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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THEOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN THEOLOGY

BY

SILAS MORGAN

CHICAGO, IL

DECEMBER 2015

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In the summer of 2004, I married Laura Beth Voight. Two weeks later, I enrolled in my first graduate program at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, MN. Eleven years, eight apartments, four advanced degrees, three states, and one child later, she is still with me. Words fail, so I will rely on three trusty ones that will, I hope, have some special meaning to her: “Hand in hand.” This dissertation is dedicated to you and to our son.

Silas Morgan

Vaxholm, Stockholm, Sweden

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CHAPTER ONE

KARL MARX

Introduction

This dissertation is situated between the modern critique of religion as ideology, on the one hand, and the postsecular turn to theology in contemporary theory and political philosophy, on the other. If we hope to more clearly define the relation of ideology critique to political theology in this matrix, it is important to first discuss Karl Marx's position on the relation of theology to ideology.¹ After all, it is Marx who identifies theology as a constructed response to social antagonisms that yield human consciousness, while simultaneously being produced by the selfsame realities. Marx's accusation that religion is ideology was instrumental in stimulating the modern suspicion of theology, and it is the spirit of this position that still animates critical theory's allergy to it. In this context, it is important to understand Marx's critique of religion as ideology as a political objection, and so I argue in this chapter against the common position that defines ideology in Marx

¹ In what follows, it is important to clarify the differences between Marx's own views ('Marxian') and those of his subsequent readers and interpreters ('Marxism') who attempt to think in and through his legacy. While there may indeed be some overlap between the Marxist legacy and the Marxian perspective, my concern in this chapter is strictly limited to how Marx envisioned the relation between theology and ideology, and so can be taken as Marxian analysis. To complicate matters further, the most perspicuous texts where the concept of ideology is featured hardly use the term at all, and those who do have a complex and varied scholarly reception.

as “false consciousness.”² Marx understood ideology as that which produces ‘false consciousness’ in political subjects. It is the mechanism of socio-political control used by ruling powers to maintain their dominative and oppressive hold on the social relations of production. An important question about Marx’s theory of ideology is whether a central criterion of the Marxian critique is that ideology is made up of false, illusory, mythical, and distorted accounts about social reality³ — a criterion for ideology that even non-Marxist theorists use.⁴ Others try to either retain the distorted or illusory character of ideology while avoiding the epistemological issues with the claim that ideology is defined by ‘falsehood’ or reject the idea that falsehood was a central definition characteristic of ideology altogether, contending that Marx interpreted as ideological any claim that its ideas were absolutely and universally valid, a kind of claim usually made in service to

² The literature that tries to represent Marx’s position is as deep as it is wide. There are numerous examples of interpretations of Marxian ideology critique that identify “false” or “distorted” thought as a constitutive element. Prominent among them are Michael Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Christopher Pines, *Ideology and false consciousness: Marx and his historical progenitors* (SUNY Press, 1993); David Miller, “Ideology and the problem of false consciousness,” *Political Studies* 20.4 (1972): 442-444; and Jorge Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), 40ff. The specific aspect of the position(s) that I am disputing is simply the often-inherent and implicit claim that in identifying theology *as* ideology, Marx is arguing that theology is false, as in ‘not factually true’, usually assuming some corresponding theory of truth. *Pace* this construction, I do not believe that for Marx, ideology is an epistemological matter, but rather a political one. By this, I simply mean that I do not believe that ideology critique belongs to that analytic philosophical work committed to questions of belief, truth, and justification; it is not a discourse that determines whether ideas are true or false, but rather how certain ideas function within social reality.

³ For a survey of influential attempts to define and categorize ideology, see Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 4-25; and Martin Seliger, *The Marxist Conception of Ideology: A Critical Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

⁴ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia; An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd, 1936), 49-51; Paul Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 71-88ff.

economic interests of specific social class at the expense of another.⁵

I consider the term ‘false consciousness’ to be too epistemological a term and as such, it misses the political point Marx tried to make in his ideology critique. ‘False consciousness’ typically refers to the idea that political subjects misapprehend their social location and so fail to fully understand or realize their real material interests within social relations and productive forces of capitalism. ‘False consciousness’ causes politics actors to fail to recognize themselves in states of inequality, oppression, or exploitation because the ruling ideas have been naturalized and universalized, and as such, there are little reason and motivation to challenge them. People under ideology apprehend social reality in an illusionary and misleading fashion and so are unable to act on their own behalf against the dominative and exploitative practices and policies of the ruling powers. Political subjects who live under ideology act out of a ‘false consciousness’ wherein they mistake appearance for reality; this is politically insidious due to the effect that false representation and distortion of the social reality has on the legitimation of power relations.

This original reading of Marx’s theory of ideology as that of ‘false consciousness’ has become a controversial issue in the theory of ideology, leading many even within the Marxian framework to abandon ideology critique on account of the many epistemology problems it appears to present - even to the Marxist critique itself. Indeed, one of the reasons for the eclipse of ideology critique in political theology is that its definition as ‘false consciousness’ implies that there exists some space ‘beyond’ or ‘outside’ ideology, some

⁵ For a more extensive discussion of these issues, see Joe McCarney, *The Real World of Ideology* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), 95ff; and Bhikhu Parekh, *Marx’s Theory of Ideology* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

objective and scientific *gnosis*, gained from a privileged, non-ideological vantage point that becomes the subjective position from which all critique of ideology proceeds. To interpret ideology in this way is to ultimately miss the full force of Marx's materialist objection to the way that theology malforms subjects by concealing and suturing the economic contradictions that operate with social realities, in service to the political-economic interests of the ruling classes. In fact, it is the long association with the idea of "false consciousness" that has led to the dismissal of ideology critique as a viable political resource by contemporary theory. It seems to be dependent on the mind/body dichotomy that produces the appearance/reality confusion endemic to the idea of false consciousness.

This chapter advocates for a reading of Marx that deemphasizes the epistemological focus of ideology as 'false consciousness' and opts instead for a more directly political reading that helps clarify not so much the theory of ideology in abstract, but in relation to his critique of religion and theology. To do this, I start with how Marx's perspective develops in contradistinction to the so-called "Enlightenment" critique of religion, not in coincidence to it. This way we are able to avoid both overdetermining the role of Marx's atheism in his critique of religion and restricting Marx's critique of religion to his critique of ideology, which extracts it from broader themes in Marx's thought, especially in the so-called "early" periods. Given the enduring effect of Marx's legacy on critical theory and ideology critique today, it is crucial that its position on what is wrong with religion and theology is brought into clear relief. These characterizations succeed only in obscuring the fundamental problem(s) posed by ideology — and theology, for that matter.

To avoid this, we must situate Marx's critique of theology as ideology outside of the traditional Enlightenment critique of religion, which Marx himself considered to be insufficiently materialist. The critique of religion is not about theology, but about the socio-political conditions that give rise to religion in the first place and make it possible.⁶ The critique of religion as ideology is not about exposing its claims to be illusory; it is about abolishing the social relations and productive forces that prevent political subjects from prehending their actual situation: "the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions."⁷ Marx's critique of ideology animated his early humanist and materialist objections to the deleterious effect of theology on the political order — and its subjects. He saw it effectively concealing and suturing the socio-economic contradictions which form along the class fault-lines in the capitalist social order. When he speaks of religion as ideology, Marx is concerned about what religion does to human social actors and how it interacts with social relations and productive forces, inevitably in support of capitalism.

⁶ Within our current intellectual climate, we are accustomed to carefully parsing out the complex relation between religion and theology upon their mention, to what extent is this effort relevant or important for understanding Marx on the relation between theology and ideology? Does Marx distinguish between theology and religion in his work, and do they function differently in his view? If so, what does he understand each of these terms to mean? A full answer is way beyond the scope of this chapter, but suffice it to say that Marx's use of terms like religion and theology do not have the technical specificity of contemporary usage. It is quite clear that he uses these terms quite interchangeably, with little care or consideration for any real or apparent differences between them. Within Marx's historical context, the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity were dominant, and the theology of the latter was characterized heavily as Lutheran confessionism by the Prussian state. He did not distinguish between the cognitive, experiential, confessional, or practical aspects of religious faith, and their corresponding theological beliefs; this illustrates my overall position that Marx knew and cared little about theological particulars, and was far more interested to critique the way it *functioned* within capitalist socio-economic dynamics *as* an ideology.

⁷ Karl Marx, "Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, trans. Lawrence Hugh Simon (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994), 28.

The point of ideology critique is not to mark the difference between appearance and reality or to expose the content of particular truth claims to be false *per se*, but to identify ideology as a function of ideas as class-driven, bourgeoisie techniques of resistance to the processes of proletarianization; they make sure that things just keep on running smoothly, that nothing ultimately changes. Insofar as religion contributes to this, it is ideological. All too often, the atheist elements of Marx's objections to religion overshadow his more political concerns with the way that theology has deleterious impact on social reality. Marx's critique of theology as ideology affords him the opportunity to show that "'the religious sentiment' is itself a social product", the humanist thesis at the center of his nascent social theory.⁸ Ideology is not about ideas being true or false (or how it is that ideas can be either, both, or neither), but about the material conditions that give rise to political subjectivity and so determine the materialist practices of human labor.

Marx famously argued that "the 'criticism of religion' is the conditional premise of all criticism"⁹, the purpose of which is to uncover the *material* reality of the human condition, which is often concealed under 'the illusionary sun' of theological 'niceties.'¹⁰ Religion, says Marx, is symptomatic of *problems* within these material conditions and is paradigmatic of the whole ideological structure. To critique theology as ideology is to explain what theology *does* to human social actors, not to argue that the content of theology

⁸ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The German Ideology* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 574.

⁹ Karl Marx, "Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, trans. Lawrence Hugh Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 28.

¹⁰ Marx, "Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," 28.

is false.¹¹ The aim of the critique of religion as ideology is to emancipate the proletariat from the debilitating effect of ideologies - the masking and concealment of the real contradictions at the base of all relations and forces in capitalist economic life and to clear the way for political subjectivization.

At first, Marx's critique of religion itself seems to radicalize the Enlightenment's rejection of classical Christian theological beliefs and the legitimacy of religious authority in public life. He was averse to Christianity specifically, which he considered to be historically complicit in the alienating and reifying effects of capitalism on the working and producing classes:

For a society of commodity-producers, whose general social relation of production consists in the fact that they treat their products as commodities, hence as values, and in this material form bring their individual private laborers into relation with each other as homogeneous human labor. Christianity with its religious cult of man in the abstract, more particularly in its bourgeois development, i.e. in Protestantism, Deism, etc, is the most fitting form of religion.¹²

Yet, while it is clear that Marx is not a sort of crypto-theologian, recent studies on his critique of religion complicate his position on the relation of theology to ideology that complicates the Marxist allegation of theology as ideology.¹³ Despite its structural atheism,

¹¹ Jon Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), ch. 9.

¹² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol.1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 172.

¹³ Roland Boer, *Criticism of Heaven: On Marxism and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Alberto Toscano, "Beyond Abstractions: Marx and the Critique of the Critique of Religion," *Historical Materialism* 18 (2010): 3-20; Andrew McKinnon, "Reading 'Opium of the People': Expression, Protest, and the Dialectics of Religion," *Critical Sociology* 31.1-2 (2005): 15-38.

the Marxist legacy finds it quite difficult to discount the formal and normative significance of theology.¹⁴ But lest we think that it is possible to extract the moral and ethical values of Christianity from its more scandalous theological particulars or its economic moorings, Marx famously resisted the idea that ‘the social principles of Christianity’ could be counted on to promote or generate social liberation or economic justice:

The social principles of Christianity preach the necessity of a ruling and oppressed class, and for the latter all they have to offer is the pious wish that former may be charitable... The social principles of Christianity are sneaking and hypocritical and the proletariat is revolutionary. So much for the social principles of Christianity!¹⁵

It is also important to note, at the outset, that specifically *theological* debates serve as the immediate intellectual and political context for the early stage of Marx’s critique of religion and his concept of ideology. I will reconstruct Marx’s theory of ideology, not exhaustively, but as it concerns the critique of theology, thereby pinpointing its place within Marx’s theory of ideology at large. Strangely enough, the question of theology is often overlooked in Marx’s concept of ideology; it is usually considered to be a footnoted example, a specific form of a more general type. While it is widely accepted that Marx dismisses religion as ideology, one often finds that when reconstructing Marx’s account of ideology itself, the place of religion in that account is far more than a marginal or negative one. Religion is indeed the paradigmatic case of ideology for Marx, at least in his early ‘philosophical’ stage, and becomes the measure for his structural analysis of

¹⁴ For differing perspectives, see Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1993); Robert C. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

¹⁵ Karl Marx, “The Social Principles of Christianity,” in *Marx on Religion*, ed. John Raines (Philadelphia, Pa: Temple University Press, 2002), 185-186.

capitalism in his later ‘scientific’ stages. Many descriptive forms of relations such as commodification, fetishization, money, and the value-product are described *as* and *by* theologies in Marx’s ideology critique of the capitalist social order.

Marx and the Critique of the Theological Critique of Religion

What concerned Marx about religion — and how did this concern differ from preceding critiques? My point here is to situate Marx’s early use of the term ‘ideology’ as contextualized within particular theological debates amongst nineteenth-century interpreters of Hegel. The context has important interpretative implications as it is directly related to Marx’s theories of abstraction and of historical materialism, which have constitutive roles in the articulation of ideology critique in Marx’s early humanism philosophy. The concept of ideology was germinated in Marx’s critical reception of Hegel in and through the critical inversion of German idealism in the work of Ludwig Feuerbach, a turn lodged within the community of ‘Left’ or ‘Young’ Hegelians.¹⁶ Feuerbach represented a decisive turn from the traditional critique of religion through epistemology and metaphysics to a French and British inspired materialist critique of religion that interpreted theology as an inverted anthropology.¹⁷

¹⁶ Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, 73-94. Marx never understood himself to be departing in any significant way from what he took to be the core intuitions of Hegel himself. Marx never left Hegel. Instead, his breakthrough came as a matter of his departure with the particular Hegelianism that eventually characterized the theological approach of Bruno Bauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, and others. Marx opposed the ‘theological Hegel’ insofar as he was read as such by idealists who were still waging a theoretical attack against religion, whose theological blows were abstract, superficial, and so woefully ineffective insofar as they were satisfied with merely exposing “the secular basis” of theology itself.

¹⁷ Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, 83 and 85-94. Tucker outlines this in his masterful recounting of Feuerbach’s interpretation of Hegel which turns metaphysics into an ‘esoteric psychology.’ Feuerbach’s point was to say that “Hegelianism is the traditional Christian theology spelt by dialectic. Hegel’s

In so doing, the ‘ideologists’ were set firmly within the confines of the traditional Enlightenment critique of religion. In response, Marx takes up the vague term of ‘ideology’ in this context, which at this time had a very short history, and utilized it as a matter of social scientific critique, directed towards those ‘ideologists’ whose inadequately materialist interrogation of religion uses the ‘transformative method’ of inversion in order to demonstrate the secular or psychological basis of theological belief. Marx argued that this approach was fatally flawed for its abstract character that led them to largely misunderstand the relation between being and consciousness and between subject and object. This resulted in highly abstracted and idealist conception of the relation between the individual social actor and society, between the state and the civil discourses of social action, all of which comes back to the overtly theological character of their critique of the inverted character of religion and its self-alienating effects on the human being.

The immediate context for the relation between theology and ideology is Marx’s early departure from Hegel along Feuerbachian lines, followed by his subsequent parting from the Young Hegelians on account of their “idealist” materialism. This is best illustrated in their theological critique of religion, which according to Marx, deals only with the highest of ‘abstractions’. Their approach takes on religion from the ‘abstract’ theological side, leaving the material conditions uninterrogated as if religion and its theological content was not itself a social product. As an abstraction, it is neither sufficiently dialectical nor historical (and so not sufficiently ‘Hegelian’), and so leads to contradictions and

picture of a self-alienated God simply brings into focus what was always present in religious consciousness, and in traditional theology as its theological transcript," meaning that in Hegel, we find a ‘rational mysticism’ that serves as the ‘last rational support of theology.’

antagonisms at the social and economic level. Marx defines an abstraction as an undeveloped unity of identical aspects of a representation ('as if') of a thing ('as such') in isolation from other aspects, whereas concrete applications are a developed unity of the diverse aspects of said representation. Practical abstraction is a contributing factor to social contradiction. Consider, for example, Marx's critique of Feuerbach in the sixth and seventh theses:

Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man. (sic) But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual... Consequently, Feuerbach does not see that the 'religious sentiment' is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual which he analyzes belongs in reality to a particular form of society.¹⁸

The early 1840s were the critical period in which Marx was most engaged on the link between theology, politics, and as such, ideology. Marx approached the question of ideology and religion in his early years, while distancing himself in *the German Ideology* from the 'critique of religion' of the "young" or "left" Hegelians, favoring instead a materialist parallelism that formulates its critique of religion as an "immanent critique of antagonism", or clearer still, the sources of social contradiction itself.¹⁹ It is important to clarify the historical and intellectual context in which Marx first took up the question of 'religion' as a *theological* matter, essentially changing the site, the battleground, upon which the struggle against religion must be waged. In other words, it is important not to

¹⁸ Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," 573-574.

¹⁹ Robert J. Antonio, "Immanent Critique as the Core of Critical Theory: Its Origins and Developments in Hegel, Marx and Contemporary Thought," *British Journal of Sociology* (1981): 330-345; Jan Rehmann. "Can Marx's Critique of Religion Be Freed from Its Fetters?" *Rethinking Marxism* 23.1 (2011): 144-153.

parse the referent 'religion' in Marx to the point that it becomes abstracted from the discursive context in which Marx takes up the question, a context in which the most important questions for philosophy were indeed explicitly theological.²⁰ The Young Hegelians that Marx criticized in *The German Ideology* were actively involved in a whole range of theological debates, not because of their particular interest in theology per se, but because the very theological nature of Hegel's argument led to that being the primarily battleground. Theology was the discursive site in the political struggle to resolve open dilemmas in German idealism, and so Marx's nascent theory of ideology emerges within this crucible. This explains at least in part why the early mentions of ideology always seem to be in close proximity to this critique of religion.

What motivated Marx's critique of religion was not his atheist theological commitments, but rather a materialist and humanist objection to ways that religion produced and sustained the very social contradictions, which causes the real needs that human social actors attempt to resolve in theology. In this way, Marx's initial analysis of theology takes the form of a critique of the theological critique of religion as undertaken by the Young Hegelians, who like Feuerbach, thought the problem of inversion lie with false ideas about God, and so the critique of religion was a matter of changing consciousness by demonstrating those ideas to be false, i.e., an affront to nature, freedom, and reason, even while these arguments lie within the field of theological discourse. The use of anti-

²⁰ Warren Breckman, *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory: Dethroning the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

theist arguments and rationalist epistemologies would be sufficient to change the consciousness of human persons and so resolve the problems with the political use of religion, or so they thought. Marx thought otherwise. His materialist concept of history as human work explored the conditions that produce religion, and critique those who were convinced that changing the world required only the pedagogy of theological inversion: God as the projected effect of self-alienated ‘essence’ of humanity. These, says Marx, are the ‘ideologists’: those who fail to interrogate “the secular basis” of religion and fail to encounter the material ground upon which ideas are formed and so function. Against Max Stirner, to whom he attributes the idea “that thoughts, which have become independent, objectified thoughts – ghosts – have ruled the world and continue to rule it, and that all history up to now was the history of theology”²¹, Marx will argue that ideologists combat religion on theological terms and so takes on the faults of such a register: inversion, abstraction and contradiction, the marks of ideology.

The real problem with religion is not theological particulars about matters such God, freedom, or the immortality of the soul. It is, rather, the social reality in which it is rooted and the material conditions it serves.²² Or to be more precise: it is the contradictions produced within that social reality, the origins of which lie with the division of labor

²¹ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 173.

²² Though to be sure, Marx has theological disagreements with the core beliefs of the major religion traditions, namely Judaism and Christianity, the Protestant variety in particular. It is not that Marx did not consider the theological dictates of religion such as the existence of God, the belief in life after death, or the existence of the human soul to be false or unreasonable. Only that this line of questioning, ‘the critique of heaven’, left the ‘the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness’ of the materialist base of religion uninterrogated. This was the line of questioning most important for understanding the various forms of political, and eventually, economic alienation plaguing the workers and producers suffering under capitalist society.

and privatization of property which not only produces alienation (in its tripartite form), but also furthers and endorses class struggle by setting the interests of the individual over that of the social good. These contradictions give rise to various forms of consciousness. Ideology is that specific type of consciousness, which attempts to resolve contradictions through negation or concealment. Whether by design or by effect, it is ideologists such as those whose critical appraisal of religion served as Marx's point of departure from the Feuerbach's emphasis on critique as inversion, which treated contradictions as something that could be resolved through a change in thinking. Rather, Marx wants to take on the different modes of abstraction and contradiction, and so he begins to categorize and analyze various responses to them, the most trenchant of which is ideology.

Taking a stand against the Young Hegelians (Bruno Bauer, Feuerbach, and Max Stirner), Marx contends that the traditional critique of religion is inadequate, in that the use of a baldly atheist critique of religious authority and the role of religion in legitimating the state only elevates the discursive stature of Christianity. His entrée into the debate on religion and politics is summarized in his materialist parallelism: Marx wants to abandon the 'criticism of heaven' and take up a 'criticism of earth' in its place. This requires that critical philosophy abandon its operation against religion and engage rather a critique of the fraught relations between the state and civil society as a matter of sociological and economic analysis. In a letter to Arnold Ruge, Marx writes,

Religion should be criticized in the framework of political conditions [instead of criticizing] political conditions ... in the framework of religion ...; for religion in

itself is without content, it owes its being not to heaven but to earth, and with the abolition of distorted reality, of which it is the theory, it will collapse of itself.²³

To make this point, that religion is 'the theory of the world,' Marx must disentangle the Young Hegelian's political critique from the traditional critique of religion. To do this, Marx must enter into the theological fray and as a result, his early diagnosis of ideology is characterized by its link to theology, both contextually and materially. It was not enough to unveil theology as an abstraction by showing it to be an inverted project of human self-alienation. Contrary to the traditional critique of religion, Marx, rather than dismissing religion as either a priestly conspiracy to manipulate human persons or a mere delusion, recognizes religion as a form of consciousness that functions politically to organize and produce collective life, and so must be engaged, not at the level of abolishing it politically or dismantling it theologically, but critiquing it materially.

To illustrate this, allow me to give two examples: first in the important although frequently overlooked, early text "The Leading Article", Marx reprimanded the German papers who attacked the "religious trend in philosophy" and called for the abolition of Christianity from the political state.²⁴ Marx disagrees, arguing that this amounts to a politicization of religion, which actually aids the critique of religion, in that the religious legitimization of politics actively "secularizes it", making it an "object of political discourse and disputation." Again in "The Jewish Question," Marx faults Bauer, for whom the

²³ Karl Marx, "Marx to Ruge, November 30 1842," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works, vol. I* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 393-395.

²⁴ Karl Marx, "The Leading Article of No. 179 of Kolnische Zeitung," in *Marx on Religion*, ed., John Raines (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), 34-35.

question of religion should be transposed into a question about the secular state. Pace Bauer who thinks that the State should abolish religion, Marx says this will neither effectively end religion's hold on social and political life nor will it actually contribute to human emancipation.²⁵ The political emancipation from religion (restricting its political influence by privatizing and confining it to civil society) does little for human social actors who are struggling to recover their 'species-being.' What Marx desired instead was the establishment of social relations and productive forces that are appropriate to human species-being and that promote the practical life-activity, of the real individual human actor. The mere political dismissal or theological rejection of religion accomplished very little in this regard. The register upon which religion is to be dismantled is at the materialist level of history, understood by social actors as the product of their natural freedom and instinctive creativity. This is not only an early position that Marx eventually sheds, but rather one that he reiterates in this line in *Capital*:

The religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature, generally present themselves to him in a transparent and rational form. The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e., the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control. This, however, requires that society possess a material foundation, or a series of material conditions of existence, which in their turn are the natural and spontaneous product of a long and tormented historical development.²⁶

²⁵ Karl Marx, "The Jewish Question," in *Marx on Religion*, ed., John Raines (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), 64-69.

²⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 173.

This path Marx took in critiquing the traditional critique of religion as abstract and idealist on account of being overly theological was to amplify the social basis of the religious forms of abstractions and to remove the material contradictions at their secular basis. This goes hand in hand with Marx's departure from Feuerbach, signaled in the fourth 'Theses':

His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. He overlooks the fact that after completing this work, the chief thing still remains to be done. For the fact that the secular basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself in the clouds an independent realm can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must be understood in its contradiction and then, by the removal of the contradiction, revolutionized.²⁷

To put it rather bluntly, Marx was less interested in defeating religion through a theological critique of its constitutive claims, as the Young Hegelians had attempted, but rather located the critical-materialist struggle against religion "neither in the "essence of man, nor in the predicates of God, but in the material world, which each stage of religious development finds in existence."²⁸ It is not that religion is false and therefore ideological, but rather that religion functions in collective life in such a way that it engenders and enacts a social logic that alienates humanity from itself and assumes an autonomous character, as if its 'independent realm' was somehow beyond, or abstracted from the real life processes of historical practice. This, says Marx, names theology's ideological function; this is why it must be ruthlessly critiqued.

²⁷ Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," 573.

²⁸ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 172.

So it is in the context of theological debate that Marx's analysis of ideology develops as a part of a sustained critique of the critique of religion that gestured towards what would eventually become the materialist conception of history in *The German Ideology* and *the Theses on Feuerbach*. In the years following 1843, Marx would go from an 'eliminative materialism' in *The German Ideology* to a full-blown historical-materialist understanding of religion, applied to capitalist economic forms in *Capital*, where one is able "to develop, from the actual relations of life, the corresponding celestialised forms of those relations." For Marx, the critique of theology as ideology goes beyond simply connecting the autotomizing and divisive activity of theological belief and practice to its 'secular' or material basis. Marx thinks that it is essential that the critique of theology uncover the social and historical necessity and rootedness of the 'phantoms' and 'sublimates' in the specifically theological form of ideology. Ideology is a social-scientific concept that expresses the economic and political task of critique, and so it names theology not merely as a fantastical psychological illusion or a bourgeois political conspiracy that is carried out by religious authorities in order to console or trick human social actors. Theology as ideology is indeed a *socio-economic* problem because it is integral to the success and endurance of capitalist forms of political economic that arranges human existence, and social life. This calls for a structural study of its material bases, realities known in Marxian parlance as the value-product, abstract labor, commodity-fetishism, and money-relation, to name a few. But first, we must clarify the use and description of ideology critique as a critical and negative concept in relation to theology, (section two) in order to better locate the place of ideology within Marx's general critique of theology

(section three). This allows us, then, to explore the theological descriptions given to its more specifically capitalist economic forms (section four).

The Use of Ideology in Marx's Critique of Religion

David McLellan notes that the term “ideology” was birthed out of historical upheaval: the rise of democratic government, mass political movements, and a society marked by rapidly developing plurality.²⁹ Tied to the breakdown of the medieval world, and as such, the hierarchical structures of metaphysics and cosmology that sustained that world, the term ‘ideology’ was first coined by French revolutionary philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy in 1797, who argued for a “new science of ideas” which would study the rational and natural origins of all ideas.³⁰ In the beginning, ideology was the positive and constructive name for this new descriptive field of inquiry. It was given its negative and critical sharpness when taken up by the European emperor Napoleon, who pejoratively titled his critics ‘ideologues’: those who “by subtly searching for first causes, wishes to establish on this basis the legislation of peoples” through a “cloudy metaphysics.”³¹ The short history of the term ‘ideology’ and the thin, ad hoc manner in which Marx uses it makes it difficult to give a thorough reconstruction of the concept, especially in relation to other more developed themes and trajectories in Marx’s writings. Finally, his theory of ideology is closely related to his theory of alienation and labor as is his critically appreciative reception of the method of inversion in Feuerbach. It is not easy to stay focused

²⁹ David McLellan, *Ideology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 2-8.

³⁰ McLellan, *Ideology*, 10.

³¹ As cited in McLellan, *Ideology*, 5.

on the trimmed down question of the ideology/theology link without getting drawn into the larger questions.

There were other historical factors that produce misconceptions about Marx's theory of ideology and complicate its interpretation in relation to theology, especially in the context of the postwar United States. I mention the context and reception history in the US in particular because it is important to note that the more humanist writings of the early Marx are translated relatively late, meaning that Marx has been read in the US as purveying a strictly 'scientific socialism' that was easily (albeit grossly and mistakenly) transposed into a "Bolshevik" state ideology first, and proto-Soviet Communism, last.³² The anti-Communist bias in Marx scholarship came of age in the US (1950s-1990s) within anti-Communist political climate and a neotraditionalist return to religion within the civil and social order. This largely overdetermined how Marx's concept of ideology was interpreted, especially in relation to his critique of religion. The correlation between his atheism and his communism is thus overdrawn and is an effect of the defense of civic religion in American politics which considers religion to be of significant political value, if not moral necessity. The emphasis on Marx's atheism as the constitutive reason for his critique of religion as ideology overlooks both the ambiguity and ambivalence of Marx's assessment of religion and the complexity of his analysis of ideology, especially in later

³² Of course, the mainstay text on Marxist history that influenced this interpretation is Leszek Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism: the Founders, the Golden Age, the Breakdown* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005), which erroneously argued for a direct genealogy of knowledge between the materialist writings of Marx and the tyrannical monstrosity of Stalin. For more on the US reception of Marx and Marxism, see Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (London: Verso, 1987) and David McLellan's landmark *Marxism After Marx: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1980).

more ‘economic’ texts such as *Capital* and *Grundrisse*, including its 1859 “Preface.”

It is common to think of Marx’s theory of ideology as a kind of paranoid conspiracy theory, whereby the sinister bourgeois invent or fabricate ideas (say, theological ones) that are then used in various social and economic forms (e.g., commodities, money, labor) in order to manipulate and regulate workers and producers under a capitalist economic regime. Contrarily, Marx does not think that ideology is an intentional or purposeful invention by the bourgeois for the expressed intention to manipulate or misrepresent social reality for the proletariat; ideology is not invented by the ruling class, but rather insists that it has a real materialist base.

Essential Features of Marx’s Concept of Ideology

Despite the many interpretative difficulties and common mistakes, it is important to clarify exactly what Marx means by ideology, specially as in consort to other difficult concepts like inversion, contradiction, abstraction, and alienation, and to make clear its relation to and identification with, theology. Marx does not give a detailed or thick description of ideology, but rather displays what he means by the term in how he uses it. To say that a particular idea is ideological is to name the way it functions in relation to contradictions in social life, in such a way as to appear to resolve the contradictions while only distorting and concealing their real material base. For Marx, ideology is defined as *the specific practice* of an idea, in the historical context of class struggle, which generates and reproduces misrepresentations of material social contradictions (from which the ideologies themselves stem) by attempting to resolve them, either by negation or concealment. Marx uses the term ‘ideology’ as a diagnostic assessment of how the formation of

ideas interacts with essential contradictions that work within social consciousness to create, but also to conceal, alienating disparities in the social division of labor. This is the scaffolding that props up the enduring economic power of the bourgeois capitalist. Yet, for our purposes, this general definition is not enough. It needs to be defined in relation to theology, which means we must determine the use of theology in and as ideological argument, the purpose of this section. We must also examine exactly what Marx means by religion and theology, and how ideologies forms take on theological descriptions in their economic capitalist forms, the subject of coming sections.

First, let me condense the position in a few theses, which will be explained further in the course of the chapter's argument. First, ideology is a *critical and negative concept* for Marx. The term expresses a certain kind of *problem* that originates from real social contradictions, the effect of which is alienation in its various forms: religious, political, and economic. Ideology *as* inversion responds to and is produced by an 'inverted world' that is already acting upon human actors in the form of an 'inverted consciousness.' Second, ideology gets its 'inverted consciousness of the world' from the 'inverted world' itself, the effect of specifically capitalist economic forms and disciplinary mechanisms. The implication here is that ideology is a secondary concern for Marx, who is far more interested in interrogating the *causes* of 'the inverted world' than he is in eradicating religion as 'the theory' of this world, the alienating effect of which is symptomatic of the defect. Third, ideology as a function of social consciousness gives human persons an inadequate and distorted picture of the *contradictions* that exist in social reality, either by ignoring them or misrepresenting them, making their effects quite politically problematic.

Fourth, these social contradictions call for a revolutionary form of material practice to uncover the ways that ideologies misrepresent or otherwise conceal ‘the real relations and activities’ of human persons. Ideologies are the results and effects of the ‘limited material mode of activity.’ To critique ideology is to name endemic limitations in the historical conditions of human life and work. These conditions as products of history can only be only transformed by putting in motion an alternative material practice that produces an altogether different future. Fifth, ideologies are a political concern because they necessarily serve the interests of the ruling class, even if that class has not produced them. As historical products, ideas might come in and out of ideological status, based in large part on the ruling class and material conditions of history. Ideologies are techniques used by the ruling classes to suppress and confuse the working and producing classes and to cover up the material conditions that contribute to their further alienation and oppression. Ideologies are a problem for Marx because they resist the processes of proletarianization. Their social impact is the primary object of critique.

It is important to identify ideologies as social products of material practice. They are not inventions or mere illusions to be corrected by persuasive argument or change in cognitive perspective. Nor are they inert or passive reflections of some external reality that they have no real role in reproducing. Marx makes his arguments about the character of ideology along the way to making a much more critical point about the nature of consciousness viz a viz the idealism and materialist polarity. It is interesting to note that it is at this juncture — the intersection of consciousness and material practice — that ideology and theology are brought into bold relief. Marx put it this way in *The German Ideology*:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men — *the language of real life*. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men at this stage still appear as the direct efflux of their material behavior. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of the politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., that is, *real, active men*, as they are conditioned by a definitely development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can be never anything else than conscious being and the being of men in their actual life-process.³³

Ideologies are indeed produced through the material process by *the very limitations of practical activity* itself, namely the propensity to reinforce pre-existing social contradictions and create new ones, identified later as the ‘objectifying power’ of alienation in the division of labor and the privatization of property. In other words, ‘practice’ is the name that Marx gives to that ‘conscious and sensuous activity’ whereby human actors produce their own material existence and the constitutive relations of their life within the context of nature, society, and history. Social reality is dynamically produced by the practical activity of real human actors in history. Rather than being outside or simply a passive reflection of it, ideology is grounded in this social reality and so cannot be dismissed as a kind of an inverted image of the real thing. It is essentially part and parcel of this social reality and so an interrogation of its ‘secular basis’ is required in order to undermine and dismantle its economic reproduction. Human consciousness is neither independent from nor a passive reflection of the real-life processes in material conditions. Again, Marx in his own words:

In direct contrast to German philosophy, which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven. That is to say not of setting out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of,

³³ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 42.

imagined, conceived in order to arrive at men in the flesh; but setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life process demonstrating the development of the ideological *reflexes* and *echoes* of this life-process.³⁴

In *the German Ideology*, Marx's social account of consciousness describes the ideological function of theology by linking it to material practice directly, thereby illustrating both the nature of ideology and what it says about theology's defects:

The *phantoms* formed in the brains of men are also, necessarily, *sublimates* of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their actual world, also their thinking, and the products of their thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness.³⁵

One is given the sense, at least from this assemblage of text, that the problem with theology that ideology names does not refer directly to its content, but instead its function, its effect on and within material practice itself. Theology could be other than ideology, in other words. In fact if theology were in fact to submit itself to the material life processes, if it were to abandon their 'semblance of independence' and so be altered along with the actual world, as a product of [human] thinking, perhaps its effect on social life might be as an alternative to ideology. To get a better sense of whether or not this works in Marx himself, we will need to investigate further about the place of ideology in Marx's critique of theology.

The Place of Ideology in Marx's Critique of Theology

³⁴ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 42.

³⁵ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 42.

So far I have argued that Marx originally developed ‘ideology’ as a negative and critical response to the ‘young’ Hegelian’s critique of religion, which remained within the sphere of theological discourse, mistaking the ‘halo’ for ‘the vale of tears’ and neglecting to interrogate the ‘secular basis’ in the criticism ‘of earth,’ ‘of law,’ and ‘of politics.’ This is the set of materialist theses in the early Marx that defines the descriptive relation of theology as ideology. In this case, ideology works in society to mask or mystify the real basic origin of social existence from the human being, wrecking havoc on the creative and reproductive practices of human labor. He sought to reorient the critical direction of post-Hegelian political thought from ‘a critique of heaven’ to a ‘critique of earth,’ that is to move out of abstract discussions about theology to materialist and historicized explanations of the conditions which constitute the real, life processes of human social actors, or as Marx would later explain it, ‘the critique of the political economy.’ The question remains: what place does theology have in Marx’s ‘critique of earth’?

Interpretative Difficulties in Marx’s Critique of Religion

The ‘Marx on religion’ discussion has a long and coiled history. For most, it is simply enough to catalogue the various citations in the 1844 ‘Introduction’, the 1859 ‘Preface,’ with a smattering of citations from *On the Jewish Question*, *Capital*, and of course, *The German Ideology* and *Theses on Feuerbach* in order to establish the basic parameters of Marx’s analysis of religion as a socially constructed form of consolation. It is in these citations that we see Marx first agreeing with Feuerbach’s inversion critique of religion, and then departing from it to a more trenchant political critique, and then finally, taking up an economic analysis of the faults of religion viz a viz its place in capitalist

forms.³⁶ In this account, it is often enough to recount Marx's apparent identification of religion as an illusion, a form of false consciousness that aids and abets capitalism, a position that seems cemented by his frequent, though haphazardly scattered, use of metaphors such as 'opium of the people', 'phantoms', 'camera obscura', and the 'sigh of the oppressed creature' to describe the social impact of religion. Marx's use of theology as metaphor for the mystifying effect of ideology intimates that he regarded religion as a false, epistemological construal of socio-economic problems in the sense that they are inverted, illusionary, and do not cohere to reality.

But as I argued in previous sections, this is not the full story. In fact, this account of Marx is very close to the position that Marx identifies with the 'ideologists' who sought through the traditional Enlightenment critique to abolish religion by defeating the reasonableness of its theological arguments through various strategies, all of which were designed to defeat religion as its own theological ambit, while never actually properly interrogating its 'secular basis.' My point here is that it is not enough to simply list the metaphors that Marx uses to describe the social comportment of religion if we are to understand the relation between ideology and theology in Marx. Upon careful consideration, these metaphors appear to be more ambivalent and ambiguous than they appear. So are the positions and arguments they apparently illustrate. They are not easily reduced to an analysis of religion's ideological character as a form of false consciousness that is complicit in propping up economic relations that alienate and oppress the human social actor

³⁶ Jorge Larraín, *Marxism and Ideology* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 40ff.

through depersonalizing and reifying capitalist economic procedures such as commodification, fetishization, money, labor, value-form, etc.

Common Mistakes in Interpreting Marx's Critique of Religion

The complexity of Marx's position(s) on theology can result in many common mistakes. For example, there were many, especially in the postwar years which were dominated by anti-Communist suspicion, who thought that Marx's critique of religion merely replaced traditional forms of religion with an atheist critique that was nevertheless religion 'by-another-name': "a new dogma."³⁷ These readers think Marx simply redefines religion in a humanist vein that explores the basis of the moral commitments of society with the ultimate goal of realizing a utopian eschatology.³⁸ Even still, other interpreters contend that despite its structural atheism, Marxian positions retain a "religious" character, keeping intact the central "religious" spirit of the Ultimate, as evinced in the utopian commitments of his humanism.³⁹ For proponents of this reading, Marx is far from the vulgar atheist reductionist that wants to abolish religion on theological grounds (e.g., "this is all there is"). This perspective emphasizes the role of Marx's humanism, not its empiricism or atheism. Marx, contrary to Feuerbach, refuses to allow secular atheism to be the final word and this point stresses the differences between Feuerbach's atheist theo-

³⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Introduction," in *Marx and Engels on Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

³⁸ Denys Turner, *Marxism and Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

³⁹ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

logical critique of religion as inversion and Marx's materialist economic critique of religion as ideology.⁴⁰

Others will try to emphasize Marx's apparent, albeit critical, appreciation of the existential value of religion and its impulses to express and protest suffering and oppression, while also sustaining the search for the purpose of human life and thought beyond critique and interruption.⁴¹ Certainly, they say, Marx's dialectics kept him open to evolving and progressive forms of religion that were appropriately sensitive to his critiques and so found ways to transform the contradictions they too often neglected, negated, or concealed as ideologies. As Denys Turner surmised, "A Christianity – indeed any religion — that itself ... is able to transcend the dichotomized Feuerbachian problematic [between human and divine], would at least evade the indictment that it is a necessarily ideological mode of thought and practice."⁴² These readings are often meant to either draw Marxism and Christianity closer together, especially during and after the dawn of liberation theology, or to definitively arrange them as diametric opposites, as was the case by most post-war theological readers concerned about the orthodox Marxist legacy of communist and totalitarian governments.⁴³

I try to avoid these mistakes by describing Marx's negative and critical position

⁴⁰ "I desired there to be less trifling with the label 'atheism' (which reminds one of children, assuring everyone who is ready to listen to them that they are not afraid of the bogey man), and that instead the content of philosophy should be brought to the people." Karl Marx, "Letter to Arnold Ruge" in *Karl Marx: The Selected Writings*, 2nd edition. ed. David McLellan. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 28.

⁴¹ Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, 121-140.

⁴² Denys Turner, "Religion: Illusions and Liberation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Marx*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 337.

⁴³ Turner, "Religion: Illusions and Liberation," 325.

on theology as ideology as motivated by its specific relation to and interaction with social relations and economic forms, *not* by any of Marx's (uninformed) theological disagreements. Again, my goal here is not to somehow save religion or theology from Marx's ideology critique. Instead, I find it important to say that Marx is rather disinterested in the Feuerbachian dualism of god/human and heaven/earth, and the whole point of this early critique of the young Hegelians was that they were too interested in defeating religion through theological disputations. Marx used his materialist conception of history and the application of this conception in his late analysis of capitalist economic forms to sidestep that problematic altogether, and get straight to social contradictions and their economic points of origin. Clarifying this point helps to contextualize, assemble, and interpret Marx's scattered comments about religion, a topic about which he knew little and cared even less.⁴⁴ The theological content of religion *per se* is not the fundamental object of Marx's ideology critique. Instead, Marx takes up the specifically contradictory forms of reality that are responsible for the conditions in which religion happens. How religion acts — in other words, its social impact — in relation to these forms of reality is what makes Marx identify religion as ideology, which again, is not the same thing as arguing that religion is false, which Marx does do but is not the significant trajectory of his *ideology* critique of religion.

Essential Features of Marx's Critique of Religion

⁴⁴ Turner, "Religion: Illusions and Liberation," 336.

I have been arguing Marx's ideology critique of religion centers on his materialist and humanist objections to religion's effects, not a theological critique of religious beliefs themselves. Marx is less concerned with indicting religious authorities, much less religious believers, with political conspiracy or sinister intentions than he is with showing how religion negates or conceals the economic and social contradictions, to great detriment to the human social actor. This is made clear in the opening words of the 'Introduction,' which orients the object of Marxian criticism away from theology. For Marx,

The profane existence of error is compromised as soon as its heavenly oratio pro aris et focus ["speech for the altars and hearths"] has been refuted. Man, who has found only the reflection of himself in the fantastic reality of heaven, where he sought a superman, will no longer feel disposed to find the mere appearance of himself, the non-man ["Unmensch"], where he seeks and must seek his true reality.⁴⁵

As such, Marx allows for no confusion as to what position the historical materialist must take on religion, when viewed through the lens of ideology critique. Marx is only interesting in taking up religion as an ideological problem insofar as it contains within itself helpful and illustrative elements that clarify the essential features of ideology and its social impact, most notably on alienation and labor. Ideology critique identifies religion, not as the cause of alienation (that he saves for capitalist social relations) but as a form of it. The task of criticism then, as a means of political denunciation, must first unmask human self-alienation in its holy form (i.e., religion) – and then proceeds through criticism to take it up via material force in unholy, or 'earthly' forms (i.e., political and eventually, economic). Marx makes this point again in the 'Introduction' when speaking about why

⁴⁵ Karl Marx, "Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed, Lawrence Hugh Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 28.

ideology critique gets more to the historical point of what is materially wrong with religion than *theological* critique does:

It is, therefore, the task of history, once the other-worldly truth has disappeared, to establish the truth of this world. The immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history is to unmask human self-alienation in its unholy forms once it has been unmasked in its holy form. Thus, the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.⁴⁶

The critique of ideology as a “criticism of heaven” is unsatisfactory to Marx. This stays well within the ambit of theological talk and so misses the point. The critique of religion and theology as ideology fails unless it pushes itself further to that of law and politics, rather than conceding the site of struggle. Marx’s critique of theology as ideology is far more socio-political and economic, which Marx considered to be the decisive factor in social life; it concerns the social impact of theology on human social actors, namely as a potentially alienating and dehumanizing force that imprisons human persons to their reproductive activity, rather than liberating them to revolutionary practice. To illustrate this, I will continue with the 1844 ‘Introduction’:

The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man ... Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower.⁴⁷

Marx’s ideology critique levies a materialist and humanist objection to the way religion mystifies the human from itself, alienating it from its spontaneous creativity and external-

⁴⁶ Marx, “Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” 28.

⁴⁷ Marx, “Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” 28.

izing its productive power ('bearing that chain'), so that the world and its historical circumstances confront the human social actor as a strange and distant entity, rather than as the natural result of its reproductive practice. Marx's ideology critique of religion is meant to clear a way forward for a revolutionary humanity to come to greater knowledge of itself as a creative and productive force, liberating it from the oppressive effects of economic contradictions forced upon it by a capitalist economic system: to 'throw off the chain and pluck the living flower.' The point of ideology critique is to cease and reverse is the negative effect that religion and theology has on the process of proletarianization of the working classes, the prerequisite for any revolutionary praxis, aimed at undermining the bourgeoisie economic system. Ideology critique is never about truth or falsehood, but always about the formation of the political subject. Theology is a problem only because it is deemed an obstacle to this endeavor rather than an ally. The goal of ideology critique is to lay bare these effects ('the imaginary flowers') as they are found in the cracks in the social system: the contradictions enacted by the various division and separations in labor, value, class, *et cetera* that imprison the human person and preclude her/his full realization in history. Marx names religion directly as an object of this critique in the next few lines, putting his humanism in clear display:

The criticism of religion disillusion man, so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that he will move around himself as his own true Sun. Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Marx, "Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," 28.

Since ideologies, as Marx describes them, are ‘theories’ with a basis in the real social world, the condition that gives rise to these ‘theories’ call for further materialist consideration. This question produced the major argument of *The German Ideology*, which seeks to clarify the idea of inversion through an analysis of history as produced by human attempts to respond to their material needs, with recourse to the natural world, which is transformed by human work. For Marx, it is important to unveil the character of labor, for it is in rediscovering the true nature of human work that humanity recognizes itself as the ‘sun’ around which history revolves, and as such bears responsible for the pathological contradictions that manifest themselves in oppressive and exploitative ways in the on-going class struggle. As such, alienation and labor are at the forefront of Marx’s metaphorical link between ideology and theology, in that the experience of alienation is caused by the very economic contradictions that ideology by definition attempts to conceal and negate, a matter of practical concern given Marx’s humanist account of labor and practice.

At the center of this humanist critique lies religion, which as ‘fantasy or consolation’, has precluded humanity from freeing itself from the circumstantial determinations that once produced by reproductive practice of social actors, end up antagonizing and enslaving them. as the material practice that constitutes social economic orders, instead accepting their estranged state as the natural state of things that cannot be otherwise. The critique of religion is a humanist objection to how religion mystifies human social actors from the real, life power of their collective material strivings in and through nature and history, particularly in the form of labor, a thesis still important for Marx to reiterate in the first volume of *Capital*:

Labor is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. ... By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.⁴⁹

Combine this humanism with Marx's basic premises of his materialist concept of history:

"the real individuals, their activity, and the material conditions of their life ... which can be verified in a purely empirical way"⁵⁰, and you get the basic structural parameters for the link between alienation, theology, and ideology. For "all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals" who "distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence, men are indirectly producing their material life."⁵¹ In this way, "what they are," says Marx "therefore coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce. Hence, what individuals are depends on the material conditions of their production."⁵²

The product of this human striving in history through nature is society itself. Indeed, the labor process, otherwise known in Marxian vernacular as 'material practice' is the basic activity proper to the creativity of the human being, and as such, is the site of where contradictions happens, the very 'stuff' from which ideologies both emerge and simultaneously conceal. A study of ideology then is the study of contradiction, and to

⁴⁹ Marx *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, v. 1, 177-178.

⁵⁰ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 37.

⁵¹ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 42.

⁵² Marx, *The German Ideology*, 37.

study religion as ideology is indeed to study the dialectical ways in which theology interacts and responds to contradictions and the problems they produce for material existence, the most central of which, in Marx anyway, is alienation.

Theology and its Social Impact

In “the Introduction”, Marx famously describes religion, in properly materialist form, as ideology in terms of its negative, social impact, particularly on human subjects. The textual context of the ‘Introduction’ proves helpful here. Marx wrote these remarks in an introduction to a planned work on Hegel’s political philosophy, and so the ‘Introduction’ also includes extensive commentary on the current state of Germany’s political struggle, and what must now be done, given that the criticism of religion has been “essentially completed” by the materialist concept of history, which shows to the human social actor ‘his true identity’, rather than “the reflection of himself in the fantastic reality of heaven where he sought a supernatural being.” Marx goes on to say that in light of these humanist gains,

The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion. Religious suffering is the expression of real suffering and at the same time the protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people.⁵³

Marx never wrote a full treatise on religion as did so many of its 19th century critics. Rather he approaches religion in a rather oblique and indirect manner, with a scattering of references, allusions, and metaphors, the most notable and infamous are present in the citation above: religion as the expression of, and protest against, suffering is the ‘sigh of

⁵³ Marx, “Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” 28.

the oppressed creature' and the 'opium of the people.' It is not entirely clear how they are to be read, either separately as oppositional statements, or together as the dialectic at the core Marx's take on religion and its social impact as ideology. Theological readers of Marx often rush to these explicit statements about religion as an opening within Marx's analysis for a more charitable take on the social value of religion as a prophetic witness to human misery, exploitation, and abuse at the hand of ruling and oppressive classes, while critics of religion will site the negative and critical aspects of opium as an expression of religion's illusory and medicinal effects on humanity. Yet, the way that religion interacts with suffering is directly tied to its social impact as an ideology.

The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.⁵⁴

These metaphors help us recognize the ambivalence and ambiguity at the heart of Marx's understanding of religion, and helps set the stage for the way the critique of religion as ideology turns into a critique of fetishism as idolatry. To critique religion, then, is to critique that which religion sacralizes, or as Marx will tell us later, fetishizes; it is to critique religion as idolatry. For Marx, religion works in consort with "a vale of tears" by concealing or denying the oppressive economic conditions that give rise to suffering, thereby sanctifying these conditions of real suffering through its claims to afford human persons forms of illusory and/or 'otherworldly' happiness. In Marx's hands, ideology cri-

⁵⁴ Marx, "Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," 28.

tique interprets religion as a response to appropriately identified antagonisms and contradictions in social reality. It is however a ‘false’ reaction, not in it mistakes appearance for reality, but insofar as it prevents the emancipatory subjectivation that precedes the subject and so composes the revolutionary possibility of change.⁵⁵

In the ‘Introduction’ quote cited above, Marx calls religion the “opium of the people”, but he also recognizes the polyvalence of religion by saying it is both the “expression of”, and the “protest against” suffering. It attests to and arises from a complex set of material realities that conditions economic exchange that produces ‘real suffering’. Religion represents (‘as if’) the oppressed creature whose struggle against the spiritless conditions of the heartless world attests to “that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.”

These references suggest that Marx considers religion to be a testament to the human person’s resilience in the face of miserable conditions and economic exploitation, the material basis for all criticism, as a means of denunciation of that “condition that requires illusions.”

My point here is that Marx makes it clear that in his ideology critique, his struggle is not with religion *per se*, but with “that world” which not only gives rise to religion, but “that world” for which religion seems to be responding to, albeit with adverse social impact. Emphasizing the social dimension within which religion is always producing and being produced, Marx interprets religion as the testimony of the proletariat’s experience

⁵⁵ Admittedly, “subjectivization” is a concept developed in later Marxist theory and does not appear in formal ways in Marx’s writings himself. It is however connected to the process of proletarianization, requisite for revolution and so hidden within the logic of Capitalism itself. It is linked directly to ideology in Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation. Cf. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.)

of economic oppression, the consequence of various contradictions at the core of the productive forces and social relations, operative in the economic base of human experience.

So since religion is both the 'expression' and 'protest' of a certain social situation, it attests to and arises from a complex set of material realities that condition the patterns of economic exchange that produce 'real suffering,' but also exists in an ideological relation to these conditions, namely that it attempts to sublimate and conceal their inherent contradictions. When Marx critiques religion in order to explain the material conditions that give rise to the need for religion as well as its specific forms, he nevertheless recognizes that religion does in fact arise out of real, actual need. Even though religion is an illusion, it nevertheless does have a real social basis. As such, the critical question for Marx is why must people have illusions, and more specifically, why do people need *religious* illusions? How do religious illusions operate in response to these needs, and how might a materialist critique of political economy better satisfy these needs, doing away with the need for religion altogether?

The opiate analogy is the well-known attempt by Marx to answer this question. Interpreting Marx's use of this analogy is complicated as this ambiguous and polyvalent opiate metaphor makes it difficult to argue, as it is customary, that religion is merely the medicinal remedy for those who are unable to handle the harsh realities of their material existence, or as a mechanism by the ruling classes to dull the senses of the working classes to avoid insurrectionary activity. For in Marx's day, the use of opium was conterminous with both the protest and suffering of the working class under capitalist conditions. Andrew McKinnon says it rather well,

In the nineteenth century, opium expressed the immiserization of the people. Opium use increased with declining conditions for the working class: more health problems, and the outbreaks of epidemics such as cholera. As Engels, for example, pointed out in *The Condition of the English Working Classes* (1845), declining health was directly related to the ravages of capitalist relations. Opium thus 'expressed' in an indirect way the ravages of capitalism on the health and well being of the population, but most particularly the workers.⁵⁶

Most will suggest that the opium analogy is Marx's way of saying that while religion console and comfort those who suffer, it nevertheless is false and imaginary, and actually paralyzes human social actors from actively resisting those who exploit and oppress them. So, yes, while as an atheist Marx clearly considered religious belief to be false, it is nevertheless important to draw a distinction between Marx the atheist (who claims that religions are false) and Marx the materialist and the humanist (who claims that religions are ideologies), the latter of which makes the most theologically (and I will argue, politically) important point. Religion is the medium of social illusions, but the need for these illusions is real. Religion has a clear social basis in reality. The fact that ruling classes benefit from religion is not enough to explain its pervasiveness among the oppressed. The explanation must be rooted in an investigation of the needs of the oppressed themselves. Religion is constantly referring to the real world that arises out of it, even if that way is indeed still illusory.

Religion is ideological because, while it expresses real human needs, it greatly misconstrues those needs, misrepresenting through its beliefs, the real basis from which it comes. Take, for example, its appeal to divine transcendence, understood in nineteenth

⁵⁶ McKinnon, "Reading 'Opium of the People': Expression, Protest and the Dialectics of Religion," 25.

century metaphysical terms as being opposed to the immanent sphere of material concern. The problem with this is not, as some suggest, that religion causes human persons to live in an alternative world that is purely imaginary, a false ‘fairy-tale’, but rather that the primary effect of religion that causes it to rightly be identified as ideological is that it causes human person to relate to the real world falsely, so much so that it leads human actors to relate to their needs in the real world through the prism of that misconstrual, which in turn, leads them away from the historical register of their material conditions as they seek solutions to their alienation and misery in an illusionary world beyond matter.

Denys Turner calls this the ‘recursive nature’ of religion, namely that it feeds back to the selfsame social basis from which it arose, causing human actors to live their lives in the real world in distorted form.⁵⁷ Religion does not promote a distorted world, but instead a distorted life in the real world. If religion as ideology is to be considered ‘false’, it is due to the fact that it both conceals and reinscribes a series of contradictions between social-practical activity and the material conditions that serve as the context for that activity; instead of exposing the antagonisms in a critique of the contradictions in material conditions, it leaves these conditions unchanged. These conditions give rise to social and economic forces that aid and incite religion in its ideological efficacy.

But why *must* religion always be ideological? Why is it proper to the structure and function of religion to be ideology? Religion is ideological because it alienates, and once it ceases to do so, it also ceases to be religion. Marx assumes that the most basic theologi-

⁵⁷ Turner, “Religion: Illusions and Liberation,” 323.

cal thesis necessarily places God in direct opposition to the human being. For all his critical talk about the danger of the dualities insisted on by the Idealists, Marx himself affirms a rather strong antimony between the human and divine, the materiality of this world and ‘other-worldly’ transcendence, metaphysics and history. In Marx’s judgment, this division, organized loosely as a dichotomy between sacred and secular, is essential to Christian theology and plays directly into its ideological character.⁵⁸ The oppositional logic on display here fractures the individual human person and her interests from those of the collective Subject, resulting in a politics of retreat and a blind economic endorsement of capitalist society.

The incompatibility between revolutionary practice and religion in Marx’s view of critique is stark. Revolutionary practice seeks to disclosure and overthrow the very realities that religion as ideology conceals, sutures, and ratifies. The theological essence of religion is such that it cannot be otherwise. But as I argued in section 1, Marx is not so quick as to rubber-stamp Feuerbach’s critique of religion as a kind of atheist theological reversal, as he thought it makes the same structurally ideological mistake as religion does:

Since the real existence of man and nature – since man has become for man as the being of nature, and nature for man, the being of man has become practical, sensuous, perceptible – the question about an alien being, about a being above nature and man – has become impossible in practice. Atheism as the denial of this unreality has no longer 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 any need of such a mediation*. It proceeds from the practically and theoretically sensuous consciousness of man and of nature as the essence. Socialism is

⁵⁸ Turner, “Religion: Illusions and Liberation,” 335.

man's positive self-consciousness, no longer mediated through the annulment of religion.⁵⁹

The world as envisioned by socialist revolution is not one wherein human actors are compelled to accept the antimonies of thought, which are essential to religion, and decide for one side of the duality or the other. In the distancing himself from Feuerbach, Marx wants to avoid thinking and acting in the world as mediated through the problematic of religion altogether. Theological ideas are ideological, not because of their religious content (e.g., theories about the divine, the sacred, the transcendent or other classically 'religious' ideas such the life after death, the existence of the soul), but because its content conceals within material practice the true reality of the human as the creative force.

The argument I have been making up to now is that Marx critiques religion for being ideological, and at the same moment, leaves it behind, as if to say that Feuerbach's critique has allowed us to see what religion does, and so we should forward to take up 'the secular basis' on which religion stands, the capitalist social relations characterized by alienation, commodification, and fetishization. To critique religion, then, is to dismantle that which religion as ideology sacralizes, usually by exposing the banal materiality of its idols. Ultimately, Marx's critique of ideology is a materialist critique of theology as fetishism, which as I will argue, has strong ties both a biblical critique of idolatry, which Marx uses to critique commodity-fetishism as a theological practice of idolatry. What this apparent connection between ideology and idolatry in Marx means for interpreting what

⁵⁹ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 145.

difference the relation between ideology and theology makes for the task of political theology today has yet to be seen.

The Place of Theology in the Critique of Capitalist Ideologies

I have been arguing that Marx's critique of religion as ideology is paradigmatic for his critique of ideology in general. Marx makes analogical use of theology as he progressively develops a more 'scientific socialist' analysis of capitalist economics and bourgeois social relations. As such, we see substantial references to theology in several places: his critique of money, of law, of the modern state, of the alienation of labor, and finally, of the "fetishism of the commodity." I hope to illustrate the centrality of theological metaphors *in* Marx's theory of ideology, not only as its paradigmatic example, but as a structural metaphor for how ideologies *function* politically.

Alienation

We start first with Marx's critique of theology as alienation, closely linked to his critique of theology as ideology. This concept runs throughout Marx's political and economic thought, and is central to his analysis of what economics does to social relations and productive forces in the context of human struggle, especially when practiced in capitalist conditions.⁶⁰ In "Estranged Labor", Marx's analysis of the self-alienation of human social agents within and by the political economy points straight to the relation of labor and labor-product itself. The human laborer invests herself into her products only to have

⁶⁰ István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin Press, 1970); Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge, U.K.: University Press, 1971). For more recent accounts of the concept of alienation in Marx, see Sean Sayers, *Marx and Alienation: Essays on Hegelian Themes* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Barry L. Padgett, *Marx and Alienation in Contemporary Society* (New York: Continuum, 2007); Amy E. Wendling, *Karl Marx on Technology and Alienation* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

those products turn against her, threatening the creative power of her life activity and confronting the human person as an alien and independent objective power that stands external to the human worker outside her creative and productive control. Marx says it this way: “the more the worker by his labor appropriates the external world, sensuous nature, the more he deprives himself of means of life ... the worker becomes a slave of his object.”⁶¹ This dichotomization of the human person whereby her consciousness is separated and divided from its proper source, origin, and condition by the antagonistic material conditions in which she works. Labor becomes individuated work rather than collective practice, turning the agent against her fellow worker in a relation of competition and self-preservation, and commodifying the products of their collective work through the fetishistic process of transferral.

The existential trauma of alienation is highlighted all the more when one remembers the basic materialist premise is that “what [humans] are therefore coincides with their production both what they produce and with how they produce.”⁶² In alienated production then, something has gone terribly wrong with humanity itself. The human worker is not only herself, but is an-other altogether:

The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him; it means that the life which he has conferred on the objects confronts him as hostile and alien.⁶³

⁶¹ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1988), 72.

⁶² Marx, *The German Ideology*, 37

⁶³ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 72

Furthermore, not only does estranged labor turn the worker's relation to the products of her labor (her very identity) against her, but also alienates her from her own productive activity, the very materialist practice that makes her life human. Production itself is alienation whereby labor becomes external to the worker, acting 'as if it belongs to another.' Marx explains the ideology within this externalizing effect of labor-product with an analogical use of theology so as to clarify the way that labor acts upon, rather than acts on behalf of, the worker:

The external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates independently of the individual – that is, operates on him as an alien, divine or diabolical activity – in the same way the worker's activity is not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.⁶⁴

For Marx, the 'commodity-fetish', a direct labor-product of economic alienation, is the primary culprit of the social contradictions that religion as ideology is charged with trying to conceal, negate, and abet. And so, alienation is the object-cause of the "inner strife and inner contradictoriness" of political systems that Marx says Feuerbach's critique of religion left untouched.⁶⁵ The economic base analysis of alienation reveals a "fundamental cleavage" perpetuated by the dualism apotheosized in religious claims (e.g., heaven/earth, law/grace, individual/society, god/human), a non-dialectic polarity that is same in structure and function as that instituted by capitalist economic forms between labor and capital, mental and manual labor, creativity and production, even between human

⁶⁴ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 74.

⁶⁵ Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Marx*, 98-102.

actor and human actor, and especially between the human actor and the spontaneity and sensuousness of her creative and social nature. Alienation, while perpetuated by economic forms of relations, and abetted by religious ideas about transcendence, is essentially political. It can only be resolved by recapturing the integral character of the active subject, the condition of possibility for human emancipation itself.⁶⁶

But how is all this relevant to properly locating the place of religion in Marx's ideology critique? Alienation is *the social impact* of religion as ideology, a point which is clarified in the description of 'estranged labor', theology/religion is used as the paradigmatic example of ideological impact on human labor. It stems from the 'more/less' formula at the heart of both inversion and alienation, both of which Marx identified as the specific ideological effects of theology in relation to contradictions operating within social reality. He explains his dynamic through a host of metaphors and analogies, not only in order to explain the social impact of religion, but as using theology as a descriptor for economic procedures in capitalist society.

The theory of alienation is birthed from an analysis of what happens to labor, production, and distribution of power under capitalist economic relations. Marx explores the anatomy of alienation by employing an analogy between human work and religion. He articulates the basis structure here, and when read in light of Feuerbach's theory of religion, the resemblance is made clear:

The worker becomes all the more poorer, the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an every cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world

⁶⁶ Marx, "On the Jewish Question," 61-67.

of men...The product of labor is labor which has been congealed in an object, which has become material; it is an objectification of labor. Labor's realization is in its objectification...So much does the appropriation of the object appear as estrangement that the more objects the worker produces the fewer can he possess and the more he falls under the dominion of his product, his capital.⁶⁷

Throughout Marx's writing, it is expressed in a kind of 'more/less' formula, which expresses the humanist core of Marx's critique of alienation in religion, specifically as it relates to ideology. As ideology, religion acts not only to conceal capitalist contradictions, but also directly alienates human social actors in much the same way as labor. Marx describes this 'more/less formula' here again in the early "Manuscripts":

The laws of political economy express the estrangement of the worker in his object thus: the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more values he creates, the more valueless the more unworthy he becomes, the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker, the more civilized his object, the more barbarous becomes the worker; the mightier labor becomes the more powerless becomes the worker, the more ingenious the labor becomes, the duller becomes the worker, and the more he becomes nature's bondsman.⁶⁸

This 'more/less' account of alienation originates in Feuerbach's theory of religion, which argues that religion alienates the human being from itself through its acts of psychological projection. For Feuerbach, religion is a problem because it alienates deprives human actors of their true nature, and so precludes them from actualizing their fullest creative and productive potential. The object of Christian theological inquiry, the biblical God, is nothing but as an imaginative construal of human ideals and aspirations, projected outward into a transcendent sphere. But how does this result in self-alienation of the human

⁶⁷ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 71.

⁶⁸ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 73.

person? The answer lies in the creation of a ‘Being above beings’ that is made in the image of the ideal human perfections. This effect of this false ‘creation’ is that by investing ‘god’ with human attribute, it inverts the human relation to nature and to itself, which impoverishes it, estranging it from what properly is its own powers, attributes, and possibilities, and further diminishes itself by worshiping its own creation, to its detriment. This externalization and projection of the human into the divine (this is the theological act of religion tout court) fabricates what is properly human into an ‘objective power’ that lays outside of itself. Unlike Feuerbach, the alienation of religious projection lead Marx to argue that ‘religion’ has no content of its own, but is indeed only a social act, whereby human persons divest their species-being of those crucial elements and characteristics that most properly and constitutively *human*: love, goodness, wisdom, creativity, and power, and thus depriving it of the ability to actualize its ‘life-activity.’ Take, for example, how Marx compares the alienation of labor to the self-divestment accomplished by theology in religious projection:

The worker is related to the product of his labor as to an alien object. From this premise it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful the alien objective world become which he creates over-against himself, the poorer he himself — his inner world — becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. *It is the same in religion.* The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself. The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object. Hence the greater this activity, the greater is the worker’s lack of objects. Whatever the product of his labor is, he is not. Therefore the greater this product, the less he is himself.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 72.

This appears to be modeled precisely on Feuerbach's structural account of the theological essence of religion. Marx follows Feuerbach in arguing that theology, in an irrational reversal, externally projects what is properly and immanently human and abstracts it into a transcendent sphere apart from the material reality of human life. Theology performs this same operation: alienating human from its immanent properties by displaying them as belonging to transcendent being and named as the divine life. Marx uses this theo-logic to explain the capitalist process whereby the product of labor gets alienated from human workers, not only in the production, but also in the market forces of distribution and consumption. Like in religion, wages, rent, and capital alienate the human being from labor as her life-activity, instituting money and value as the 'gods' of the religion of everyday life. Marx's critique of religion as ideology becomes a critique of capitalism *as* religion, rendering capitalism as a religion, structured as ideology. More specifically, the place of religion in the critique of ideology is as a critique of fetishism as idolatry, illustrating the quasi-religious structure of ideology in general.

To claim, as Marx does, that religion is ideology is to say that religion acts, that it functions, in a certain way with a particular kind of social impact. More specifically, to critique religion for its effects, namely human self-alienation, is to name it as a symptom of the base problem of economic alienation, and these effects are ideological in the sense that they mistake the historical with the natural, the contingent with the primordial.

Drawing a parallel between the political economists and the theologians, Marx insists:

Do not let us go back to a fictitious primordial condition as the political economist does, when he tries to explain. Such a primordial condition explains nothing; it merely pushes the question away into a gray nebulous distance ... theology in the same way explains the origin of evil by the fall of man, that it assumes as a fact,

in historical, what has to be explained. We proceed from an actual economic fact.⁷⁰

For Marx, religion, by projecting what is properly human outside of itself, damages human self-relation and self-knowledge, while also establishing conditions of privatization and competition that set the interests of the individual over and against those of the concrete social whole. One can see why this has significant implications on the development of a working class consciousness, or an emancipatory political subjectivity, specially in the mid 1840s at the rise of revolutionary organization and mass political movements, most of which sought to topple monarchical governments (who had long used oppressive conditions of labor as instruments of oppression) for the sake of liberal and constitutional democracies, or in the case of Marx/Engels, a communist society. Religion is ideology because of the way it conceals contradictory social relations by concealing and incubating patterns of alienation. It is symptomatic of what revolutionary practice must overcome in the course of proletarian struggle, but it is not a primary target.

While Marx adopts loosely with Feuerbach's "religion as human self-alienation" thesis, he disagrees that a critique that produces the abolition of religion will produce the (conditions for the) emancipatory subject. As Marx/Engels makes clear in *The Communist Manifesto*, even as it seeks an end to "eternal truth, to abolish religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis", nothing can be accomplished without the "total disappearance of class antagonisms" where "the free development of each is the

⁷⁰ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 107.

condition for the free development of all.”⁷¹ For Feuerbach, the solution was a theological liberation of humanity from religion whereas for Marx, the problem lie with how the political economy occludes the self-realization of the human as a collective social actor:

Every emancipation is a restoration of the human world and of human relationships to man himself... Human emancipation will only be complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, has become a species-being; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers (forces propres) as social powers so that he no longer separates this social power from himself as political power.⁷²

Commodity-Fetishism

The concept of the fetish appears as a key element in Marx’s critique of the economic structure of capitalism. Accounts of fetishism vary greatly, but in Marx, it is directly connected to the deleterious and oppressive effect that the capitalist economic system has on the subject. Strictly speaking, fetishism is the procedure that attributes or transfers an improper or artificial value (often categorized as mythical or ‘religious’) to inanimate, manmade objects. It is a truly affective relationship to an object; that is, fetishism is usually associated with extreme or excessive forms of value: obsession, mania, obsession, and irrational fixation are all common cognates. In Marx, fetishism refers to a particular ordering or structuring of desire that affords us insight and analysis of central economic processes, many of which he critiqued under the general rubric of ideology. Fetishism explains how it is that capitalism is able to evoke and sustain patterns of desire

⁷¹ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Verso, 1998), 28.

⁷² Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 56

and consumption so effectively. It produces a desire for an object that is based on an excessive or disproportionate attribution of value, the larger and more politically salient effect of which is synecdochic — the part is taken as the whole. Capitalist social processes — accumulation, privatization, rent, wealth disparity, the rise of wage labor, etc — are all contingent upon human workers being transposed into consumers whose excessive desire for objects turns them and their relations into commodities. Fetishism converts the artificial power of the commodity into the logic of exchange-value, which cyclically produces the surplus-enjoyment experienced by the consumer that gets invested back into the object itself.

This is accomplished through a transferral process that Marx calls “fetishism,” a term with a complex religious genealogy and political history. In his late analysis of capitalist ideologies, Marx turns to the value-form of commodity-fetishism and elaborates its theological structure. As described in that well-worn section in *Capital*, entitled “The fetishism of the commodity”, the commodity-form is an inverse relation between human workers and the products of their labor, structurally analogous to that relation in religion between human beings and their self-alienation in the theology of God.⁷³ As a theological product, fetishism alienates human persons through techniques of externalization and reification, taking what is properly their own (as the direct products of their labor) and then deploying them as ways so that they function as instruments of their domination and oppression. In the state of labor within capitalist social relations, human workers are alienated from their products as they become ‘reified’ by economic processes that invests

⁷³ Karl Marx, *Capital*, 165.

these products with an enchanted and inverted value that makes them “appear as autonomous figures endowed with the life of their own.”⁷⁴ Fetishization transforms both the products of labor and their constitutive social relations, both of which belong naturally to the human worker as part of their life-activity, into ‘things’ that are then exchanged and transacted in the market as commodities, “whose movements within society has for them the form of a movement made by things, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them.”⁷⁵

Fetishization as the commodifying procedure is described by Marx as an economic practice whereby the creative and productive powers of the human actor are transferred to an object, whose materiality and banality is overlooked and undermined, even while the human person is diminished and deprived, alienated from itself and others through this inverting transferal. In fetishization, human person’s social relationships, and the products created out of this life-activity, are objectified and reified as something vulgarly transacted and mediated through money-relations. This conceals the fetishized product’s intrinsic use-value (e.g., that which meets human needs directly) and replaces it with an inflated exchange-value (e.g., what the commodity is worth in relation to other commodities). It takes away the sensuousness and the spontaneity essential to the creative productivity that is proper to human life and its material activity; this is its real transgression.

⁷⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 165.

⁷⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 167-168.

In commodity-fetishism, products of human labor and human beings have inverted roles. It switches the qualities of human social relations with that of objects, conferring upon them a transcendent, enchanted value, a mystification that finds its ultimate site in capital itself. Commodity-fetishes oppose and antagonize their producers ‘as if’ they stand external to them, beyond the control of their creative powers. It reverses the natural mode of production of objects, the positive relational connection the producer naturally has with that which she creates for her own use, to meet her own needs. It does this by reifying the social relations of labor and transferring them to the products of labor ‘as if’ the relations exist between the products of labor, as commodities, and not between social agents, as is the case in nature: “the social character of men’s labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves but between the products of their labor.”⁷⁶

Marx took up the concept of fetishism as a term replete with theological meaning, especially in the post Enlightenment studies of the history of religion and sociology of religion in the 18th and early 19th centuries, subjects that Marx studied thoroughly, but published little on. Marx seems to have discovered this definition of fetishism during his research on the history of religion and Christian art, wherein he came across the work of Charles de Brosses, one of many researchers in the late 18th century whose interest in the religion of colonized peoples was motivated, at least in part, by a desire to understand

⁷⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 72.

their resistance to early capitalist mercantilism.⁷⁷ The ‘Fetish’ provided the colonialist with the conceptual vernacular to express that which the more classical term of idolatry could not, namely as Roland Boer describes it, “an account of the direct material effects of the fetish in terms of physical and psychological well-being. It also was seen to play a central role in social ordering.”⁷⁸ The ‘Fetish’ described for the Portuguese colonialists the unique role that certain objects and practices around those objects played in the economic and social life of indigenous people. Seen through this history of colonialism, the concept of fetishism takes on new political meaning. For many in Marx’s context, religion was analyzed within a historical scheme of progression where anthropological studies of ‘primitive cultures’ designate religion as an element of more savage, less developed human life. So fetishism as a descriptive category of indigenous communities, interpreted through a European colonialist perspective, expressed the ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’ character of the indigenous people in terms of their relationship to their material environment.

Marx’s reception of this account is evident in his “Ethnological Notebooks” where he describes the various stages of religious development á la John Lubbock, who argues that rather than narrating history of religion as being progressively more atheist and less religion, the earliest human societies were atheists, namely because they were not yet mature enough to understand or develop religious ideas.⁷⁹ The stage of idolatry is

⁷⁷ Roland Boer, “That hideous pagan idol: Marx, fetishism and graven images,” *Critique* 38. 1 (2010): 96.

⁷⁸ Boer, “That Hideous Pagan Idol,” 107.

⁷⁹ Karl Marx, *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, ed. Lawrence Krader (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974).

an intermediate and more developed, yet still savage and primitive, stage of religious experience and expression. Marx seems to agree with Luddock's conclusion, but interprets its critical significance differently: the onset of religion late in the process of human social development explained, not by the failure to understand religion, but by the presence of social and moral system of repression which developed the conditions upon which religion became a necessary result. While the modern European considers himself to more developed and mature than the primitive savage, it is indeed the savage who shows us how indeed primitive we are: how far we have regressed because of capitalist social relations. The indigenous societies, said Marx, are indeed better off, and so are more 'modern.' Indeed their atheism illustrates the lack of a need for religious consolation for and expression of suffering, and the presence of religion illustrates the endurance of such conditions, pointing out the fact that what one would expect would have fallen off with the advance of history, the savage or primitive aspects of indigenous life, are indeed still alive and well us, despite our narrative of progress.

For Marx, a fetish is a specific mode of commodity, "abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties"⁸⁰ and as such, the (religious) problem with fetishization is comparable to that the inverted structure inherent and operative in the alienation and reification of labor and capital. As such, fetishization is ideological in the same way as theology because it inverts the relation between the human laborer and the object of her labor, somehow making the object of labor more powerful and valuable than the hu-

⁸⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 163.

man laborer herself, and also conceals the more fundamental problem: the way that capitalist social relations enact this contradictory reversal in social reality for the benefit of ruling class power. Although it is described as an economic procedure, it has a deep theological structure, further illustrating the complex relation between theology and ideology, specifically in the context of capitalist ideology.

Through the economic act of fetishization, where human attributes and social relations are externalized and reified to the products of human labor (which is itself an effect of capitalist ownership of the modes of production themselves, including religion), human social actors are left emaciated, powerless, and hallow. But for Marx, fetishization is also a *theological* practice, even when performed within the economic sphere; this suggests a political link between economics and theology in Marx's concept of ideology. For example, in "the Leading Article", Marx remarks that "Fetishism is so far from raising man *above* his sensuous desires that, on the contrary, it is the 'religion of sensuous desire.' The fantasy of the appetites tricks the fetish worshipper into believing that an 'inanimate object' will give up its natural character to gratify its desires."⁸¹ Here he is suggesting that the logic of 'sacralization by inversion' which lies at the theological core of religion is also inherent to the transferral act of fetishism. This ties fetishism most closely to the transferral definition of idolatry as the fantastical attribution of divine powers to an object, the transgression typically associated with the cultic practices that biblical critique

⁸¹ Marx, "The Leading Article of No. 179 of Kolnische Zeitung," 33.

of idolatry singles out.⁸² This suggests a theological-political connection between idolatry and ideology that not often associated with Marx's use of the concept of fetishism.

What is interesting for me is the way that Marx's sources incorporated this within a theological critique of idolatry as fetishism, complete with a host of biblical references and allusions that describe and illustrate examples of fetishes and fetishistic practice. Marx defined the concept of fetishism in much same way as de Brosses did (e.g., a sacralizing process of inversion and whereby certain magical powers and enchanted attributes are transferred to objects with negative economic and social effects), as evinced in *The Ethnological Notebooks* whose references to fetishism tie it closely to religion through a host of biblical citations, even as he prepared to the concept for use in his political and economic polemics on all forms of capital itself: modes of production, value-product, the nature of money, machinery, and technology.⁸³

A number of recent studies have reminded us of the theological origins of Marx's analysis of fetishism.⁸⁴ For example, Roland Boer argues that the idea that Marx's concept of fetishism is theological (at least in history and structure) is supported by its frequent mention in his unpublished notebooks and his study of world religions, replete with biblical quotations and theological allusions.⁸⁵ The concept of fetishism comes to appear

⁸² Boer, "The Leading Article", 100.

⁸³ Karl Marx, "Economic Manuscripts of 1861-1863," in *Collected Works*, vol. 34. (Moscow: Progress Publishers), 457-458.

⁸⁴ Roland Boer, "Opium, Idols and Revolution: Marx and Engels on Religion." *Religion Compass* 5, no. 11 (2011): 698-707.; Rehman, 147-148. Also see William Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism: the limits of theory in Marx," in *Fetishism as cultural discourse.*, eds. E. Apter and W. Pietz. (Ithaca, N.Y.; Cornell University Press, 1993), 131.

⁸⁵ Boer, "That Hideous Pagan Idol," 93-116.

in Marx after a long history, whereby the term was used to describe most primitive stage of religious belief and experience, most closely associated with colonialist assessments of religious life and experience of indigenous peoples. The primitive believers, due to their primitive beliefs about the magical, the mystical, and enchantment of natural objects, invested transcendental meaning into banal objects that were fabricated, often by their own hands (Latin *facticium*, or *facere*, “made”), but gained power over their creators through the act of sacral worship. In this way, fetishism names that transferral process whereby human beings becomes unduly subordinated to objects of their own creation through the attribution of transcendent value or divine power. Fetishism is ideological because it follows the similar theological script. It functions within economic and political relations in similar ways to theology: concealing and suturing economic contradictions within capitalism through alienation and reification. But Boer goes even further to suggest that Marx’s ideology critique of fetishism is derived from a biblical critique of idolatry. He qualifies this by saying that “the category of fetishism was initially developed over against the long theological elaboration of idolatry, which turned out to be ill-suited for dealing with the amulets and objects that Portuguese encountered in Africa. However, once the new category of the fetish had gained ground...it then subsumed idolatry within itself.”⁸⁶ The critique of idolatry is sublated into the ideology critique of fetishism. Pre-figuring my argument in chapter 4 on the relation between ideology and the biblical critique of idolatry, this way of relating the two critiques does not take the social origins of

⁸⁶ Boer, “That hideous pagan idol,” 106.

biblical aniconism into account, misconstruing the similarities and presumed alliances between the critique of ideology and that of idolatry.

In Marx, fetishism is not explained as idolatry; rather idolatry is seen as a specific form or example of fetishism. For example, in regards to another fascinating reference to *the Ethnological Notebooks*, Boer shows how Marx's interchangeable use of the term fetishism and idolatry illustrates their functional, if not analytical, equivalency: he refers specifically to biblical examples of idolatrous sacrifice and described them as instances of 'eating the fetish.'⁸⁷ Perhaps Boer overstates the extent to which Marx takes up this relation in his own use of fetishism, but the point which is interesting and important for us, is that Marx seems to follow his sources (i.e., de Brosses and Lubbock) in interpreting the concept of fetish as an economic category through the biblical theology of idolatry, which explains in part the consistent analogical references to religion and theology in and through his analysis of alienation, money, and capital. This modifies both fetishism and idolatry, moving the latter beyond the rather restrictive 'religious' meaning as the worship of gods in and through material objects, to include a more critical and negative analysis of how idolatry as fetishism both diminishes human beings and elevates everyday material objects, an inversion that directly effects social and economic orders. Perhaps this can be interpreted as a latent, albeit critical, theological materialism within Marx himself.

⁸⁷ Boer, "That hideous pagan idol," 109. Also, see Marx, *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, 343.

Nevertheless, the essential point here is that in truly materialist fashion, Marx's analysis of fetishism as idolatry points out how basic, ordinary, and everyday the fetishized idol is, regardless of whether or not it is natural or fabricated by human hands. But it is important to emphasize that Marx is not simply interested in debunking the idolatrous beliefs of fetishism as false, but instead seeks to disclose and explain its social impact as it alienates and diminishes human beings, a political pattern quite familiar in his ideology critique of theology. In this way, Marx seems to use the theology of idolatry as a way into ideological critique of theology's negative social impact. When it functions like a fetish, the idol is not innocuous and powerless, but indeed is profoundly destructive - not because it is false, but because of how it acts against the political subject and the conditions of possibility for radical and collective proletarian politics.⁸⁸

Capitalist Economics and Theology

If Marx may be read as using fetishism to link ideology to idolatry, he also seems to link theology to economics through ideology critique. This illustrates the pattern of inversion and transferral that is key to understanding the fetishism internal to theology that renders it ideological. This bears out upon close examination of Marx's mature texts, especially in *Capital*, where his descriptions of capital, labor, money, and value are laden with references to theological and religious analogies. In light of what I have argued so far, while some might dismiss these mentions as merely ad hoc references, I find them essential to understanding the relation of theology to ideology.

⁸⁸ Boer, "That hideous pagan idol." 113.

For example, in *Capital* Vol. 1, Marx explains the transferral characteristic of fetishism operative in commodification that inverts the relation between the worker and the product and establishes a kenotic relation between them. To do so, Marx turns to a religious analogy to link the economic effects of commodity-form with its theological structure:

As against this, the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labor within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. *In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion.* There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism, which attaches itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.⁸⁹

Here, Marx shows us how theology often is performed as a fetishistic exercise. The relation that he draws here between ‘the misty realm of religion’ and ‘the world of commodities’ is sharpened by the direct analogy between capitalist political economists and theologians: both attempt to explain the materiality of the social world with recourse to a similar ideologic that happens to be theological. In another text, Marx plays on this analogical relation between theology and capitalist economics in order to expose its negative social impact and the various ideological strategies of capitalism, all of which share a common theological structure:

Economists have a singular method of procedure. There are only two kinds of institutions for them, artificial and natural. ... In this they resemble the theologians who likewise establish two kinds of religion. Every religion which is not theirs is

⁸⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 233.

an invention of men, while their own is an emanation from God. *When the economists say that present-day religions – the relations of bourgeois production – are natural, they imply that these are the relations in which wealth is created and productive forces developed in conformity with the laws of nature. These relations therefore are themselves natural laws independent of the influence of time. They are eternal laws which must always govern society.* Thus there has been history, but there no longer any. There has been history, since there were the institutions of feudalism, and in these institutions of feudalism we find quite different relations of production from those of bourgeois society, which the economists try to pass off as natural, and as such, eternal.⁹⁰

From these texts, it is clear that Marx favors a strong analogy between capitalist economics and theology in that they both act as ideologies to naturalize, conceal, and de-historize social reality and economic processes. This clearly benefits the bourgeois political economists who have the upper hand in the labor process, and benefit from maintaining systematic dynamics that estrange the human worker from the productive process and the value of products. Theology is not only a phenomenal form of capitalist ideology, but also a social actor within it, fetishized by capitalism and deployed in favor of sustaining the very contradictions from which it comes, usually by emphasizing itself as central to the natural, universal, or self-evident social order. We see this again in *Capital*, where Marx criticizes the reversal of labor and value relations, comparing it to the supersessionist theologies of Christianity:

Political economy has indeed analyzed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labor is expressed in value. And why the measurement of labor by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product. *These formulas, which bear the unmistakable stamp of belonging to a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite, appear to the political economists' bourgeois consciousness to be as much a self-evident and nature-imposed necessity as productive labor itself.* Hence the pre-

⁹⁰ Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 120-121.

bourgeois forms of the social organization of production are treated by political economy in much the same way as the Fathers of the Church treated pre-Christian religions.⁹¹

One final theological example used by Marx to describe the religious structure of capitalist economic forms (identifying it therefore as ideological *tout court*) is the famous analogy between money and Christology. Here we can see the theological structure of Marx's theory of money. He models his critique of money on his critique of theology, both of which are animated by his materialist premise that money, like god, is a 'social product' of alienation and reification. Real human freedom depends on large scale, collective emancipation from the logic of 'abstract labor' which is responsible for both 'the division of labor' and the 'labor-product'. Marx continues to use theological analogies in his critique of James Mill, whereby he portrays money, like theology, as the representation or illustration of the domination of things over people.⁹² Money acts upon the political subject, so as to alienate, in the act of labor, the worker from her product, effectively reducing social relations to property relations.

Marx describes money and the power of its social function (which is more important and interesting to Marx politically than its economic one) as a particular kind of *mediating* relation proper to theology. The more specific argument is that money func-

⁹¹ Marx, *Capital*, 173-175.

⁹² Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 220-227.

tions in economics the way that Christ functions in theology: as a mediator that both alienates and obscures what ought to be a direct and unmediated relation.⁹³ Money, like religion, has no direct and immediate content of its own, but is constructed purely for the benefit of perpetuating capitalist relations, particularly through wages, capital, and labor.⁹⁴ Likewise, Christ, like money, alienates human persons from themselves through his mediating relation. For Marx, in theology, Christ ‘represents originally’, and thus is seen as the “ideal mediator.”⁹⁵ The unique identity of Jesus Christ as “the divine and human natures united in one person” means that Christ represents human persons before God, represents God before human persons, but also, due to the Incarnation, also represents human persons to human persons.⁹⁶ God only has value insofar as God is represented by and also itself represents Christ and the human person only has value to the extent that s/he represents Christ.

For Marx, money operates the same way. The very essence of money is its mediating activity which self-alienates the human person, making her an Other to herself and making a god out of commodity.⁹⁷ Money operates in capitalist society as a mediator of religious value. It is actively fetishized by its use in exchange relations, reifies social relations as a set of things moved about in transactions, and has turned productive forces into

⁹³ Karl Marx, *Early Political Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 93.

⁹⁴ Karl Marx, “Excerpt-Notes of 1844,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence Hugh Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 42.

⁹⁵ Marx, *Early Political Writings*, 94.

⁹⁶ Marx, “Excerpt-Notes of 1844,” 42.

⁹⁷ Anitra Nelson, *Marx's Concept of Money: The God of Commodities* (London: Routledge, 1999); Also see Phillip Goodchild. *Theology of Money* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

rigid, given ‘things’ whose overly determined exchange-value, inflated and enchanted by its involvement in the ethereality of money, actively undermines the use value of products. This self-alienation actively dehumanizes the human person as a worker by externalizing that which is properly her own and setting it against her. Her own will, the product of her labor, and those to whom she is constitutively related confront and threaten her in the mediating activity of the money-relation.

This assemblage of examples instructs us that Marx is not simply referring to theology as an example of ideology, but rather using theology as an operational metaphor that structures what Marx thinks ideology does and why it is politically problematic, namely that it obfuscates and precludes the emergence of the emancipated political subject. Ideology is not a marker of truth or falsehood, or appearance and reality, but rather it designates a particular function of an idea within material conditions of possibility for collective action.

Conclusion

Myriad open questions await us here. Keeping the matter of ‘political theology’ in view, how ought theology respond to the Marxian critique of ideology? Beyond the accusation of religion as ideology, what are the consequences of this Marxian critique of ideology for theology? Certainly, theology can and should object to how Marx depicts and portrays theology, for it is widely acknowledged that Marx knew little about theological particulars and so often caricatures religion for the sake of his critical position. But the self-defense of theology against Marx’s portrayal of it misses the more crucial point that I

think remains, even if Christian theology was able to convincingly dispute the validity of Marx's depiction of religion.

The Marxist critique of religion is broadly interpreted as calling for 'the end of theology', a consequence of overdetermining the epistemological aspects of ideology critique. This merging of Marxian critique of ideology with broader secularizing and atheistic critiques of religion does a significant disservice, not only to theology, but also to secularization and atheism. On the other hand, if theology seeks to take the Marxian critique of ideology seriously, there are no want of options for how best to do so.⁹⁸ Over the last thirty years, the "Marxism" question has repeated itself within theology with dubious effect. Prompted in large part by the onset of liberation theology, much of which was at least broadly informed by Marxian social analysis, even if that relation is wrecked with complexity⁹⁹, the theological debate between theology and Marxism produced a series of

⁹⁸ A comprehensive list here is not possible, much less desirable, but one can easily see how sensibilities and movements as diverse as Radical theology (e.g., death of God theology), Secular theologies (e.g., Harvey Cox, Paul van Buren), Liberation theologies (e.g., black, feminist, queer, and postcolonial), Postmodern theologies (e.g., Charles Winquist, Thomas J.J. Altizer, Mark C. Taylor, Jack Caputo), and of course, the actual Marxist theologies (e.g., Nicholas Lash, Alister Kee, Alaisdar MacIntyre, Denys Turner) can all be read as direct responses to the critique of religion as ideology (if not directly to the critique of ideology itself).

⁹⁹ Michael Löwy gives the status of the question in reference to the Marxism of Liberation theology in Latin America, characterizes the type of usage as "'neo-Marxists' — that is to say, as innovators who offer Marxism a new inflection or novel perspective, or make original contributions to it." Examples include the concept of the poor, the critique of capitalism, and the affinity between idolatry critique and commodity-fetishism. Unsurprisingly, absent here is the concept of ideology. Michael Löwy, "Liberation-Theology Marxism" in *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, ed. Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 225, 228.

Yet, the relation of Liberation theology to Marxism has been characterized in various ways: conceptual borrowing (which may or may not include political alliance), appropriation, and strategic common ground (i.e., critique of international economic development as the cause of exploitation and alienation). What is clear is that while there is not a strict adherence to Marxist categories, liberation theologians applied principles with a loose, almost *ad hoc*, flexibility. For some Vatican theologians, (such as the then Cardinal Ratzinger), even this goes too far, while for others, it is far from adequate. For Kee, liberation theology is not Marxist enough. It must incorporate Marxism in radically self-reflexive way, rather than

responses to Marx's critique of religion that attempt to align theological studies with its materialist and humanist proposals.¹⁰⁰ How might theology meet these Marxist demands?

Liberation theology, especially the Latin American variant, presents itself as an attempt, in turning to Marx's critique of capitalism, to develop a critical distance between theology's liberative roots in its biblical faith and its complicity with oppressive and exploitative economic and political systems. Liberation theology attempts rethink theology so as to produce or generate theological ideas that are considered revolutionary and liberative, ridding theology of its ideological and oppressive aspects. In so doing, it positions Christianity in a critical relation to material conditions, governed by liberating praxis. The impetus for this is decisively Marxist in that it follows his critique of capitalism based on theories of class struggle and surplus value respectively, but not the critique of ideology as applied to religion.¹⁰¹

simply "baptizing" its theory so as to fit its peculiar theological concerns and political aims. See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of Liberation Theology* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1984), and Alister Kee, *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).

Defending liberation theology from the Vatican critique that it was too aligned with Marxism, the Boff brothers argue that Marxism is only helpful for liberation theology when "submitted to the judgment of the poor and their cause." Its relationship is one of a "decidedly critical stance." Since Marx can be a "companion, but not a guide", it is treated as an 'instrument' and so liberation theologians "feel no obligation to social sciences for any use it may make, correct or otherwise, of Marxist terminology and ideas." liberation theology "freely borrows from Marxism certain 'methodological pointers', one of which is "the mystifying power of ideologies, including religious ones." Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 28.

¹⁰⁰ David McLellan, *Marxism and Religion: A Description and Assessment of the Marxist Critique of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987); Denis Janz, *World Christianity and Marxism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹⁰¹ This has mostly taken up by Liberation theology. McLellan notes that Liberation theology, broadly speaking, interprets Marx's critique of religion suggests that Christianity will eventually wither away since the relation of Christianity to capitalism is radically symbiotic, and that this argument amounts to a Marxian *a priori* rejection of religion tout court. The idea that an *a priori* rejection of religion should be associated with and interpreted as properly Marxist is soundly rejected by Turner, 166-168 and more recently

The responses to this challenge are often broad-based attempts to reform and reinterpret theology according to broadly Marxian standards, whether it meant critiquing Christianity's alignment with capitalism, acknowledging the centrality of class struggle, or implementing various versions of materialism (most of which rarely were truly Marxist forms).¹⁰² It was acknowledged that if theology were to respond to Marx's critique of ideology, it would have to do so by securing its "oppositional status" in relation to its determining pressures and material locations, rather than mooring itself as a "countering" discourse that seeks to intervene into social reality as a ready alternative.¹⁰³

And yet, let us remind ourselves of the ideological function and role that religion and theology plays in frustrating and obstructing the formation of the emancipatory political subject. The critique of ideology is not about the epistemological status of specific theological claims, but rather affords us an appropriate method for the political assessment of religion and theology's effects on social reality. The critique of religion as ideol-

Roland Boer, *Criticism of Earth On Marx, Engels and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2012). and Alberto Toscano. 2010. "Beyond Abstractions: Marx and the Critique of the Critique of Religion." *Historical Materialism* 18: 3-20. As a result of this resistance to Marx's critique of religion, Liberation theology has struggled to integrate and constructively use the critique of ideology in their theologies in any kind of sustained or material way. Instead, they choose, by and large, to respond to the Marxist critique of religion by admitting to the complicity of religion with the dominant social order, and so attempt to reconstruct theologies that offer alternatives forms of life and practice, which again missed the critical Marxian point.

¹⁰² Alister Kee, *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990); See also Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968); Denys Turner, *Marxism and Christianity* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983); Nicholas Lash, *A Matter of Hope: A Theologian's Reflections on the Thought of Karl Marx* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981). For more recent examples, see Andrew Collier, *Christianity and Marxism: A Philosophical Contribution to Their Reconciliation* (New York: Routledge, 2001) and Roland Boer, *Criticism of Earth On Marx, Engels and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

¹⁰³ Peter Scott, *Theology, Ideology and Liberation* (New York, NY: Cambridge, 1994), 36.

ogy is not a resource that frees theology to realize itself socially, politically, and otherwise (now liberated from ideology), but rather is the immanent stricture to which political theology must be respond, should it hope to be more a false response to the antagonism and contradiction at the core of social reality. This turns the attention away from the 'end of religion' interpretation of ideology critique. Ideology critique of religion is not, as Marx will say, about investigating religion to see if it is possible to detect its internal fissures or contradictions. This misses the critical point, which is to identify the particular types of economics and social relations upheld and supported by religion and theology, and to chart out alternative materialist possibilities, not only theological, but also political and economic. The ideologico-critical analysis of religion begins with material life and so rather than offer theological responses to the critique of religion, so as to secure the non-ideological status of theology, the critique of ideology must direct and complete the critical, theological approaches to political life. What is required is not a direct theological response to Marx's critique of religion, but rather a critical-theoretical approach to political theology to be sketched out in proceeding chapters.

This 'critical theology', developed in response to Marx's critique of ideology, takes up political theology as its object in order to modify the immanent relation of theory and praxis that prescribes actions and values, whether on the basis of specific theological commitments or political convictions, even so-called emancipatory ones. Marx's critique of ideology shapes the relation of theory and praxis in political theology, leading to a critical theology which chastens and subdues the way that Christianity uses the major themes of justice, freedom, liberation, solidarity as the basis for political theology.

Constructively speaking, one must start with the recognition that active political interests that are always already present and invested in theology and its use in various publics. The slogan “all theology is political” may be as cliché as it is nebulous, but so much theology remains seemingly absent of any self-conscious, critical perspective on the politics embedded within itself as a discursive practice. But how exactly does theology come to this awareness? Undoubtedly, it becomes important to rethink theology *against* the critique of ideology that understands itself to be a certain kind of *critical* political project, not an epistemological one.

I do believe that the identity and relevance of political theology is at stake in the Marxian critique of ideology. I am with Peter Scott when he says that “the Christian claim to speak of a God of freedom is systematically undermined if the claim is productive, not of the knowledge of social structures and relations, but rather ideological strategies whose effect is precisely to obscure such structures and relations.”¹⁰⁴ And so, is Christian theology ideological, and if so, how might it become non-ideological? What are the criteria we use to assure ourselves that Christianity is not ideological - that is, that ideology critique immanent to theology has worked? Disagreements and confusion about what constitutes “political theology” notwithstanding, the legitimacy of political theology depends on recognizing its ideological elements and eliminating them. I do not wish the weight of my argument here to fall on the construction of a non-ideological theology; I have no intention of trying to develop such a project. But if the argument of the disserta-

¹⁰⁴ Scott, *Theology, Ideology and Liberation*, 70.

tion is that a sustained engagement with the critique of ideology is needed in order to secure the identity and relevance of political theology *as a critical theory*, how ought theology proceed with such an endeavor? In what way can political theology be thought as a Marxist theology? What might political theology mean, if interpreted as a Marxist practice? As Leonardo Boff reminds us, “it is absolutely insufficient to claim not to be ideological, or to wish not to be, in order actually not to be.”¹⁰⁵

Marx’s critique of religion as ideology expresses a concern that is still relevant for much of western Christianity and its theologies as they are expressed and treated as a commodity-fetish in our contemporary culture. Theology and its ‘priestly’ practitioners economically benefit from the transferral procedure whereby religion is enchanted with a sort of transcendent and abstracted magic that increases its own marketability and its viability as a commodity. Its exchange-value in relations of commodity-exchange, or as we would say today, its brand is constructed as an ideology.¹⁰⁶ Fetishization is that exact transferal procedure whereby theology is transformed into ideology, and in this way, heology is problematized as an economic product of the capitalist political economy. Theodor Adorno describes the problem this way: “Religion is on sale as it were. It is cheaply marketed in order to provide one more so-called irrational stimulus among many others

¹⁰⁵ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 44.

¹⁰⁶ To prefigure an argument from Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School, part of the economic problem with religion is that, as a brand, it is now the commodity-product of the Culture Industry, and as such, is instrumentalized as a packaged, advertised, and marketed reification whose exchange-value far exceeds its use-value, introducing a dominating surplus into social constructs that works to suppress and manipulate subjects, rather than liberate them.

by which the members of a calculating society are calculatingly made to forget the calculation under which they suffer.”¹⁰⁷

When theology gives attention to Marx’s critique of ideology, it raises the question of whether theology can be de-fetishized as a question of immanent critique; this is often expressed by theology in the biblical and prophetic critique of idolatry, discussed at length in chapter four. The idol reoccurs as the ideological form that theology represents to itself, making the Marxian analysis of the fetish all the more politically and theoretically relevant. How might it avoid inadvertently colluding with the forces of domination, exploitation, and oppression by becoming truly critical, or what Geuss describes as, “a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation”?¹⁰⁸ How does theology avoid ideology? Is it through idolatry critique?

This constructive perspective notes the interesting resonances between the ruptural and inaugural mode of the Marxian critique and that the immanent critique by biblical prophets like Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, whose condemnation and indictment of Israel’s unfaithfulness challenges its complicity, hypocrisy, and reticence in regard to the concrete realities of social and political conditions in the processes of ‘real, active life.’ My point is that Marx is not as interested in abolishing religion *per se* (because of theological aspects he finds objectionable tout court) as he is in exposing and critiquing its ma-

¹⁰⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature* Vol. 2, trans. Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 294.

¹⁰⁸ Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 2.

terialist base, surpassing the abstractions of theological Idealism, and refocusing the attention of true criticism on the oppressive and dominating dynamics of social world. By advocating that religion interrogate its materialist base, Marx joins his voice with this Hebrew prophetic tradition, a link not made explicitly by Marx himself, but one that can be helpful in providing a theological reading of Marx's ideology critique that make sense of his critique of religion without glossing over its ambiguity and ambivalence.

To do this, political theology must attain and secure its identity and relevance through a self-reflexive critique that affirms the material nature of theology itself and introduces a critical posture that resists the immediacy of practical activities in the name of the liberating praxis of heteronomous acts, the conditions of which cannot be thought or known in advance; this is a politics *ex nihilo* which emerges from the contingent gaps in which the subject discovers the wounded core of her political subjectivity.¹⁰⁹ Further discussion of this awaits us in future chapters, but we leave this chapter on Marx with a clearer sense of the effect that ideology critique has on theology: the recognition of the raw political interests always already invested in the theological, making the need to interpret these interests critically all the more the urgent and pressing, even if, at this juncture, what function critique may have in political theology is uncertain.

In this chapter, I have tried to suggest that the Marxian critique of religion had less to do with its substantive or material theological claims, and more to do with its deleterious function and impact on social and political life, specifically its fetishistic, alienating, and capitalist modes. "False consciousness" is inadequate for describing what Marx

¹⁰⁹ Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 3.

finds objectionable about theology. To accuse theology of ideology is not the same as accusing it of being false. What is important to note is that while Marx defined religion *through* a critique of ideology, he is most interested in developing a materialist parallelism that takes on the state and society that produces the conditions of and for religion itself as a site where social contradictions emerge and take root. While I am not suggesting that Marx is a sort of crypto-theologian, or that there is a religious remainder in Marxism itself, I do think it is important to state the extent to which the admittedly complex relation between theology and ideology is complicated by the fact that ideology is not an epistemological category in Marx, but a social-scientific concept. Sure, Marx's critique of religion is an ideology-critique, but that is not the entire story of their relation, or even the most important part of it.

If much of modern philosophy after Marx has proceeded to cast aspersions on theology in light of Marxist critique that it is ideological, that it contributes to 'false consciousness' of human beings and so occludes their potential formation as emancipatory political subjects liberated into forms of life and ways of being commensurate with their flourishing and well-being, then it is truly surprising that the turn to theology and religion in philosophy has been motivated by an eagerness to use theology to think and act towards the ethical and political imperatives of our day. The so-called "new visibility" of religion, then, has to do with the immanent relation of praxis to theory in political theology; that is, it comes as a result of philosophy's immanent critique which recommends religion and theology as an agent of ideology critique, rather than its object. This has as

much to do with concrete changes in the composition and arrangement of our social world as it does with challenges within philosophy and theology.

As such, it is less surprising than one might expect that political philosophers, indeed even Marxist ones, find themselves turning to theology as ideology critique and are doing so for mainly political reasons. Two prominent examples, British literary critic Terry Eagleton and Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, both turn to theology at precisely that moment in their respective projects where one might expect them to eschew it: the intersectional nexus of theory, ideology critique, and politics. This leaves open the possibility of interpreting and deploying theology in non-ideological or anti-ideological ways, all within a Marxist conception of the idea. What is gained by theology in this surprising turn to Christianity *by* ideology critique? It presents an opportunity for theology itself to return to the question of whether a non-ideological theology is possible. Such a version would afford political theology with the critique necessary to regulate its immanent relation of theory to praxis, resisting the temptation of complicity while also directing how best to relate its theological commitments to material political realities. This possibility surfaces in political philosophy on the contemporary left in a variation of the “the return to religion” within contemporary theory. The following two chapters of the dissertation look at two differing contemporary treatments of theology as ideology critique, both of which do so in critical appreciation of the Marxist rubric.

CHAPTER TWO

TERRY EAGLETON

Introduction

This chapter interprets Terry Eagleton's theory of ideology's critique in relation to his critically appreciative turn to theology. It situates Eagleton within two predominant trends: the theological or religious turn in political philosophy and critical theory, and the political turn in theology and critical research on religion. It is within this crucible that political theology is best interpreted, and so is the best conceptual space in which ideology critique is understood and practiced. Insofar as the overall purpose of the dissertation is to inquire about the relation between ideology critique and theology, it is also important to take up the surprising reemergence of the use of theology in contemporary Marxist political philosophy. When speaking a broad-based 'theological turn' in general¹, it is imperative to clarify both the nature of and the reasons for this 'turn' in Marxist politics, represented by Terry Eagleton and - in the proceeding chapter -

¹ For more in-depth discussions about the open questions in political theology today, see Péter Losonczi, and Aakash Singh, ed. *The Future of Political Theology: Religious and Theological Perspectives* (London: Continuum, 2012); Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics after Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Jeffrey Robbins. *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Creston Davis and Slavoj Žižek, ed. *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Hent de Vries, "Introduction: before, around, and beyond the theologico-political" in *Political Theologies Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 3-91.; Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward, ed. *The New Visibility of Religion Studies in Religion and Cultural Hermeneutics* (London: Continuum, 2008); Aakash Singh and Péter Losonczi. eds. *From Political*

by Slavoj Žižek. What kinds of theology are being taken up here and for what reasons? What difference does their respective use of theology make for their employment of ideology critique and its political role in social and political change? Put differently, how might we characterize their use of theology as ideology critique? In an attempt to answer these questions, the present chapter examines how the Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton uses theology as ideology critique for the sake of radical politics. We find that the consistent appeal to theology immanent to their Marxist politics has to do with the critique of ideology, for theology is seen as the decisive catalyst for achieving human emancipation, and so is called upon to inform, animate, and direct ideology critique itself. If the primary question that guides this research is “in the case of Eagleton, why is theology important for Marxist philosophy – especially given the Marxist legacy of religion as ideology?”² The chapter argues that Eagleton discerns within theology a particularly radical element that promises to challenge prevalent trends in contemporary political theory. The surprising answer is that the operative feature of this element is ideology critique. Eagleton, I argue, uses theology *as* ideology critique, an intriguing development within Marxist

Theory to Political Theology: Religious Challenges and the Prospects of Democracy (London: Continuum, 2010).

² While the ongoing rapprochement between Marxism and theology is nothing new, serious research on the engagements between Marxism and theology in and by the major figures of Western Marxism is an unexpected development. Roland Boer has led the way by arguing that Marxism has never been as inimical or oppositional to religion and theology as popularly thought; it is more the rule than the exception to see Marxist writers take up theological and religious questions directly within, and in service to, their Marxist political work. Cf. Roland Boer, *Criticism of Earth: On Marx, Engels and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Roland Boer, *Vale of Tears; on Marxism and Theology V* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

political philosophy given the aforementioned critique of religion *as* ideology in Marx presented in chapter 1.

Perhaps Eagleton furthers Marx's point by affording us an alternative way of looking at the relation between ideology and theology. This helps us imagine a different kind of procedure, not in order to save theology or religion from the critique of ideology, but for the sake of a *critical* theological procedure that is better prepared to take on the negative dialectics of critical theory more thoroughly than it has up to this point. More explanation of that last point is required, but at this juncture, I am only interested in what Eagleton says about the role of critique in theology (and the form that theology must take as a result) and what he says about the role of theology in critique. Put simply, I aim to identify the *critical* form of political theology as it exists in Eagleton's use of theology *as* and *for* ideology critique. While this appears to be a reversal of Marx's critique, Eagleton shows it to be endemic to the Marxist position itself, bringing Marx (and us) into the contemporary debate itself.

Eagleton indicates a theologico-political way of relating ideology and theology that differs significantly from more standard views on ideology critique which do not include theology. He does so by critiquing postmodernism, secularity, and cultural studies - the approaches most commonly used to help rethink the relation of ethics, religion, and political practices in light of the contemporary critique of the secular.³ But what does Eagleton mean by "radical politics"? The term "radical" has undergone considerable usage

³ Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-1985* (London: Verso, 1986); Terry Eagleton, *Figures of*

by those eager to differentiate their perspective from other exiting alternatives, whether it be the post-Marxist agonist politics of ‘radical democracy’⁴ or readings of Continental philosophy of religion as ‘radical political theology.’⁵ By ‘radical’ politics, Eagleton means something else. Eagleton considers ‘radical’ politics to offer an ‘third way’, an alternative to both ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ types of political thinking. The ‘radical’ has something to do with the formalistic constraints of the nature of the critical itself, bearing important resemblances to the Frankfurt School, especially Theodor Adorno. Eagleton describes it this way: “a radical politics can describe what must be done in order for this to occur, but it cannot prescribe the content of what must then be lived, for the content, as Marx says, goes beyond the phrase. All radical politics are thus in a profound sense formalistic.”⁶ For Eagleton, radical political thought is less about a social movement or a (set of) position(s) (e.g., Marxism, anti-colonialism, feminism, etc) but rather a *critical* sensibility that seeks to break with the established order in pursuit of the altogether new. It matters little then, for radical theory, to make determinate political prescriptions, and

Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others (London: Verso, 2003).

⁴ E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Verso: London, 1985); Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013).

⁵ Clayton, Crockett, B. Keith Putt, and Jeffrey W. Robbins, ed. *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey W. Robbins. *Religion, Politics, and the Earth The New Materialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Clayton Crockett, ed. *Religion and Violence in a Secular World: Toward a New Political Theology* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).

⁶ Terry Eagleton, “Nationalism: Irony and Commitment” in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson, and Edward Said (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 29.

instead, it seeks to demonstrate the contingency of the actual - that the world can and must be thought otherwise. The aim of radical theory is not to provide alternatives to social reality, but to rigorously establish the possibility that things *can* be different: it is to imagine the world otherwise. Radical politics is always essentially *critical*. It identifies and combats oppressive structures, but falls short of any prescriptive work. This is important because it is due to its *radical* character that Eagleton discovers something politically powerful about theology which contributes directly to the project of ideology critique in contemporary thought. Put differently, he considers theology to be *radical only* insofar as it is practiced *critically*. Whether the theology he offers is up to the task remains to be seen.

It is notable at the outset that Eagleton opposes that idea that ideology critique somehow assumes or promotes a *secular* critique of religion, as if the materialist thesis of ideology critique (its affirmation of worldly immanence) is restricted or limited to an opposition to religion tout court. This is problematic for a number of reasons, the strongest of which is the developing thesis that the secular is indeed a religious invention and does not fully escape the ambit of theology. The idea of the secular itself remains tethered to and mediated through the idea of religion as the foil against which Christianity and the category of religion both establishes itself.⁷ To appropriately understand the challenges

⁷ This thesis is related, though unequivocally, to discussions about the postsecular world, and the impact of religion in the global civil sphere and official political decision-making, a debate that will not move forward as long as the secular and religion are thought in oppositional terms. For an important and representative dialogue between leading theorists on that discussion, see Charles Taylor, "Why We need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," and Jürgen Habermas, "The Political: The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Judith Butler, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 15-33 and

facing the secular today, we must not think it as detached or emancipated from religion or theology. I will return to the ongoing debate on the relation of religion to the secular, including a due consideration of the so-called ‘postsecular condition’ in later sections of this chapter. First, however, it is important to make a case for how Eagleton takes up a Marxist style of ideology critique but interprets it theologically, while also insisting that this is not a departure from materialist or socialist commitments. This amounts to a “critical political theology” for the sake of radical politics, a characterization that situates critical questions about the secular/postsecular in a particular way.

Eagleton and the Political Use of Theology

The idea behind moving so quickly from the nineteenth century Marx to the twenty-first century Eagleton (and Slavoj Žižek, in the next chapter) is not to avoid the unenviable task of making sense of the complex reception history of Marx’s thought in the twentieth century, especially as it relates to the meaning of theology as ideology. Rather, I am interested in a new assessment of the relation between theology and politics within ideology critique. The question of religion and theology was not abandoned by Marxist thought after Marx. Later Marxists like Gramsci, Lukacs, even Lenin, grappled with the challenge that religion (when interpreted as an ideology) posed for revolutionary politics and the development of the working class consciousness. It was clear to many

34-59, respectively. Both Taylor and Habermas recognize the descriptive reality that religion has shifted in relation to the secular and this forces us to rethink of their relation, both historically and as a matter of practical reasoning. Although they have meaningful differences about what this means for religion (and politics), it is important to note how they are both no longer interested in reading religion off of a secular backdrop, but take it up as a *sui generis* matter.

twentieth century post-war Western Marxists (or, arguably, post-Marxists) like Theodor Adorno, Ernst Bloch, Jacques Ellul, and Erich Fromm that religion was not going away, at least not at the accelerated rate that early modern critics once expected. Theology in all its messy conceptual and political particulars needed to be included within their social theory. Genuine *critical* social theory, they said, needs to *explain* theology, not just explain it away. As I have already discussed, this idea is central to the ideology critique of religion in Marx himself. Theology, Marx insisted, was a *result*, not a cause, of alienated social life that had a negative material impact as a fetishized and fetishizing ideology. Ideology was a detrimental obstacle to revolutionary practice because it got in the way of a working class consciousness, only benefiting those whose economic and political interests are the commodification of work, accumulation of capital, and controlling modes of production.

Eagleton follows Marx this far. His early theoretical work on literary criticism displays its Marxist inflection insofar as it is centered on working from the concept of ideology. His early bibliography lists titles such as *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, *Criticism and Ideology*, and *Ideology: An Introduction*, as well as a pair of books on Marx.⁸ When paired with more recent texts such as *On Evil, Holy Terror, Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, and *Trouble With Strangers*, it is clear that both Eagleton's early theology

⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 2006); Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991); Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); and Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Terry Eagleton, *Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

and his latest ‘full circle’⁹ are motivated by broadly Marxist political concerns, as is his adaption of ideology critique for the sake of a political literary criticism.¹⁰ Likewise, Eagleton’s critique of ideology is decisively Marxist in both its political and materialist elements, but he drops the ‘false consciousness’ label from ideology critique. He links ideology critique thoroughly to the discursive practice of *criticism*, a unifying theme in his disparate *oeuvre*.¹¹ He firmly believes that what we need most today is a recovery of working-class resistance against identitarian nationalism, finance capitalism, and exploitative

⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Terry Eagleton, *The Gatekeeper: A Memoir* (London: Penguin, 2001); Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); Terry Eagleton, "Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching," *London Review of Books* (2006); Terry Eagleton, *Jesus Christ: The Gospels* (London: Verso, 2007); Terry Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Terry Eagleton, "Religion for Radicals: An Interview with Terry Eagleton," *MRZine* 61, no. 4 (2009); Terry Eagleton, "Monotheism and Violence," in *The New Visibility of Religion Studies in Religion and Cultural Hermeneutics*, ed. Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (London: Continuum, 2008), 88-98; Eagleton, "Tragedy and Revolution," in *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, eds. Davis, Creston, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 8-15. For a detailed review of this "turn" in Eagleton, see Roland Boer, *Criticism of Heaven: On Marxism and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) 275-333.

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others* (London: Verso, 2003).

¹¹ Eagleton, *Ideology*, xxiii: "‘Critique’ is that form of discourse which seeks to inhabit the experience of the subject from inside, in order to elicit those ‘valid’ features of that experience which point beyond the subject’s present condition." I agree with Eagleton that revitalizing *critique* is essential to the vibrancy and persistence of radical politics, which lost ground to a postmodern skepticism that is more interested in identity and culture than in materialism or class struggle. As goes critique, so goes theory. Eagleton follows the Kantian tradition of "critique" that affords "a standard by which knowledge can with certainty be distinguished from pseudo-knowledge"; this task requires both a negative moment and a positive criterion upon which to base the former adjudication - even if said ideal is both constructed, provisional, and thin. I. Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. G. Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 133–134. Eagleton develops this concept in his early work, starting with *Marxism and Literary Criticism, Criticism and Ideology, Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, and *The Function of Criticism*. The latter work advances an argument that locates the contemporary critic in a traditional role: "reconnecting the symbolic to the political, engaging through both discourse and practice with the process by which repressed needs, interests, and desires, may assume the cultural forms which could weld them into a collective political force." (Eagleton, *Function of Criticism*, 123) Eagleton insists on a ‘revolutionary

labor practices. Eagleton is actively engaged in an intellectual effort to highlight the enduring significance of Marx himself for contemporary political action and debate, over against the reception history of Marx in the tradition of Marxism.¹² His consistent rehabilitation of Marx goes hand in hand with his reproach of Western liberal politics, whose bourgeois multiculturalism and beguiled postmodernism, he claims, lifts up a virtueless and vacuous world.¹³ Eagleton laments the state of critical theory today: it has failed to foster social emancipation and the intellectual and theoretical practices that should be counted on to help generate this are distracted by, complicit in, and otherwise rendered

literary criticism' (Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*, 98) that is materialist in content, negative in form, but rooted in its 'substantial social function' as an *immanent* investigation of theory as it presents itself within "the symbolic process of social life." (Eagleton, *Function of Criticism*, 124)

¹² Terry Eagleton, "Marxism without Marxism," in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Spectres of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), 83-87; Terry Eagleton, "Where does postmodernism come from?," in *Marx Today: Selected Works and Recent Debates*, ed. John F. Sitton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

¹³ Eagleton's dislike of postmodernism and poststructuralism is scattered through his writings, but the most interesting and representative loci include Eagleton, *After Theory*, p. 63-73, 103-117 as well as Terry Eagleton, *The Illusion of Postmodernism* (Oxford (UK): Blackwell, 1996). The core of Eagleton's disapproval with postmodernism is its political failings - and that it sees itself as an outgrowth of Marxist failures. Specifically, Eagleton criticizes postmodernism's suspicion of hierarchies, its praise for cultural relativism, and its silence on class analysis while linking race and gender to oppression. While postmodernism is often politically oppositional, it is also economically complicit in its adherence to a moral and cultural relativism that eclipses the common good by placing individual rights above that of the community. In *Illusion*, Eagleton faults postmodernism for its "cultural relativism and moral conventionalism, its scepticism, pragmatism, and localism, its distaste for ideas of solidarity and disciplined organization, its lack of any adequate theory of political agency..." (Eagleton, *Illusion of Postmodernism*, 134). He contends that the postmodernist suspicion that anything resembling a grand narrative is a totalitarian gesture of power occludes any ability to speak critically about the state of the world: "For socialist thought there has indeed been a grand narrative, and more's the pity. What strikes a socialist most forcibly about history to date is that it has displayed an almost remarkable consistency -- namely, the stubbornly persisting realities of wretchedness and exploitation." (Eagleton, *Illusion of Postmodernism*, 51)

impotent by anti-theoretical cultural trends that have worked their way into everyday political life: anti-foundationalism, relativism¹⁴, and a post-political allergy for morality.¹⁵ Eagleton's answer is to return to a theory *after* theology, animated by a critique of ideology. The task of this theory is to return to serious philosophical questions about morality, foundations, social cohesion, and virtue. He actively promotes (or more precisely, defends) theology as a kind of "vanishing mediator" between this kind of critical theory and radical politics, one that he finds uniquely capable of generating the kind of political subjects needed for oppositional and emancipatory movements.

Responding to those who deride his 'theological turn', Eagleton writes: "I would point out to my friends on the left that the politics implicit in the rather exotic talk [of theology] are more, not less, radical than much that is to be found in the more orthodox discourses of the left today."¹⁶ For Eagleton, "there is something here which is in a certain interpretation *far more radical* than most of the mainstream political discourses that we hear at the moment." Theology is "a science of discontent" that sheds lights on the materialist narrative of human struggle - the sickness of evil, terror, oppression - but he also highlights "the capacity of religion to unite theory and practice, elite and populace, spirit

¹⁴ Eagleton, *After Theory*, 50-55.

¹⁵ Eagleton, *After Theory*, 71-74.

¹⁶ Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, vi.

and senses, a capacity which culture was never quite able to emulate.”¹⁷ The radical politics of theology are of a different sort: rather than striving to vacate political space so as to fill it with alternative forms of thought, theology is at its radical best when it is critical: that is, when it calls for “a traumatic breaking down and remaking, for which the Christian term is conversion.”¹⁸ Theology also affords certain elements that have been missing in contemporary theory since postmodernism: a rational basis for moral judgements and a materialist account of universality, based on the love of strangers, solidarity, dependence, and equality, all of which provide the “vital precondition of human flourishing”, and the basis of genuinely critical self-reflexive spirit.¹⁹

Eagleton’s Critique of Ideology

Terry Eagleton has generated a new wave of interest in his work, mostly in critical response to his ‘theological turn’²⁰ a phrase that Eagleton uses himself to describe his political and ethical writings.²¹ I do not offer a thorough assessment of his theology here,

¹⁷ Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), ix.

¹⁸ Eagleton, *On Evil*, 17.

¹⁹ Eagleton, *After Theory*, 160-170 and 154.

²⁰ Eugene McCarragher, “The Gospel According to Terry,” *Dissent* 61, no. 4 (2014): 132-137.; Ola Sigurdson, *Theology and Marxism in Eagleton and Žižek: A Conspiracy of Hope* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); G. Youzhuang, “Miracles and Revolutionary Reversals: Terry Eagleton's Theological Turn,” *Literature and Theology* 26, no. 3 (2012): 323-337.; Ola Sigurdson, “Emancipation As a Matter of Style: Humour and Eschatology in Eagleton and Žižek,” *Political Theology* 14, no. 2 (2013): 235-251; Kenneth Surin, “Theology and Marxism: The Tragic and Tragi-Comic,” *Literature and Theology* 19, no. 2 (2005): 112-131.

²¹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, xii; Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, vi; Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, viii; Eagleton, *On Evil*, 16-18; Eagleton, *Jesus Christ: The Gospels*, xxvii-xxx; Terry Eagleton, “Religion for Radicals” interview, *The Immanent Frame*: <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2009/09/17/religion-for-radicals-an-interview-with-terry-eagleton/>;

as I restrict myself to the nature of Eagleton's *critical* appeal to theology on ethical and political grounds.²² Eagleton's critical theory brings ideology critique and theology together cooperatively in order to face down and disassemble the political brinkmanship caused, in part, by the lack of sufficiently radical ideas circulating in contemporary political thought and practice. Eagleton's patently eclectic style, his unapologetic socialism, and his reuse of theological ideas from his early work as a "Left Catholic" theologian, all converge to afford us a theology *for* radical politics. I will chart out the points of nexus between ideology critique and theology, exploring how it is that Eagleton draws up the relation between theology and politics. My aim is to clarify both the use of ideology critique in Eagleton's political theology and the use of theology in his distinctive version of ideology critique.

Eagleton's General Concept of Ideology

At this point, I want to outline his own distinctive concept of ideology, to explain its function in and relation to political theology, and clarify why both are so important for radical politics. First, why has the concept of ideology fallen away as an instructive and effective mode of critique? Eagleton blames the "end of ideology" on certain developments within postmodern theory, namely its critique of absolute claims to knowledge as

²² For detailed discussions of Eagleton's theological positions, see Roland Boer, *Criticism of Heaven*, 275–333; James Smith, *Terry Eagleton*, 9–30 and 140–167., and Sigurdson, *Theology and Marxism*, p. 66–81, 110–126, and 198–203; Boer, "Terry Eagleton and the Vicissitudes of Christology" *Cultural Logic* 8 (2005): <http://clogic.eserver.org/2005/boer.html>; Boer, "An Intrinsic Eagleton?," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory*, 9.2 (Summer 2008), 1–17.; Boer, "Toward Unethical Insurgency," *Rethinking Marxism* 25, no. 1 (2013): 38–51.

well as its dismantling of truth, objectivity, and morality, all of which are deemed “ideological” because they presuppose some privileged standpoint, some outside vantage. This seemingly advances the post-Kantian point that human beings *as* subjects are trapped, in a way, within the limits of knowledge, and thus only access the real *as* phenomenal. “Reality” is always interpreted and as such, there is no direct knowledge of reality per se outside of subjectivity. Eagleton does not counter this familiar line, but rather disagrees that it means that ideology and its critique is obsolete or politically pointless. He hazards a post-critical and anti-foundationalist concept of ideology that is based on a theological perspective on human rationality, embodiment, and social interdependence. The predominant role of ideology in Eagleton’s model of critique (whether it to be political, social, or literary) may appear to be quite prosaic, outdated, or atavistic - if only because much of contemporary critical thinking has left the concept of ideology behind altogether, influenced by the anti-Marxist sentiments of poststructuralist and postmodern theory.²³ In his

²³ The apparent incongruences between Marxism and postmodernism are well documented. See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) for the classic account. But for Eagleton, his resistance to postmodern and poststructuralist theory is more theoretically specific - and more directly political. “What is projected by postmodernism as a universally valid reaction between knowledge and interests is in fact fairly specific to the bourgeois epoch... those who regard reason as no more than the instrument of interests, in at time-hallowed bourgeois tradition, sometimes seem to assume that it is self-evident what exactly our interests are.” (Eagleton *Ideology*, 173) He contextualizes the rise of poststructuralism within the defeat of the New Left and the disillusion within theory thereafter: “One advantage of the dogma that we are prisoners of our own discourse, unable to advance reasonably certain truth-claims because such claims are merely relative to our language is that... it also frees you at a stroke from having to assume a position on important issues... Since it commits you to affirming nothing, it is as injurious as blank ammunition.” (Eagleton *Literary Theory*, 125)

In *After Theory*, Eagleton argues that the cost of postmodern advances (‘the rise of cultural theory’) was ‘critical language’. This brought on the loss of morality as a common human concern: the ability to raise ‘meta-questions’ about fundamental ends and means of human life (Eagleton, *After Theory*, 83), the task that Eagleton attributes to (the function of political criticism within) theory itself (Eagleton, *After Theory*, 74-95). Theology can bring to theory what culture has proven it cannot: it addresses key questions of

classic witty form, Eagleton writes that “If postmodernism is right, than Marxism is wrong – *pace* those brands of postmodern Marxism which bear about the same relation to classical tradition as guitar-toting vicars do to the Desert Fathers.”²⁴ Certainly, the predominant culture of cynicism causes us to consider ourselves to be fully aware of what it is going on around us. We do not experience ourselves as deceived and fooled anymore by the forces at play in our social and political order. The idea inherent to ideology critique, that we are nevertheless experiencing a distorted or illusionary sense of being conscious in the world, seems quite out of place. There is no need for an “enlightened” point of view if there is no ideological state or subject from which one needs to be emancipated; postmodern theory has already accomplished this with deconstruction. Additionally, postmodern theory has convincingly argued that there is not an ‘outside’ position, there is no external point from which we are able to interrogate any standpoint - cultural, political, anthropological, etc. Any unique purchase that a critique of ideology might claim on the current situation seems itself to be rather naive, if not politically suspect.

value and links them to the mundane aspects of everyday life. (Eagleton, *After Theory*, 99)

In *Ideology*, he enumerates his concerns with postmodernity as they affect ideology critique specifically: (1) the dismissal of ‘representation’, (2) the idea that ‘all thought is ideological’ (Eagleton, *Ideology*, 165) means that all critiques are tantamount to absolutist claims to truth: “we cannot brand Pol Pot a Stalinist bigot since this would imply some metaphysical certitude about what not being a Stalinist bigot would involve.” (Eagleton, *Ideology*, xxi) Finally, (Eagleton, *Ideology*, 3) all rationality is insidiously invested with interests and power, and so “everything is a matter of rhetoric and power... talk of ‘facts’ or ‘objectivity’ is merely a specious front for the promotion of specific interest” disqualifies the critique of ideology as “redundant.” (Eagleton, *Ideology*, 165) This does little more than “consecrate the political status quo.” (Eagleton, *Ideology*, 167) Eagleton routinely faults poststructuralism for “this stoicism in the face of an apparently all-pervasive power or inescapable metaphysical closure.” (Eagleton, *Ideology*, 146)

²⁴ Eagleton, ‘Introduction: Part 1’ in *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 15.

The idea that the critique of ideology is thought to be outdated and out of place is precisely why Eagleton believes it to be so important and relevant for our time. We need the critique of ideology all more as we have become blind to the ways in which ideology prevents us from identifying its everyday role in our lives.

As such, it is possible to speak of ideology *critique* as “a continuous, if still rather anonymous resistance” that is made available to political subjects in and through their very embodiment. All human life and thought is linked in and through the body. This is politically important because without ideology critique, we have no ability to identify what is wrong within our social reality, and more importantly, *why* it is wrong, and what we ought to do about it. There must a position from which to identify the difference between what is real and what is not, between ideology and non-ideology, for if we lacked this position, we would not be able to tell the significant differences between “loving God and loving Gorgonzola”²⁵, nor would we be able to articulate why torture and terrorism is objectionable, or why defeating cancer is (or ought to be) a higher human priority than Manchester United winning the Premier League.²⁶ The question, for Eagleton, is not whether this position exists, but rather how best to theorize and actualize it *materially* within the embodied conditions of human life. We must believe that political subjects and

²⁵ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 147.

²⁶ Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 47: “It is sport, not religion, that is now the opium of the masses.” See also Terry Eagleton, “Football: A Dear Friend to Capitalism,” *The Guardian*, June 15, 2010: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jun/15/football-socialism-crack-cocaine-people>

social institutions can be transformed, that there are alternative possibilities within society that can animate the resistance necessary for thinking and making the world otherwise. Althusser's perspective on ideology is too resigned, bleak, pessimistic, and takes all the critical power and analytic strength out of ideology critique; this has drastic and dramatic negative implications for radical politics. It concedes the day to ideology, allowing it to both naturalize and universalize the alienated state of human life for the benefit of ruling interests without the annoying and noisy objections of critique. Indeed, it is exactly because Christianity is so annoying and noisy that Eagleton considers it to be promising - and potentially revolutionary - for ideology critique itself.

Ideology and Literary Critique

While Eagleton's early theology illustrates a rather exuberant Marxist humanism, Eagleton's early literary work displays the deep and abiding intuition that reading and studying literature is always already a political activity, one that must always be properly oriented towards understanding what forces and interests are involved in the formation, redaction, and reception of literature.²⁷ Literature is always a social and political act, and so literary criticism must always take shape in dialogue with political theories designed to help surface those aspects and elements. To read literature, one must be aware of the text's place within a wider matrix of history, politics, and economic interests, and for this task, Eagleton wrote *Criticism and Ideology* wherein developed a Marxist literary theory,

²⁷ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 169-170.

so as to chart and organize the various levels and elements using a more “scientific” theory of ideology critique.²⁸ This signaled a decisive shift wherein Marxist critical theory is applied to literary studies, but it did not include theories of ideology specifically until *Criticism and Ideology*. The point of literary criticism is to surface the myriad ‘categorical structures’ operative within a single literary text so as to explain their origin, source, and genetic conditions. The study of literature can have actual political impact by uncovering the various political structures at play, identifying what these structures mean for overall aesthetic judgments about the relative merits or demerits of any given literary work.

Criticism and Ideology offers a “Marxist science of the text” that attends more specifically to ideologies in literature, not just genetic categorical structures. It is important to understand what goes into the textual production of literature in history. To put it differently, what are the various levels of ideology present in and active on the text, and how should we think about the relationship between any given text and its ideological status? For Eagleton, history enters into the textual production as history. Instead of thinking of the text as an expression of ideology, “the text, rather, is a certain production of ideology.”²⁹ From a critical-materialist standpoint, literary texts matter for human life because they form us, they act upon us, “they make us think” and so we need to be aware

²⁸ Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 8-21.

²⁹ Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 64.

of the complex layers in the ideological matrix operative in both interpretation and production. The purpose of ideologico-critical reading of a text is not to identify those places in a text where it leads to and facilitates ‘false consciousness’ in the reader, or where ideologies work to cover up or conceal disarray, incoherence, and contradictions in a text, but instead to analyze complex, dialectical relations between the ideological factors and influences on the textual production of literature in its wide historical context and economic circumstances.

Eagleton would eventually sharpen the political tone of this style of ideology critique, not by doubling down on narrow analytic or methodological attempts to design a complete theory of ideologies in textual production, but by moving towards a unique, pragmatic strategy whereby the search for strict argumentative rhetorical and polemical modes gave way to a more diffuse and pluralistic approach. The basic criterion for his radical critical pluralism is the ability to engender revolutionary modes of socialist thinking and acting, and so his initial interest in Marxism gave way to new attention to post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, and feminist ideas; that is, “towards a revolutionary criticism.”³⁰ At this point, Eagleton became very interested in the role and function of criticism in general, wondering aloud if ideology critique can contribute to the priorities of socialist politics in the context of postmodernism, cultural studies, and deconstruction. He concluded that a new critical practice was required in a context where most of what

³⁰ This direction is already present in Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981) and Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: From the Spectator to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984).

called itself ‘criticism’ was merely liberal-humanism reworked in trendy conceptual garb. He found in the figure of Walter Benjamin a tradition of Western Marxism that prefigured this concern and so provided resources for a *style* of ideology critique that was capable of bringing together the emancipatory impulses of poststructuralism and the radical political aspirations of socialism without falling prey to the anarchic seductions of the Derrida fete of deconstruction.

Given that Eagleton’s major concern shifted to how the literary critic could expand her work into new modes of political engagement, *Literary Theory* is notable for its concern with linking political concerns with the study of literature. How and what literature is studied is mutually constitutive to the ideologies of the academy. The task of politically responsible criticism is to establish notions of literature and modes of analysis that both uncover the ways that literary theory reinforces these ideologies as “part of the ideological apparatus of the modern capitalist state.”³¹ But what did Eagleton suggest as an alternative? Surprisingly, he refused to offer a full-throated Marxist theory, opting instead to advocate for an eclectic approach of “using whatever one can.” The goal of literary theory determines its methods, and so its goals, say Eagleton, afford us the opportunity to take up a radically pluralistic, pragmatic, and ultimately rhetorical, strategy of taking up and using whatever resources, ideas, and discourses will produce results that contribute to

³¹ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 200.

“the strategic goal of human emancipation, the production of ‘better people; through the socialist transformation of society.’”³²

The various interests of *Literary Theory* are consolidated into a broad political thesis that the study of literature must consider how it is itself directly implicated in and responsible for the function of ideology in social modes of power and dominance; it is, in this way, a *critical* discourse³³ that resists political complicity in ideology by struggling to see how “repressed needs, interests, and desires may assume the cultural forms which could weld them into a collective political force.”³⁴ But apart from some broad pointing and generic allusions to Althusser, it is not altogether clear what exactly Eagleton has in mind when referring to ideology in this early stage, other than that he does follow Althusser’s rejection of George Lukács’ thesis who defined ideology as “false consciousness” that functions as a cultural hegemonic power, which can and must be escaped if one is to apprehend the historical ‘Real’ upon which any truly effective revolutionary politics must be based. While in *Criticism and Ideology*, ideology seemed synonymous with the myriad cultural, political, and economic factors and forces that influence textual production and reception in history, this very broad and unspecified sense in *Literary Theory* becomes more specifically politicized as Eagleton deepens his critique against postmodern theory.

³² Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 211.

³³ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 175-178.

³⁴ Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, 123.

His groundbreaking text *Ideology* takes up this argument at this intersection between postmodern theory and poststructuralist critique and highlights the relevance of ideology and foregrounds its relation to theology. Eagleton attempts in *Ideology* to reassert the usefulness and political power of the concept of ideology, and to explain the historical development of the idea. He argues that ideology is vital if we are to understand and properly analyze the varied, competing interests in an increasingly fractured, pluralized, and global geopolitical context, all the while also resisting the temptations of postmodern theory to conflate ideology with something resembling ‘discourse’, turning politics into hermeneutics. True to form, Eagleton does not offer a unified theory of ideology here, but rather provides both a historical account of the term’s development and a helpful listing of six definitions. This strategy affords Eagleton the opportunity to illustrate and apply his critically aggregating approach. It must take a strategically pluralist approach in order to be successful: “all these perspectives contain a kernel of truth, but taken in isolation they show up as partial and flawed.”³⁵

However, in contrast to his earlier generic definition, ideologies are “something” in particular in that they describe a specific formation, a definite function. The critique of ideology is mounted in defense of the “objective interest” which allows us all to distinguish between what is most important, whose interests are most pressing, and whether or not certain material conditions and social relations are desirable. Eagleton argues that the radical potential of ideology critique rests understanding the dialectics of the oppressive

³⁵ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 222.

and emancipatory elements (and their historical context). In this way, *Ideology* is a study of the term and the concept that establishes ideology critique as a positive basis for a political solidarity in strong contrast to the identitarian approaches that use multiculturalism and globalized plurality as reasons and rallying points for sectarian and localist formations for whom the goal of politics has gone from consensus and ‘the common’ to the airing of grievance and the continuance of conflict and dissensus, or a communitarian ‘tribalism.’

Eagleton insists that his theoretical preface for ideology critique is intended to directly counter the cultural theory which “has been shamefaced about morality and metaphysics, embarrassed about love, biology, religion, and revolution, largely silent about evil, reticent about death and suffering, dogmatic about essences, universals and foundations, and superficial about truth, objectivity, and disinterestedness.”³⁶ Eagleton believes the most important reasons why we need to revitalize critique itself include the various shortcomings of the Marxist-Structuralist ideas about ideological interpellation³⁷, the

³⁶ Eagleton, *After Theory*, 101-102.

³⁷ For more on Eagleton’s disagreements with an Althusserian concept of ideology critique, see Eagleton, *Ideology*, 18-21 and 143-153. He considers Althusser’s theory to be too generalized and too universal; its appeal (based in a rigorous dichotomy between ideology and scientific knowledge) to the ‘problematics’ inherent to the social interpellation process that governs and restrains ‘lived relations’ of the subject (Eagleton, *Ideology*, 137) leads to a functionalist account that is void of any political criticism. Althusser is deeply pessimistic and bleak (Eagleton, *Ideology*, 144-146), in that he resigns the subject to an inevitable “self-misrecognition” (Eagleton, *Ideology*, 142) that “mutes its potentially rebellious clamour, ignoring the ways in which may attain its allotted place in the social order only ambiguously and precariously.” (Eagleton, *Ideology*, 144) There is little chance for political resistance in Althusser’s theory - and this betrays the very point of critique itself, according to Eagleton.

“end of ideology” declarations made by liberal politics³⁸ and the prevailing culture of cynicism, promoted by predominant trends in “critical” theory itself.³⁹ This “pervasive political faltering” is just as much the responsibility of ideology critique (and its ‘would-be’ leftist defenders) itself as it is the end-of-ideology theorists: “If the end of ideology theorists viewed all ideology as inherently closed, dogmatic, and inflexible, postmodernist thought tends to see all ideology as teleological, ‘totalitarian and metaphysically grounded. Grossly travestied in this way, the concept of ideology obediently writes itself off.’”⁴⁰ For Eagleton, the problem is that contemporary theory ignores or marginalizes concerns about ideology, not by pretending it is not there, but by turning its presence in our lives into a natural, generic fact of subjective experience; in fact, it actively generalizes ideology so that it appears to be so ubiquitous and inescapable part of the subject’s landscape, to the point that it absolutely saturates the subject and her world. She is unable (or not thought to be able) to evade or resist its deleterious effects on her knowledge and action. The idea that one cannot escape ideology makes ideology *critique* appear to be rather pointless.

Eagleton’s conception of ideology acts in critical response to these problematic trends and is precipitated by the acutely oppressive and alienating realities facing political subjects today, many of whom “continue to invest in their own unhappiness.” Even though they show that they are indeed aware of their situation, they consistently fail to act

³⁸ Eagleton, *Ideology*, xv-xix; xxi,

³⁹ Eagleton, *After Theory*, 41-73.; Eagleton, *Ideology*, 38-42.

⁴⁰ Eagleton, *Ideology*, xxi.

in ways that will rupture the normal flow and so inaugurate something new altogether. The value of ideology critique lies in the fact that “the critique of ideology, then, presumes that nobody is ever *wholly* mystified.”⁴¹ Eagleton faults theory (especially the cultural and linguistic turns within postmodern and post-structuralist varieties) for the failure of criticism itself. Its suspicion of truth, virtue, objectivity, and reason has resulted in a spineless relativism that precludes the necessary conflict, struggle, and judgment required for any real emancipation from oppressive material conditions.⁴² Eagleton finds the theory of ideology, and incidentally theology, to be helpful for thinking the world otherwise, highlighting those particular aspects of human existence (i.e., its embodied life, the relation of nature to culture, its rationality) that have been eclipsed by major aspects of the theory. Of course, we must be able to properly identify the common elements of human flourishing and discover how to actualize them materially. But is this not fully obfuscated by ideology itself? What must we do to get out from underneath the ideological mechanisms that lead us to act in ways detrimental to our proper ends as human beings; in other words, on what basis do we hope to practice the critique of ideology? It is at this exact juncture that Eagleton turns to Christian theological ideas, and in so doing, comes back full-circle to his earliest days as a Leftist Catholic. The point now, the same as it was

⁴¹ Eagleton, *Ideology*, xxiii.

⁴² It is important to note that Eagleton’s dismissal of relativism is equally matched by resistance to a pre-critical objectivity. Ola Sigurdson is right to say that his account of a ‘moderately rational’ human nature is indeed post-critical in the sense that he is eager to chart a way forward for critique beyond both the pointless search for a ‘external standpoint’ and the resignation of ‘total mystification’. See Sigurdson, *Theology and Marxism*, 34-35.

then, is political. Returning to the classical theory of ideology, albeit in a new and updated way, helps radical politics rediscover its *critical* spirit, and Eagleton finds in theology a critical hermeneutic through which to do exactly this.

To overcome postmodern objections, Eagleton must give an account of ideology critique that differs substantially from the common understanding of ideology as “false consciousness.” Eagleton insists that human subjectivity is not completely illusory and that “its moderately rational character” makes the critique of ideology possible. We are able to identify, for example, ourselves as existing in a state of oppression and also imagine the world otherwise. While insisting that there is indeed no ‘external standpoint’ from which to offer an absolutized critique, it must still be possible, Eagleton maintains, to discern critically what is good for human flourishing and what it is not - the difference between emancipation and oppression. This illustrates the “moderately rational character” of human nature, which is indeed “perfected” by culture, rather than corrupted by it.⁴³ No subject is so completely trapped within ideology that she is unable to discern and apprehend herself as such and also be able to imagine and identify the possibilities of being untapped and how to actualize that possibility. That is, in Eagleton’s favored Aristotelian terms, she is able to imagine herself “happy” - living unto that end proper to her nature as an embodied human being - and to actively invest (or not) in that happiness in an efficacious manner due to the “moderately rational nature of human beings.”⁴⁴ The critique of

⁴³ Ola Sigurdson helpfully points out the structural affinity between Eagleton’s account of culture and nature with Thomas Aquinas’ theology of grace as the perfection of nature. See Sigurdson, *Theology and Marxism*, 36-37.

⁴⁴ Eagleton, *Ideology*, xxiii.

ideology is made possible by the universality afforded us by our bodily conditions. If the subject is neither completely alienated by ideology, nor is the subject always in or under ideology, it is human embodiment that generates the practical reasoning form which we are able to develop a critical view of our situation - and so distinguish between ideology and non-ideology. Countering the postmodern dismissal of ideology critique as obsolete given our awareness of the mystification of the subject, Eagleton defends the concept of ideology on the basis of the bodily conditions of human existence⁴⁵, a political theme that Eagleton explicitly interprets in theological terms.⁴⁶

It is certainly always possible for us to be wrong, to be deluded about our existence, our social conditions, or the character of our acts and our beliefs. This is not necessarily true to ideology, however. There is indeed a difference between illusion, mystification, error, and ideology. For Eagleton, ideology is that specific *political* instance whereby the systemic distortion of knowledge forecloses real, authentic action, but nevertheless still exists as a constitutive part of political subjects and their lived relations: beliefs, assumptions about reality, and actions in and towards that reality. It is both an existential position and an intellectual perspective, which means that ideology can be false,

⁴⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (Oxford: University Press, 2005), 1–41.; Terry Eagleton, “Peter Brooks on Bodies,” in *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others* (London: Verso, 2003), 129–136; Terry Eagleton, *The Significance of Theory* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1990), 24–28.

⁴⁶ Eagleton’s frequent use of the body as the universal basis for a materialist morality and a political solidarity typically intersects with his reference to a radical “Jesuanic” politics. See Eagleton, *After Theory*, 152–173, especially 154–155.; Also, Eagleton, “Introduction,” in *Jesus Christ, The Gospels*, xvii–xix.; For more on how and why the relation of faith and reason to moral values are best understood in relation to the concrete realities of human bodily existence, see Eagleton, *Reason Faith, and Revolution*, 127–133.

but this does not mean that the subject who is shaped by ideology is indeed deceived about everything she believes that she knows about her social reality. Ideology can also be true in the descriptive sense, but still be “mistaken” or “erroneous” insofar as it functions or relates to the current status of affairs *in a certain kind of way*. Ideology is this “certain kind of way” in that it animates and leads subjects to consistently “invest in their own unhappiness” despite their clear and demonstrated ability to do otherwise.⁴⁷

This last point, “despite their ability to do otherwise”, is where Eagleton tries to overcome the culture of cynicism. The possibility of critique - not to mention even politics itself - depends on the fact that the human subject - and her cultural environs - is *not* ideological ‘all the way down.’ Otherwise, the subject can only be tragically passive and has no real recourse in the face of an objective social and political system that acts upon her. The moment we believe that ideology is inescapable is the moment that we have acquiesced to it - and all emancipatory politics and ethics are foreclosed. Ideology works to conceal the possibility of the alternative. The belief in real, actionable alternatives to injustice, oppression, and the like is opened up by the patient practice of ideology critique, the aim of which is not to set the facts straight about reality, but to shift the coordinates of possibility within the material conditions that give rise to social thought itself.

In returning to ideology critique, which Eagleton insists is required if we are to have any hope for emancipatory kinds of political radicalism, we are not pitting value-

⁴⁷ Eagleton, *Ideology*, xxii.

systems against each other (i.e., the ‘West’ vs. the ‘Islamic extremists’) nor are we leveling all cultural perspectives as relative to any other. To return to the critique of ideology is “to expose the material pre-conditions of such values and ideas and thus to defeat the most deadly brands of them by transforming the conditions which give rise to them.”⁴⁸ This sheds further light on where Eagleton thinks ideology resides and is generated: it is not, as Marx argued, at the level of the individual whose consciousness lead her to believe in certain ideas about the world or practice certain styles of ‘lived-relations.’ In this way, Eagleton departs in instructive ways from the structuralist Louis Althusser by refusing to concede that ideology so completely saturates social institutions that interpellate the subject into being that it is utterly inescapable and cannot be overcome. For Eagleton, ideology exists and acts neither in consciousness nor social institutions, but rather *between* them.⁴⁹ It is instead within the “complex systemic operations” *between* social institutions and the subject that are the sites where ideologies shape human existence. Instead of giving up on institutions as the location of ideology itself, Eagleton finds it important to revitalize these selfsame institutions for the work of ideology critique as sites of resistance - including religious communities.

Theology, ‘*After Theory*’?

⁴⁸ Eagleton, *Ideology*, xix.

⁴⁹ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 194.

And with this, the stage has been set for Eagleton's "full circle" back to theology.⁵⁰ He is motivated by a strikingly similar set of political concerns that animates his original interests in Left Catholicism: the defense of a radical theological project and an eagerness to think theologically both with and against leftist politics. Theology has always been about more than the 'gods.' In fact, Eagleton finds in Christianity something deeply akin to socialism. Theology is interesting to Eagleton because it expands the range and scope of radical political thought. He faults contemporary leftist politics for dismissing theology out of a "politically crippling shyness" and "an embarrassed silence."⁵¹

Quite the contrary, Eagleton quips

In a world in which theology is increasingly part of the problem...it is also fostering the kind of critical reflection which might contribute to some of the answers. These are the lessons which the secular left can learn from religion, for all its atrocities and absurdities, and the left is not so flush with ideas that it can afford to look such gift horse in the mouth.⁵²

However, Eagleton does not provide a distinctive, original, or constructive position on theology. Eagleton's broad thesis is that Christian theology specifies an egalitarian ethic of love and justice for strangers and enemies alike that is indispensable for a socialist resistance that combats the ideologies of capitalism and humanism at work within the late modern social order. He argues that the politics of Christianity are more radical than

⁵⁰ Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, vi.; "This book...belongs to the metaphysical or theological turn (or full circle) which my work seems to have taken in recent years, one welcomed by some but looked upon with alarm or exasperation by others."

⁵¹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, xi-xii.

⁵² Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 168.

other present options, even those coming from committed materialists or progressive politicians. Rather than dismissing theology as ideological, political radicalism needs sophisticated engagements with theological ethics and political theology, so as to learn from the virtues and rhetorics that Christian theology promises will overcome the evil and terror of modern life. The ethical vision of socialism has an inherently theological spirit, Eagleton argues, that mirrors in some ways that of Catholic liberation theology.⁵³ Eagleton more or less adopts as axiomatic for this politics the Catholic “preferential option for the poor,” interpreting it as a political truth that is espoused in ethical terms by the figure of Jesus Christ in the biblical gospels⁵⁴, but also echoed in the socialist imperative to enact a revolution for the sake of “the wretched of the earth.”⁵⁵ This revolutionary spirit has been betrayed on both sides: by an “ideological kind of Christian faith”⁵⁶ which is “horrified by

⁵³ The core of Eagleton's theology is best expressed in Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 5-32. It is here that he notes the similarities between his own views and those of liberation theology, but insists that all theology which is authentic, is indeed “liberation” theology.

⁵⁴ Eagleton, “Introduction”, *Jesus Christ: The Gospels*, vii-xxx.; Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 34-37.; For evidence of Christocentrism in his early theology, see Eagleton, *Body as Language*, 39-40, 47.; Eagleton, *The New Left Church*, 142f. For extended comments, see Boer, *Criticism of Heaven*, 276, 280, 301-309.

⁵⁵ This phrase comes from Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, Inc, 1965). Fanon's now classic anti-colonialist text draws powerful connections between imperialism and systemic economic and psychological deterioration. Part of colonialist politics is the intent of degrading the humanity of occupied persons, so as to form them to be malleable, flexible, and dependent, so as to inoculate them, eliminating them as a threat to the powers.

⁵⁶ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 57.

the sight of a female breast, but considerably less appalled by the obscene inequalities between rich and poor”⁵⁷ and a rationalist “New Atheism” that knows as little about emancipatory politics as it does about Christian theology, and unwittingly opposes them both for the same reasons.⁵⁸

The secular left, by clinging to their orthodoxy, have kept themselves sealed off from ideas that are far more radical than anything currently circulating amongst themselves: prosaic, boring, and throwback ideas like sacrifice, love, morality and the suffering of the *anawim*. At this juncture, we should keep in mind that for Eagleton, theology is ideology critique insofar as it is always already a way of speaking about the human predicament today that challenges the present configurations of power and profit. Here, I will focus on Eagleton’s utilization of theological ideas *as* and *for* critiques of ideology, namely in how they work to explain how and why it is that human persons consistently invest in their own unhappiness, misery - why it is that they continually work towards their own downfall, and seemingly consent to their own oppression and domination.

Why Theology?

Eagleton believes that theology, politics, and literature are linked by their ability to afford us a thick description of what it means to be a good human and to be good at being

⁵⁷ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 55.

⁵⁸ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 168: “In a world in which theology is increasingly part of the problem... it is also fostering the kind of critical reflection which might contribute to some of the answers. These are the lessons which the secular left can learn from religion, for all its atrocities and absurdities, and the left is not so flush with ideas that it can afford to look such gift horse in the mouth.”

human together, or what Eagleton calls ‘the political.’⁵⁹ All three function as theoretical reference points for Eagleton, and so a socialist-humanist account of human existence cannot foreclose the possibility that each mode of discourse is indeed correct – or at least politically useful. Terry Eagleton’s self-identified ‘theological turn’ emphasizes a series of concerns present throughout his work in its various stages; it is not something isolated to his late work or detached from his established literary and political commitments. His work on ideology critique and theology are motivated by the same political aspirations of socialism: namely the defeat of advanced capitalism through a systemic critique of the injustices and pathologies generated and perpetuated by ‘free-market’ economies. Insofar as Eagleton’s interest in theology is an important feature of that agenda, it is important to analyze closely *how* Eagleton is using theology, specifically in relation to his theory of ideology and ideology critique.

The use of theology in “critical theory” on political grounds is not a late development for Eagleton. His early theoretical and political early work was under the tutelage of radical Dominican Catholic theologians such as Herbert McCabe and Laurence Bright; resonant with the birth of “the Catholic New Left” in the wake of optimism surrounding Vatican II, Eagleton penned several articles for the theological journals *Slant*⁶⁰ and later

⁵⁹ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 169-182. Eagleton explores his understanding of the ‘political’ in several different places: see Terry Eagleton, *The Significance of Theory*, 24–83; Terry Eagleton, “The Contradictions of Postmodernism,” *New Literary History* 28.1 (Winter 1997): 1–6.; For broad expository treatments of Eagleton on this subject, see David Alderson, *Terry Eagleton* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2004), 76–82, and James Smith, *Terry Eagleton: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 77–85.

⁶⁰ For the history of *Slant* and Eagleton’s connection to it, see Smith, *Terry Eagleton*, 9-31. Also, Eagleton, *The Gatekeeper*, 28-40. The goal of *Slant* was to provide a “Catholic exploration of radical politics”

New Blackfriars, many of which were later collected into *The New Left Church*⁶¹, and his full length monograph *Body as Language*.⁶² The theology in *Slant* is overtly Marxist, eager to make the case to fellow leftists that socialism, theology, and the church can work together toward common materialist goals, even while he actively critiques the structures and patterns in Catholicism that he deemed to be antithetical or obstacles to a Marxist political agenda. This trajectory was expanded in the *New Left Church*, where he again takes up the themes of community, literature, and religion so as to establish an alliance between New Left ideas (British Marxist Raymond Williams, literary critic F.R. Leavis), contemporary philosophy (Sartre, Wittgenstein), and traditional Catholic theology (Thomas Aquinas). His major proposal was that community is the key to resolving the alienation that plagues human existence, and that this requires an “existentialist” Christology that sees Jesus Christ as “a ‘here-everywhere’, the constitutive unity of the group...the centre of the subjectivity of the other, and as the centre of their own subjectivity.” Here we see Eagleton drawing on his Marxist predilections for human community

through the philosophy of Marx and Wittgenstein. The Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe was involved in this project and remains a central figure for Eagleton’s understanding of theology. See Terry Eagleton, “The Roots of the Christian Crisis,” in *“Slant Manifesto”: Catholics and the Left*, ed. Adrian Cunningham, Terry Eagleton, Brian Wicker, Martin Redfern and Lawrence Bright OP. London: Sheed & Ward, 1966.; Eagleton, “The Slant Symposium,” *Slant* 3, no. 5 (1967): 8-9; Eagleton, “Why We Are Still in the Church,” *Slant* 3, no. 2 (1967): 25-8; Eagleton, “Language, Reality and the Eucharist (1),” *Slant* 4, no. 3 (1968): 18-23; Eagleton, “Politics and the Sacred,” *Slant* 4, no. 2 (1968): 18-23; Eagleton, “Language, Reality and the Eucharist (2),” *Slant* 4, no. 4 (1968): 26-31; Eagleton, “Priesthood and Leninism,” *Slant* 5, no. 4 (1969): 12-17.

⁶¹ Terry Eagleton, *The New Left Church* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1966).

⁶² Terry Eagleton, *The Body as Language: Outline of a 'New Left' Theology* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1970).

as the solution to the “fall into language” which is both creative and destructive for humanity. The latter of which is more dominant in late modernity, where the turn to the subject manufactured the fateful division between individual and social interests, operative in the reification, alienation and commodification so prevalent in “what the Christian calls sin and the Socialist calls capitalism.” Again, the community of the Church can be a catalyst for a counter way of life that privileged interdependency, care, and integration of the *anawim* into political life, but more importantly, Eagleton sees in Christology a political reversal.

Although Eagleton’s early theology makes little mention of ideology, it is important for a number of reasons. First, the major concern in Eagleton’s early work in left theology is to show the radical potentials of Christian theology for in and socialist politics of the New Left.⁶³ He sensed a common interest between them: to construct and establish an alternative kind of human community, an altogether different pattern for human life. He sought to leverage this link for thinking radical Christianity and Marxism with and against each other in order to display the ways that they can complement each other in the revolutionary effort to heal the social fractures and resolve economic contradictions that give rise to the conditions of human suffering.⁶⁴ The key idea here is that in his early theological work, Eagleton displays a hope and belief in the radically emancipatory potential

⁶³ Eagleton, *Body as Language*, ix.

⁶⁴ Eagleton, *Body as Language*, 12. “The struggle to transcend an era of destructive and illusory ‘freedom’ for the achievement of genuine communal liberation lies at the core of both Christian and Marxist belief.” See also Youzhuang, “Miracles, and Revolutionary Reversals,” 325-326.

of Christian theology, in consort with socialist change, to reform western Catholicism.⁶⁵ When comparing, for example, the early *Body in Language* to more recent texts such as *After Theory*, *Sweet Violence*, and *Trouble with Strangers*, the themes are resonant, if not directly repetitive: the late interest in tragedy, sacrifice, the preferential option for the *anawim*, and the revolutionary potential of virtue for reforming culture into a fully participative community, all make embryonic appearances in the early work, and are expanded and deployed politically in what Eagleton himself calls a “full circle” to more ‘metaphysical or theological’ interests: morality, evil, sacrifice, ‘non-being’, and virtue.

Eagleton wants to see the political Left move past its postmodern obsession with culture and identity and turn to metaphysical and theological themes such as evil, tragedy, sacrifice, violence, and love, topics that Eagleton believes will generate authentically revolutionary acts of protest, resistance, and change. This adds a critical density - an ontological depth - to what the political left says about how and why the current ideological system has emaciated individual and collective human life within an advanced capitalist society. Theology gives radical politics the sort of ethical sobriety that has been lost with the anti-metaphysical wanderings of an ethically empty postmodernism. This revolutionary trajectory of theology is an intrinsic critique of ideology because it, like socialism, has the rhetorical strength and ethical vibrancy to resist and disarm the ideologies of humanism and capitalism. Certainly, there are religious practices and theological beliefs that are themselves ideological, but Eagleton is interested in recuperating their political

⁶⁵ Eagleton, *The Gatekeeper*, 16-17, 113-114.

core and encouraging the political left to engage a radical Christianity and not wholly deride and dismiss it as the secularist “new atheists” insist.⁶⁶ To clarify how Eagleton uses theology, I turn here to some of the major theological and religious themes he politically develops: sin, Christology, the body, and the defense of God. The goal here is not to discuss or dispute theological specifics, but to show how Eagleton’s materialist theology fuels his ideology critique.

Sin and Evil

Eagleton links his politics to his theology through his firm belief in the fundamental brokenness of humanity, a political concept that he explains with recourse to the theological concept of sin. Eagleton turns to evil in order to explain why human persons demonstrate an unwillingness or inability to attend justly and responsibly to each other in ways that prioritizes those who are suffering or are oppressed, those who are cast out at the margins, and that care for those who are assigned the highest levels of vulnerability and fragility. Eagleton makes the relation between sin and ideology clear: “original sin means that we are built for truth and happiness but have no spontaneous access to what they mean or how to attain them.”⁶⁷ Sin explains what is wrong with human beings and how politics must be thought so as to ameliorate, rather than play into, the inherent flaws in the human condition: recalcitrant flaws like individual interest, self-regard, pride, disorder, corruption, and alienated desire. A theology of sin functions as ideology critique;

⁶⁶ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 50-54.

⁶⁷ Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, 101.

that is, rather than teasing out the disaffected relations between an angry God and human depravity, it is a way of speaking about why we human beings are at odds with ourselves and each other, cut off from that which most makes us human - our embodied social relations with others. But Eagleton's theology of sin is decisively materialist and so it has to do with the mundane, ordinary aspects of human intersubjective life - not with humanity's abstract relation to 'god.'⁶⁸ "What the christian calls sin and the socialist calls capitalism"⁶⁹ are united in their joint concern to identify situations and conditions of injustice, idolatry, and domination; both are based on the tragic interpretation of human nature.⁷⁰

Eagleton highlights "self-centeredness" as a key political aspect of sin and so, of capitalism.⁷¹ To give an Augustinian spin to it (as Eagleton himself often does), there is something inherent to the structural constitution of human beings that leave them prone to disordered desires, leading them "to invest in their own unhappiness" in narcissistic pursuit of our ego-centric interests; in other words, to get entrenched in ideology. The resultant effect is alienation, isolation, and misery, all of which frustrates and precludes the human person from recognizing and actualizing her relationality. It is social interdependency, not autarchic freedom, that is the foundation of the human political subject, and the

⁶⁸ Eagleton, *Body as Language*, 23-27.

⁶⁹ Eagleton, *Body as Language*, 52.

⁷⁰ Eagleton, "Language, Reality, and the Eucharist 1," *Slant* 4, 3, 18-22.

⁷¹ I strongly disagree with Boer who argues that "sin is the absent conversation partner in Eagleton's work." (Boer, 296). It is a featured theme in the early theological work in the final two chapters of *Body as Language*, as well as on pages 40 and 52, which interpreted sin as alienation, reification, and the like. It is treated in more explicitly theological terms in later work as well. And yet, one direction that Boer picks up on - but that Eagleton does not take up himself - is the possibility of using Eagleton's materialist reading on sin to explore the conjunction of reification and idolatry, themes that I develop further in chapter four.

modern quest for autonomy has had grave existential and political consequences, namely as ideology, insofar as it has contributed to the tendency of human persons to choose egocentricity at their own peril.

For Eagleton, sin is not only a theological concept, but is a way of speaking about the human predicament that makes political sense. It goes hand in hand with ideology critique insofar as it sheds light on the correlation between human self-understanding and on-going political investment in misery and alienation, all the while trying to explain how and why it is that human persons consistently work against themselves, making decisions and acting in ways contrary to their essential interests, their free, full flourishing. The devastating and destructive effect of sin comes from the fact that we are created in “pure liberty” and as such, are in fact “built for truth and happiness.” Eagleton’s Catholicity shines through here: depravity and perversity do not go ‘all the way down’, clearing the way for a redemptive (read: revolutionary) process of *metanoia*, which may be the closest theological analogue to ideology critique.⁷²

Sin is hardly a matter of individual actors, but has to do with the “depth of the sickness that has to be cured.”⁷³ It carries into the social world in which they live. Human persons demonstrate an unwillingness or inability to attend justly and responsibly to each other in ways that prioritizes those who are suffering or are oppressed, those cast out at the margins, and to care for those who are assigned the highest levels of vulnerability and

⁷² Eagleton, “Tragedy and Revolution,” 8-15. In Eagleton, *Why Marx is Right*, 73, he describes this “not as a runaway train; it is the application of the emergency brake.”

⁷³ Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*, 73.

fragility. This is fundamentally a theological position that, as Sigurdson rightly points out, is closely linked to Eagleton's belief that human persons are "moderately rational" and so are not wholly mystified by ideology. It is also how Eagleton tries to explain why we find ourselves investing in our own misery and calling it "free" acts of "self-interest."⁷⁴ The ideologico-critical response to sin generated both in Eagleton's theological reading of the poor as the biblical *anawim*, "the wretched of the earth", on one hand, and the tragic vision of self-sacrifice in his theology of atonement on the other, both of which are refashioned *as* ideology critique. The goal of both is to restore to the political foreground, commitments to solidarity, justice, and collective responsibility, all of which Eagleton believes are at the critical core of both theology and ideology critique.

Perhaps it appears heterodox for a Marxist like Eagleton to speak of archaic moral categories like "sin"⁷⁵, but his point is precisely that it is not, or at least that it should not be.⁷⁶ Eagleton clearly discerns in Marx not only a secularization of eschatology ('world-revolution') but also a politicization of morality that unites history, reason, ethics, and human flourishing. Socialists - at least the radical sort - must embrace moral (as distinct

⁷⁴ Sigurdson, *Theology and Marxism*, 69-70.

⁷⁵ Eagleton, *On Evil*, 8.

⁷⁶ Sigurdson, *Theology and Marxism*, 121-122. Eagleton is well aware of the pitfalls and is eager to distinguish his own ideologico-critical approach to evil from other ill-advised treatments. Shifting any materialist analysis to some abstract transcendent explanation, ending arguments (rather than furthering them), quickly casting blame and responsibility on the individual actor, rather than on social conditioning Eagleton is concerned about making evil too interesting, as if its prevalence and ubiquity in social affairs isn't mundane and prosaic. Evil is not mysterious, and we ought not to turn to evil as to explain human action. Evil is distinctly rational - it can be explained, explored, understood, and combatted.

from moralism⁷⁷) thought, even if cultural theory has developed an ill-advised allergy to it, says Eagleton.⁷⁸ To understand evil is to understand how and why it is that “people invest in their own unhappiness.” As it turns out, the most adequate response to evil is ideology critique - and for this, Eagleton finds theology to be the best recourse. Towards this end, Eagleton takes up the topic of evil as a political question, explored within a distinctly theological perspective because it has a unique way of facing into evil, even if evil presents the most daunting challenge to traditional theism.⁷⁹ The issue of evil is of great *critical* importance insofar as it allows us to diagnosis the on-going material reality of injustice, domination, and alienation that befalls the human condition - and to address it *critically* without falling into the common traps of conservative or liberal tropes.

According to Eagleton, theology understands evil as privation, “not as something existent, but as a kind of deficiency of being.”⁸⁰ Evil is the vacuity at the core of reality itself that suffers from “an incapacity for life rather than an abundance of it.”⁸¹ This does

⁷⁷ Eagleton, *On Evil*, 150: “The opposite of materialism here is moralism - the belief that good and bad deeds are quite independent of their material contexts.”

⁷⁸ Eagleton, *On Evil*, 13ff.

⁷⁹ Eagleton, *On Evil*, p. 131-159, especially 142-143.

⁸⁰ Eagleton, *On Evil*, 125.

⁸¹ Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 282-283.

not make evil mysterious⁸² or extraordinary⁸³, but insofar as it is “an attitude towards being”⁸⁴, evil is a metaphysical force marked by its pointlessness⁸⁵ and its ‘brute senselessness.’⁸⁶ When it comes to social reality, “evil would actually prefer that there was nothing at all.”⁸⁷ Evil is about bringing death, and so is marked by “its uncanniness, its appalling unreality, its surprisingly superficial nature, its assault on meaning, the fact that it lacks some vital dimension, the way it is trapped in the mind-numbing monotony of an eternal recurrence.”⁸⁸ In this way, evil is not independent of social conditions, but is a ‘malfunctioning’ within human history that cannot be separated from its material realities. The goal of evil is to annihilate all being, an outgrowth of being unable to sublimate the deeply embedded desire to be pure nothingness that ushers from the terrifying non-being at your own core.⁸⁹ Evil originates from the traumatic realization of human beings that at their core lies their own non-being. This abyssal haunting triggers the death drive and so surfaces in the ideological workings of “fetishes, moral ideals, fantasies of purity, the

⁸² Eagleton, *On Evil*, 73.

⁸³ Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 283: “It is evil which is boring and brittle, not good, which is humorous and high-spirited.”

⁸⁴ Eagleton, *On Evil*, 16.

⁸⁵ Eagleton, *On Evil*, 104.

⁸⁶ Eagleton, *On Evil*, 131.

⁸⁷ Eagleton, *On Evil*, 60-61.

⁸⁸ Eagleton, *On Evil*, 49.

⁸⁹ Eagleton, *On Evil*, 100 and 108. For more on the connection between evil and the death drive in Eagleton, see Sigurdson, *Theology and Marxism*, 121-126.

manic will, the absolute state, the phallic figure of the Further”⁹⁰ and the like. Evil responds by defying all this, attempting to stave off this truth by eradicating all being as an extreme form of self-assertion that is simultaneously creative and destructive.⁹¹ Evil fuels the death drive’s “orgiastic revolt against interest, value, meaning, and rationality”⁹² which in the end is not so dramatic as it is banal, ‘mind-numbingly monotonous’, ‘lifeless’, and ‘without real substance.’⁹³

This is not to underestimate the horrific force of evil in history, but rather to more precisely pinpoint how and why it acts so destructively, even out of its deficiency, its lack, to effect such horrifying results, such as death. There is nothing more evil (and also more banal) than death, for death is all around us; its introduction of nullity into vitality is terrifying in both its forcefulness and its vacuity.⁹⁴ Paying attention to evil (as a theological idea, if not a theological problem) is the ideologico-critical thing to do because we need a full, thick description of the metaphysical and theological aspects of evil in order to make sense of how it works within our material aspects of our social world to generate

⁹⁰ Eagleton, *On Evil*, 100.

⁹¹ This has to do with the relation between freedom and evil, namely that is the absolute freedom of human beings that gives rise to the possibility for evil. This rather Augustinian take again helps to explain the persistence of ideology, or again, why human persons consistently act against their own self-interest. “There is something potentially self-thwarting or self-undoing about humanity” (Eagleton, *On Evil*, 30), says Eagleton, for freedom while it can bring both liberation and hope, also brings its share of misery and exploitation. A theological notion of evil helps radical politics explain why this is and what ought to be done about it; the goal is not just to understand evil, but to understand it in a way that it can be defeated. We must understand evil as both a materialist and metaphysical; it is not the property of individual behavior (Eagleton, *On Evil*, 152) but has to do with institutions, relations and forces. (Eagleton, *On Evil*, 150-151).

⁹² Eagleton, *On Evil*, 109.

⁹³ Eagleton, *On Evil*, 122-124.

⁹⁴ Eagleton, *On Evil*, 127.

ideology. To understand the nature of evil is to confront its ideological effects on political subjects, many of whom seem unable to avoid investing in their own happiness. A theological account of evil, then, is conceived by Eagleton as an ideologico-critical way to explicate its persistence of evil, and its role in ideology, a matter that must be resolved if we hope to field a viable radical politics that counters the predominance of capitalism, terrorism, and death-dealing ways of oppression.

Christology

What appears at first glance to be a rather traditional Catholic “preferential option for the poor” turns into a more “radical” Christology, centered around a political-literary reading of tragedy that feeds a politics of self-sacrifice.⁹⁵ This politics is geared towards critiquing what Eagleton calls the ‘Satanic’ image of God á la the “New Atheists” (whose understanding of theology is so lazy and misinformed that it is not worth rejecting). It counters this by establishing the ‘ontological depth’ of divine solidarity with the biblical *anawim*, the outcasted and exilic poor, who are tossed out of the social order because their “destitute and dispossessed” presence⁹⁶ issues a damning indictment of idolatrous theologies of God that are consistent with and complicit in the “pragmatic needs and interests of the status quo.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 277-296; Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, 128-140.

⁹⁶ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 277.

⁹⁷ Eagleton, *After Theory*, 175.

Eagleton's theological turn is animated by his political rehabilitation of tragedy as an ideologico-critical concept that directs radical politics to acts of self-sacrifice - the exemplary model of which is Jesus Christ. Sacrifice is the key category for his political theology of tragedy - but not in the typical profane sense of sacrifice as the attempt to appease and gain favor with angry and vengeful gods. The true political meaning of sacrifice is found in the *tragic* acts of Christ, whose life and death is interpreted in line with the biblical *anawim*, who as the poor and destitute "scum of the earth", are seen as the ancient *pharmakoi* or scapegoats - who are banished outside the walls of the community because their unseemly appearance evokes a challenge to the injustice and alienation perpetuated by the existing flow of things. The early theological Eagleton describes them this way: "These men -- the *anawim* of the old testament whom Christ speaks of in the beatitudes -- are the "dirt" which falls outside the carefully wrought political structures of society, those whom society cannot accommodate; as such they stand as a living challenge to its institutions, a potent and sacred revolutionary force."⁹⁸

The self-sacrifice of the scapegoat (of which Christ is the paragon) is tragedy in its purest form; it takes upon itself the products of the social order and wanders in the wilderness of dispossession, displacement, and exile; their very existence serves as a living testament to social failure, human brokenness. and political oppression. In the present

⁹⁸ Eagleton, *Body as Language*, 67-68; Eagleton, *The New Left Church*, 21-22.

conditions of capitalism, the marginalized *anawim* are the majority, more like the *lumpenproletariat* than the ‘multitude.’⁹⁹ Their self-sacrifices are not supererogatory acts of heroism, but by their very existence, they condemn the normal, smooth running of things that establishes this divide between what ought to be (and was created to be) an egalitarian community of persons. Eagleton interprets *anawim* as *pharmakoi* and presents Christ as the exemplary figure whose ideology-critical acts of torture and crucifixion tie the theology and political together in order to highlight the political point that radicals must go through the most hopeless and wretched conditions of human life if we hope to be able to imagine the world otherwise, before any political redemption is possible for the rejected, repressed, and banished *anawim*. Eagleton underscores the ideologico-critical character of the tragic sacrifice of Jesus Christ as *anawim* by concluding that “the destitute condition of humanity, if it was to be fully restored, had to be lived all the way through, pressed to the extreme limit of a descent into the hell of meaninglessness and desolation, rather than disavowed, patched up, or short-circuited.” Or, as Sigurdson aptly puts it: “the crucifixion is a kind of tragedy but not the kind of tragedy that ends in destruction but in

⁹⁹ While Eagleton himself ties the *anawim* to Marx's proletariat (Eagleton, *Body as Language*, 68 and Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 288), he intentionally democratizes it in order to highlight the fact that the majority of the world are dispossessed by a capitalist system which has always been based on the exploitation of whole populations by a relative few. (Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 296) In this way, Eagleton's reading of *anawim* differs significantly from other political readings of emancipatory masses such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's “multitude”, in that it more closely resembles the mocked *lumpenproletariat* described by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. 1852, ch. 5: “the vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, maquereaux [pimps], brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars — in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French call *la bohème*.”

the sense that one must learn how to really die to be able to really live.”¹⁰⁰ Eagleton interprets the *anawim* as theological figures of ideology critique without aggrandizing or valorizing their destitute, poor or or tortured state. The condition of the *anawim* performs critique in that their sheer existence (and the hideous nature of this existence) brings ideologies to light which would otherwise likely remain hidden in the darkness. The *anawim* are symbols and sites of ideology at work and it is the theological interpretation of their condition (“it is with them that Yahweh identifies”) that generates the critical dimension of radical politics that Eagleton finds promising.

The dereliction of *anawim* as scapegoats is not directly redemptive in the traditional substitutionary sense that immunizes the community through its suffering, but it can have liberating effect insofar as its self-sacrificial acts (martyrdom as the primary example) afford us a model of what it looks like to give up one's life for the sake of something more valuable - not just a Cause, or a Party, but in order to bring the present condition and its falseness into clear focus - to expose the extent of alienation and exploitation in our midst. The desperate struggle of the *anawim* just to survive, to persist in a socio-political world not of their own making serves as an incessant condemnation of the community's failures to include and care for the most poor, oppressed, and vulnerable of its members. The *anawim* are not heroes whose self-sacrificial yet tragic suffering is valorized for saving the collective, but rather are “the dispossessed or shit of the earth who

¹⁰⁰ Sigurdson, *Theology and Marxism*, 75.

have no stake in the present set-up, and who thus symbolize the possibility of new life in their very dissolution.”¹⁰¹ In the early *Body as Language*, Eagleton insists that:

The *anawim* are the embodied negativity of each *status quo*, and as such focus its breaking-point; they are thus, themselves, a kind of contradiction: an expressive sign of human failure and limitation which yet, by pinpointing so exactly the limits of a social order, the points where it tails off into chaos, offers a positive symbol for the future. . . . The *anawim* -- the scum and refuse of society -- have, like all dung, a contradictory status: the more they reveal dissolution and decay, the more politically fertile they become.¹⁰²

Their very existence is a living testament to socio-political failure, “they illustrate what misery those powers must wreak in order to secure their sway.” They exist as starving, dying, and raging indictments of the community’s inability or unwillingness to adopt inclusive forms of life. Their atoning power does not come from the tragic nature of their suffering, or their self-sacrificial acts. It comes from the fact that they are “the useless, vulnerable, and discarded in whom the approaching kingdom is most powerfully prefigured.”¹⁰³ The *anawim* are not politically safe, they are undesirable, unpredictable, made unstable by their utmost abjection and desolation. It is because they are as potentially explosive and destructive as they are redemptive and liberating that Eagleton interprets the life and death of Christ as acts of identification with them - not merely with their plight, but with their identity and their critical function in relation to the powers: “In Christian terms, this is Christ's descent into hell after his scapegoating on the cross, the solidarity

¹⁰¹ Eagleton, *The Gatekeeper*, 114.

¹⁰² Eagleton, *Body as Language*, 67-68; Eagleton, *The New Left Church*, 21-22.

¹⁰³ Eagleton, *Jesus Christ: the Gospels*, xx.

with human despair and destitution by which he 'becomes sin' for our sake.”¹⁰⁴ Only in this way can the self-sacrificial suffering (modeled after the political example of Jesus as the crucified God) be atoning: as an act of political solidarity that simultaneously is a theological disclosure of God’s identification with the the *anawim* (who are seen as scapegoats only insofar as it is in their suffering that we are able to apprehend just how desperate the situation is): “Christ’s descent into hell [is a] sign of his solidarity with torment and despair.”¹⁰⁵

What are we to make of the political significance of tragedy in the crucified God, as it pertains to ideology critique? Solidarity with the *anawim* is Eagleton’s way of understanding Christ’s life and work as politically redemptive while avoiding theological dangers of atonement. “It is the tragic which both Marxism and Christianity seek to redeem, but they can only do so by installing themselves at the heart of it.”¹⁰⁶ The passion and death of Christ - his crucifixion and decent into hell - are interpreted - with recourse to the tragic - as an immanent critique of class society which dialectically “reclaims” the social order¹⁰⁷ by model itself after “Christ’s descent into hell after his scapegoating on the cross, the solidarity with human despair and destitution by which he 'becomes sin' for our sake.”¹⁰⁸ This brings together the destructive and redemptive forces of revolution in the

¹⁰⁴ Eagleton, *The Gatekeeper*, 114.

¹⁰⁵ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 283, also 37.

¹⁰⁶ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 40.

¹⁰⁷ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 58.

¹⁰⁸ Eagleton, *The Gatekeeper*, 114.

person of Jesus Christ whose act of sacrificial love unites the deepest suffering and the highest exaltation in the same moment, which is typical of the paradox of the tragic itself.¹⁰⁹ And so in this way, the sacrifice of Jesus is tragically atoning, not so much by reconciling or redeeming humanity, but rather that it affords us all a reason for hope, the possibility of that something entirely new and liberative might still develop, but it is also a sobering reminder that there is the equal possibility of destruction and catastrophe.

Writing about the relation of God to the *anawim*, Eagleton echoes his early comments in *Body in Language*:

St. Paul refers to them rather colourfully as "the shit of the earth." The *anawim* are the dregs and refuse of society, its tragic scapegoats. They are the flotsam and jetsam of history who do not need to abandon themselves to be remade, since they are lost to themselves already. And it is with them that Yahweh identifies. He will be known for what he is, in the words of Luke 1:53, when you see the mighty cast down and the lower orders exalted, the hungry filled with good things and the rich sent away empty. The true sacrificial figure, the one which like the burnt offering will pass from profane to powerful, loss of life to fullness of it, is the propertyless and oppressed.¹¹⁰

“And it is with them that Yahweh identifies.” Through the person of Jesus Christ, the *anawim* and the biblical god share the common trait of “non-being” which affords them the opportunity to expose ideological conditions: to be critical forces that identify the immanent forces at work in social relations that malform and oppress political subjects. The

¹⁰⁹ Eagleton, *Jesus Christ: the Gospels*, xix.

¹¹⁰ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 277.

anawim are the ideal models for ideology critique; far from being valorized or romanticized, their suffering does not have a juridically redemptive effect on the community.¹¹¹ Suffering that is tragic insofar as it is self-sacrificial is neither heroic nor aggrandizing. It is evil without qualification¹¹², theologically expressed by the fact that in the biblical gospels, Jesus is terrified and reluctant in his suffering and utterly abandoned at his death.¹¹³ “Jesus plainly does not welcome his own impending torture and death, even though he seems impelled by an obscure conviction that such failure will prove the only way in which his mission will succeed”, Eagleton writes, underscoring the fact that “once suffering is conceived in this instrumental or consequentialist way, it ceases to be redemptive, rather as a gift class to be truly a gift when one is thinking of a return.”¹¹⁴ Far from a being “a cheap conjuring trick”, Christ’s passion and death are redemptive only to extent that it shows all of us the way out of our present failures.

The meaning of atonement is refashioned as ideology critique insofar as atonement is really about the iconoclastic posture immanent to theology: it is through Christ’s self-sacrificial death and harrowed descent that he shows the dramatic extent of God’s identification with the *anawim*, shattering ideas of God as guarantor of the powers or as “august metaphysical principle.” If we are looking for what the God of Christianity really

¹¹¹ Sigurdson and Boer are both right to point out that Eagleton is quick to distance himself from traditional theologies of the atonement that adhere to “the Satanic image of God as Nobodaddy, superego, or blood-thirsty despot.” Cf. Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, 70, 40-41.

¹¹² Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 287-290.

¹¹³ Matthew 26:35-46.

¹¹⁴ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 37.

means for the radical politics involved in ideology critique, we should look no further than the image of ‘Christ-crucified’:

The only authentic image of this violently loving God is a tortured and executed political criminal who dies in an act of solidarity with what the Bible calls the *anawim*, meaning the destitute and dispossessed. The shit of the earth, the scum and refuse of society, who constitute the cornerstone of the new form of human life known as the kingdom of God, Jesus Himself is constantly presented as their representative. His death and descent into Hell is a voyage into madness, terror, absurdity and self-dispossession, since only a revolution that cuts that deep can answer to our dismal condition. What is at stake here is not a prudently reformist project, but an epiphany of the absolutely new - of a regime so revolutionary as to surpass all image and utterance, a reign of justice and fellowship which for the Gospel writers is even now sticking into this bankrupt, depose, washed up world.¹¹⁵

This ‘tortured and executed’ body that inaugurates the politics of ‘the absolutely new’ is not the self-proclaimed institutional body of Christ that is the church, but rather the Christological body of the *anawim*, cast out and despised by power, privilege, and posturing. The ‘everyday’ body of the human person takes on this form under the ubiquitous oppression of capitalist forces, and so if the ‘suffering, mortal, needy, desiring body’ is indeed the site of politics and of critique, it is also the basis for a political solidarity. They are the constant testament to the fact that things are not as they should be. They establish the basis for critique itself as immanent critique of a theopolitical order in which nothing like this should ever happen.

The Body and a Theology of Creation

Eagleton critiques postmodernism for being politically vacuous and for clearing

¹¹⁵ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 23.

the way for new reiterations of the same flawed liberal-humanism that is responsible for the problems caused by late advanced capitalism and the modern state that supports it. With these two concerns, the critical agenda of discrediting postmodernism and the positive agenda of revitalizing Marxist critical theory by suggesting it (and its politics!) as the only suitable alternative to postmodern theory, Eagleton returns to two thematic areas that were central to his early theological work and become even more prominent in his later political theology: ideology and the body. More specifically, he contends that a return to the body as a materialist site that reconnects the symbolic to the political is necessary, and that this is only possible in and after a revitalization of ideology critique. Eagleton contends that what was desperately needed in contemporary critical theory is to conceptualize and mobilize political subjects to create and practice new modes of solidarity, while also revitalizing older Marxist ones left behind.

His two main themes in this materialist specification of ideology are aesthetics and politics, both of which were centered on the body. In *Ideology and the Aesthetic*, Eagleton identifies the origin of the ideologies of bourgeois society with the creation of aesthetics. He identifies reasons behind the contemporary obsession with the aesthetic by exploring its susceptibility to ideology.¹¹⁶ In his narrative, aesthetics enacts a distinction between the corporeal and the immaterial, between objects and senses, and between the happenings of our creaturely life and that which belongs to the mind. When one speaks of

¹¹⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

aesthetics in the historical moment of its inception and use, one is referring to the sentient, affective, and sensuous aspects of somatic life: the sometimes banal ways our bodies apprehend and interact with the biological and natural aspects of fleshly being. It originated with the rise of the bourgeois society, argued Eagleton, who required a binding force to resist the trenchant fracturing of social life into individual interests, especially after the fall of the absolutist state: “The ultimate binding force of the bourgeois social order in contrast to the coercive apparatus of absolutism will be habits, pieties, sentiments, and affections”¹¹⁷, a mode of social control that functioned by “inserting social power more deeply into the bodies of those it subjugates.”¹¹⁸ The aesthetic was deployed as a new mode of political power that used “the discourse of the body” (i.e., that particularly *embodied* way that human beings as political persons live, labor, produce, and struggle in socio-political life) to direct human persons towards specific forms of social control and disciplinary tactics, performing a “gradual modulation of the psyche” that guides the body back to cooperation.

Eagleton’s concern is that in aesthetics, the body becomes suppressed in its political use, that its materialist character is overwritten, in many ways, by its aesthetic function in the modern social world. He notes how “a certain style of meditation on the body, on pleasures and surfaces, zones, and techniques, has acted among other things, as convenient displacement of less immediately corporal politics.”¹¹⁹ The postmodern, while it

¹¹⁷ Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 20.

¹¹⁸ Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 28.

¹¹⁹ Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 7.

seems obsessed with everything that has to do with the body, misses the body altogether because it has effectively anesthetized the body, rendering it both politically voiceless and socially peripheral by its ‘fetishism of style and surface’ and its ‘abandonment of critique and commitment.’ In this same gesture, in its quick announcement of the end of metaphysics, it has also declared that “truth is a lie; morality stinks; beauty is shit.” But just as the body can be decentered for the sake of the postmodern aesthetic, it can also be revitalized as the materialist ground of the politically Real that rises above and beyond the register of the ideological matrix: “all human beings are frail, mortal and needy, vulnerable to suffering and death. The fact that these transhistorical truths are always culturally specific, always variably instantiated, is no argument against their transhistoricality. For the materialist, it is these particularly biologically determined facts, which have bulked largest in the course of human history.”¹²⁰

In *Idea of Culture*, Eagleton problematizes the priority of difference both within post-Marxist shifts (e.g., agnostic politics) and other forms of identity politics as ideological. When critical theory embraces pluralism to the point that it loses any basis for a common culture, it loses the ground upon which political solidarity is possible, a necessary condition for any kind of revolutionary political action. It turns the human body in a site of division and conflict, rather than that “the suffering, mortal, needy and desiring

¹²⁰ Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 410.

body, which links us fundamentally with our historical ancestors, as well as with our fellow beings from other cultures.”¹²¹ He goes on to admit that, “Of course, human bodies differ, in their history, gender, ethnicity, physical capacities, and the like. But they do not differ in those capacities – language, labor, sexuality – which enable them to enter into potentially universal relationships with one another in the first place.”¹²²

The body is not just a theoretical site, but also has theological meaning for Eagleton. A distinct feature of Eagleton’s theology (as refashioned into ideology critique) is his firm belief in the centrality of the bodily condition of human beings for critique. It stems from his literary appropriation of Marx whereby the most fundamental aspect of human being is its bodily conditions - its individuated existence as an embodied being and all this entails for its life and struggle. It should be clear that Eagleton is not interested in “discourses on the body” as taken up by postmodern theory and aesthetics, which Eagleton directly faults for its ‘culturalism’ - its obsession with emphasizing the body’s constructedness. We must take up the body as it is, as it is present before us in social reality, and as it shapes and directs our place in the world as real, concrete, fleshly, vulnerable, and virile. It is the body that makes our social lives precarious, and that positions us in interdependent relations with others. But it is also our bodies that connect and link us together, establishing symbiotic lives that are both the core of our hope and our trepidation.

¹²¹ Terry Eagleton, *Idea of Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 111.

¹²² Eagleton, *Idea of Culture*, 111.

Eagleton maintains that the body must be understood within a theology of creation that incorporates the power of religious belief with the communal vision of socialist politics.¹²³ What is important for Eagleton about this theology of creation is its distinct social effect: democratization. A theology of creation is radically democratic: it makes the most important thing about human beings that which all human beings share: all human beings are created within the image of God, “placing each person in direct communion with the ontological ground that renders existence, life, intelligible.”¹²⁴ The *meaning* of this life - and how to make life meaningful for those persons whose bodies have been made redundant and disposable by a capitalist order - is the theological question at the heart of Eagleton’s politics..

A theology of creation need not depend on a traditional theism that sees God who, as the sovereign maker of the natural world, holds a ultimate monolog on freedom and creative agency. Eagleton turns to the doctrine of the *imago Dei*: the key idea of the creation of humanity in the image of the Creator. Eagleton finds creation useful because it is concerned with the ground of the possibility of both the existence and the interrogation of things, that is, answers to ‘questions such as why there is anything in the first place, or why what we do have is actually intelligible to us.’ Eagleton finds in theology of creation that political quality within all truly critical discourse: that it has something to say about

¹²³ Richard Greydanus, “Religion and Revolution: Terry Eagleton’s Literary Appropriation of the Doctrine of Creation.” *Arc*, the Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University Volume 38 (2010): 95–103.

¹²⁴ Greydanus, “Religion and Revolution,” 101.

human flourishing and is universally applied to all human beings, irrespective of who they are. The beauty of human createdness is that being human is essentially pointless. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* illustrates how it is that God creates out of freedom, not necessity¹²⁵ and so graciously extends that radical liberty to creation: “to say of the world that it is ‘created’ is for classical theology to say that it is pointless. Like God, and like humanity, it exists for purely for its own delight...Creation is a scandal to the sharp-faced stockbrokers for home everything must have a point.”¹²⁶ A God who creates *ex nihilo* is “pure liberty”, and so if all human beings (actually - all of creation) are thought to be created in the divine image, they must share in and participate constitutively in that liberty. That the world is created “out of nothing, rather than out of grim necessity” says something about the way human beings are and the way they ought to be. This is the condition of possibility for critique, but also liberation and oppression, and Eagleton consistently finds theology to be on the side of the former: “All authentic theology is liberation theology.”¹²⁷ The important political aspect of this insight is that God is not transcendent to the material realities of human bodily concerns (the idolatrous God that is “out there”). Eagleton argues that if you are looking for the truth about God, “you shall know him for whom he is when you see the hungry being filled with good things and the rich being sent away.”

As it turns out, it is the bodily way of Christianity - the “all rather disappointedly

¹²⁵ Greydanus, “Religion and Revolution,” 102.

¹²⁶ Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent*, 182; Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 128.

¹²⁷ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 32.

materialist, unglamorous, and prosaic” political way set forth and modeled by the biblical figure of Jesus Christ - that is most ideologico-critical precisely in the way that it perpetually challenges attempts to suture or reconcile the social fissures and lacerations that exist in our social fabric due to the bodily conditions of our existence. Because we are bodies, human persons experience profound and enduring limitations, dependencies, and fragilities, and in Eagleton’s judgement, Christianity (or, at least the radical interpretation he prefers) is particularly helpful in putting this forward.

Theology gives radical politics the language and categories to think and act in ways for which, at this point, it lacks the resources. Indeed, he argues in *After Theory* that “cultural theory as we have it promises to grapple with some fundamental problems, but on the whole fails to deliver. It has been shame-faced about morality and metaphysics, embarrassed about love, biology, religion and revolution, largely silent about evil, reticