yet been extinguished in the liberal countries, most of them left for the latter.

The poor

According to the comparative, critical religiology, long before Marx and Engels inverted the dialectical historical idealism of Hegel into their dialectical historical materialism and initiated a communist movement, which intended to abolish the private property of the means of production that gave the owners the power over nature as well as over workers, family, civil society, state, history, and culture, and which they considered to be the root of the prevailing commodity fetishism, the idolatry of greed, and of all social evils, Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) described the dialectic of having and being with a penetration and clarity not surpassed by any teacher ever since. A major figure of the Dominican Order, a beggar order opposed to early capitalism, and a contemporary of the even more radical Francis of Assisi, the founder of another anti-capitalistic beggar Franciscan Order, both stressing the vow of poverty, Meister Eckhart was a scholarly theologian and the greatest

representative and deepest and most radical dialectical thinker of German mysticism. Thus, on the basis of the *Beatitudes* in the Sermon on the Mount,

How happy are the poor in spirit;
theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3)

or

How happy are you who are poor: yours is the kingdom of God. (Luke 6:20)

and of the connected curse,

But alas for you who are rich: you are having your consolation now. (Luke 6:24)

Eckhart stated in his Sermon Fifteen: How A Radical Letting Go Becomes A True Letting Be:

Thus we say that a person must be so poor that he or she is no place and has no place wherein God could act. Where people still preserve some place in themselves, they preserve distinction. This is why I pray God to rid me of God; for my essential being is above God in so far as we consider God as the origin of creatures. Indeed in God's own being, where God is raised above all being and all distinctions, there I was myself, there I willed myself, and I knew myself to create this person that I am. Therefore I am cause of myself according to my being which is eternal, but not according to my becoming, which is temporal. Therefore also I am unborn, and following the way of my unborn being I can never die. Following the way of my unborn being I have always been. I am now, and shall remain eternally. What I am by my temporal birth is destined to die and be annihilated, for it is mortal. Therefore it must with time pass away. In my eternal birth all things were born, and I was cause of myself and of all things. If I had willed it, neither I nor any things would have come to be. And if I myself were not, God would not be either. That God is 'God', of this I am the cause. If I were not, God would not be 'God' ... (Fox, 1980: 213–225)

Positive and negative theology

For Eckhart, the dialectic of being and having was rooted in the tradition of the *via positiva* as well as *via negativa* of the kataphatic and apophatic theology. Already in his Sermon Thirteen entitled *Outside God There is Nothing but Nothing*, Meister Eckhart had taught a post-theistic, panentheistic theology:

The divine One is a negation of negations and a desire of desires. What does One mean? Something to which nothing is to be added. The soul takes hold of the Godhead, where it is pure, where there is nothing beside it, nothing else to consider. The One is a negation of negations. Every creature contains a negation; one denies that it is the other. An angel denies that it is any other creature; but God contains the denial of denials. He is that One who denies of every other that it is anything except himself. (Blakney, 1941: 247)

Asking how man could possibly approach, not to speak of love, such a God, Eckhart gave a post-theistic, *panentheistic* answer:

How, then, shall I love him? You are to love God aspiritually, that is, your soul shall be aspiritual, devoid of ghostlikeness, for as long as the soul is ghostlike it is a mental image and, being imagelike, it will lack both unity and the power to unite. Thus, it could not love

God rightly, for true love is union. Your soul ought to be deghosted, void of ghosts, and be kept so. For if you love God as a god, a ghost, a person, or if he were something with a form—you must get rid of all that.

How, then, shall I love him? Love him as he is a not-god, a not-ghost, a-personal, formless. Love him as he is the One, pure, sheer and limpid, in whom there is no duality; for we are to sink eternally from negation to negation in the One... (Blakney, 1941: 248)

In the view of the comparative, dialectical religiology, the method of the Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, or Islamic mystics has often been *negation*. Here, with Meister Eckhart, it was a double negation. The negation of negation was *fullness of being*. Eckhart stated in his *Defense IX: 23*, against the accusation of *pantheism* without transcendence by the Holy Inquisition, which misunderstood his deeply Christian *pan-en-theism*, that a hundred men were many and numbered; a thousand angels were many and without number; but the three persons in the Trinity were neither many or numbered. If they were many, they would not be one. For Eckhart, this was true according to 1 John 5:7:

...so that there are three witnesses,
the Spirit, the water and the blood,
and all three of them are one.

According to Eckhart, deprivation was the beginning of number, but the beginning of multiplicity was negation; however, in God there was no deprivation, nor yet negation, since there was *fullness of being*. The reason for this seeming circumlocution—the double negation—was to avoid putting a verbal description on something that words could not possibly describe. It was in his doctrine of God that Eckhart went beyond the tolerance of his time, and perhaps beyond the capacity of ours—in 2012. What Eckhart knew of himself, and through himself, of all people in all times, and therefore what he discovered about God and the relations of God to man, and of man to God: this was the gift he wished to give and did give most richly. Certainly Eckhart lifted Christianity above any parochial conception, and revealed its inner relation to the great, universal spiritual movements, which have found expression in many forms since at least the Axial Age.

Protest

Erich Fromm (1976) has pointed out that already one of the main themes of the Hebrew Bible had been: leave what you have; free yourself from all fetters: *be*. In Fromm's view, the New Testament continued the Hebrew Bible's protest against the structure of having. Its protest was even more radical than the earlier Jewish protest had been, since it came from the lower social classes: from the poor and socially despised, from the downtrodden and outcasts, who like some of the old Hebrew Prophets castigated the rich and powerful and denounced without compromise wealth as well as secular and priestly power as unmitigated evils. The Sermon on the Mount was the speech of a great slave rebellion. The classic source for Eckhart's views on the mode of having is his sermon based on the Sermon on the Mount. Eckhart does not want to speak of external but rather of internal poverty referred to by Matthew rather than Luke, in which he defines poverty by saying:

He is a poor man who wants nothing, knows nothing and has nothing. (Blakney, 1941: 227)

According to Fromm, Eckhart used *being* in two different, though related, ways and meanings. In a narrower psychological sense, *being* denoted the real and often unconscious

motivations that impel human beings, in contrast to deeds and opinions as such, and is separated from the acting and thinking person. The second meaning is wider and more fundamental: being is life, activity, birth, renewal, out pouring, flowing out, productivity. In this sense, being is the very opposite of having, of ego boundness, egotism, egoism, and narcissism. Being means to be active in the classic sense of the productive expression of one's human powers, not in the modern sense of being or keeping busy. Today in 2012, Catholic priests and even Bishop Gumbleton in Detroit continue the protest of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, Eckhart, and Fromm against the structure of having, when they call capitalism, the private appropriation of collective labor, the most morally evil economic system ever invented and developed by humanity.

The murder of the poor man

While the younger Marx still stood with the Torah, the New Testament, and Hegel in the cataphatic tradition, the older Marx moved with Kant and Hegel into the apophatic one. Yet, even the older Marx still quoted in *The Capital* and other writings not only Kant and Hegel, but also the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The older Marx also still took his children to church in London to listen to the music. When his children asked him what the music was all about, he answered that there was once a poor man and the rich people murdered him (Fromm, 1961: 252). The older Marx (2002: 41) also still indignantly asked the London bourgeoisie: why do you make a liar out of him—Jesus of Nazareth—with every word you say, and with every deed you do? In the view of the critical theory of religion, the rich have never stopped murdering the poor man ever since: slaveholders, as well as feudal lords, and capitalists. For Horkheimer (1974: 96–97), informed by the younger and the older Marx, Jesus died for all human beings. He could not avariciously hold himself back for himself. Jesus belonged to all that suffered. According to Horkheimer, the Greek and Roman Church Fathers made out of this self-giving death of Jesus of Nazareth a religion. They made out of his self-sacrificial death a teaching, which was a consolation for evil people without a conscience, or a dull one. In Horkheimer's view, since then this religion has been so successful in the world that the thought of Jesus no longer has anything to do with the actions of people, and certainly not with their immense suffering. In Horkheimer's view, whoever read the *Evangelium* and did not see that Jesus died against his present day representatives could not read at all. This contemptuous and scornful theology has done more damage than has ever happened to any thought. The early Church accepted finally, after many internal struggles, soldiers into its community. The Church did not yet bless the murder weapons of two hostile armies, or, so the critical theorist of religion may add, the atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The religion that appealed to Jesus of Nazareth redirected the spiritual energies, which had been awakened through his unheard-of deed of self-giving and broke through the coldness of the ancient world, from *mimesis* to cult, from action to adoration. However, as Horkheimer admitted, if that had not happened, Jesus would probably have been forgotten, and his followers would have wasted themselves. They would have gone under in darkness. Instead of an economically and politically successful organization, which was also not poor in educational results, nothing would have remained. The good and bad deeds and institutions of Christianity would not have been written down in any history book. Jesus would have remained correct with his response to

Pilate, the Roman Governor of Palestine, a notorious mass murderer, shortly before his execution:

Mine is not a kingdom of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered to the Jews. But my kingdom is not of this kind (John 18:28–40).

Horkheimer did not dare say what would have been better: total forgetfulness or ecclesiastical distortion. The critical theory of religion prefers distortion over complete forgetfulness, since the former still allows at least some remembrance of the truth, which Jesus confessed before Pilate, the skeptical Roman judge:

Yes, I am a king. I was born for this. I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of the truth listen to my voice. (John 18:28–40)

On November 25, the Church celebrates the *Feast of Christ, the King of the Universe*. Like Fromm, Horkheimer saw in Jesus of Nazareth an extraordinary and exemplary man of *being*, rather than of having.

Faith idea

In 1969, Horkheimer differentiated between the critical theory of society and the Christian faith idea. Horkheimer admitted that his, Adorno's, and Fromm's idea of expressing the notion of an all-mighty and all-benevolent Being no longer as dogma but rather as an X-experience, or as longing for the imageless and nameless utterly Other in the face of the positive sciences as well as of the whole historical situation after Auschwitz, so that the horrible events, the injustice of the previous world history would not be the ultimate fate of the victims, seemed to come close to the Protestant, more precisely the Calvinistic, solution of the theodicy problem through the central role of the faith idea. However, according to Horkheimer, the essential difference between the critical theory of society and the Protestant faith idea consisted in that faith was expected to accept all too many hard to digest representations, e.g. the idea of the Trinity. Such faith had become connected with an authoritarian coercion, which could almost no longer be recognized, and that it became in spite of all protest once again a dogma. Horkheimer explained the tendency toward an aggression, which understood itself as being religious, through those aspects of the Protestant faith idea. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the key idea of the critical theory of society was a religious and a theological one: the longing that the murderer may not triumph over his innocent victim, at least not ultimately. The fundamental idea of the critical theory of society is connected to and rooted not only in Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, but also, and even most of all, in the three Abrahamic religions. According to Horkheimer, particularly as the chosen people, the Jews felt they were obligated as individuals and as a nation to the only God and to justice. Through his will to justice, the Jew was the enemy of everything totalitarian on the Right, or on the Left, and precisely in that lay one of the roots of the global Anti-Semitism in the past, as well as in the present—in 2012. In his letter of 1 October 2012, Edmund Arens, Professor at the University of Luzern, Switzerland, and a former student not only of Johannes Baptist Metz, but also of Jürgen Habermas, has recognized that since the 1980s our teaching and research in the comparative, dialectical religiology has been faithful to the critical theory of society of Schopenhauer, Adorno, and Fromm, and that we have developed it creatively further and

have passed on its not yet realized inheritance to the younger generations: particularly, its religious key idea of the imageless and nameless utterly Other than the horror and terror of nature and history. This critical theory of religion has always been dialectically connected with pedagogical as well as political praxis of being rather than having in Europe as well as in America. At the same time, Professor Helmut Fritzsche of the University of Rostock, Germany, admired our far-reaching renewal of the critical theory of society and our contribution to the Christian, inter-religious discourse. He was certain that it would work as a milestone for the generations to come. He confirmed that all that we have been looking forward to concerning the community of fate between the modern civilization and religion for decades is happening now, and our call for a worldwide revival of religion seemed to him the most important matter in the world of spirit today. Furthermore, Professor Fritzsche wanted to bestow his high respect for our courage to address the concrete political, social, and justice issues of the day in our theoretical, philosophical reflections, which is in contrast to the approach of most present-day authors, who take pains to bypass the real world and humanity's real sufferings.

The City of Being

As the critical theory of religion, informed by Eckhart, Hegel, Marx, and Freud, evolves further, it is concerned with the question of whether a conversion to a humanistic religiosity without dogmas, authorities, institutions, and asceticism can come into existence. Such humanistic religiosity has been prepared for centuries through the non-theistic movements from Buddhism to Marxism and Freudianism. According to the comparative, dialectical religiology, in the present world historical transition period from Modernity to Post-Modernity, people do not stand before the alternative to become victims of a culture industry and mass culture characterized by sex, car, and career, on the one hand, and the acceptance of the Abrahamic notion of God, as it appears in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, on the other hand. The new humanistic religiosity may develop in family, society, state, history, and culture, without the need for a separate religious organization. The demand for a new non-theistic, non-dogmatic, non-ascetic, non-institutionalized humanistic religiosity is not directed against believers of the great, traditional world-religions, in so far as they experience authentically the humanistic core of their faith and sharpen their conscience. The demand for a new humanistic religiosity is not an attack against the traditional religions. It is, however, an appeal to the Abrahamic religions to return to the spirit of their first paradigms: e.g. to the Roman Catholic Church to convert itself from the Roman bureaucracy to the spirit of the *Evangelium*, as promised in the Second Vatican Council. The demand for a new humanistic religiosity does not mean that the former socialist countries in Eastern Europe remain *de-socialized* after the successful neo-liberal counter-revolution of 1989, but rather that the former bureaucratic socialism, not to speak of red fascism, will be replaced in the future by a genuine humanistic socialism. The goal of the new humanistic religiology is Post-Modern alternative Future III—the *City of Being*. The *City of Being* concretely supersedes the Catholic vision of the *City of God*, which inspired the medieval culture. The *City of Being* also determinately negates the vision of the earthly *City of Progress*, which energized the people in Modernity. Since the 20th century, particularly since the end of World War I, this vision of the *City of Progress* has taken on characteristics of the *Tower of Babel*, which in the 21st century seems to move from one crisis to the other, and may finally collapse and bury humanity under its ruins. When, in terms of the Hegelian

and Marxian dialectical logic, the heavenly *City of God* and the earthly *City of Progress* represented thesis and antithesis, then a new synthesis is the only alternative to chaos and barbarism. The new synthesis is *The City of Being*. It is the synthesis between the internal and the external world; between the sacred and the profane; between the religious core of the Medieval culture, and the development of the modern world with its scientific thinking and its emphasis on the individual, since the Renaissance and the Reformation; between personal autonomy and universal, i.e. anamnestic, present, and proleptic solidarity; and also between having and being: having concretely superseded in being.

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Author biographies

Rudolf J. Siebert was born in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. He has studied history, philology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and theology at the University of Frankfurt, the University of Mainz, the University of Münster, and the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC. Siebert created and is a specialist in the critical theory of religion, or comparative, dialectical religiology. He has taught, lectured, and published widely in Western and Eastern Europe, the United States, Canada, Japan, and Israel. He is Professor of Religion and Society, and the Director of the Center for Humanistic Future Studies at Western Michigan University, director of the international course on the "Future of Religion" in the IUC Dubrovnik, Croatia, since 1975, and director of the international course on "Religion in Civil Society" in Yalta, Crimea, Ukraine, since 2000. His mayor works are *The Critical Theory of Religion: The Frankfurt School, From Critical Theory to Critical Political Theology: Personal Autonomy and Universal Solidarity* and *The Manifesto of the Critical Theory of Society and Religion: The Wholly Other, Liberation, Happiness, and the Rescue of the Hopeless*.

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Dustin J. Byrd specializes in the Critical Theory of Religion/Frankfurt School and Islamic Studies. He did his graduate work in comparative religion at Western Michigan University and PhD work in Continental Philosophy at Michigan State University, where he focused on developing a critical theory of religion as it pertains to Islam and the Islamic world. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Humanities at Olivet College, where he teaches religion, philosophy, and Arabic. He has recently published a book on Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution.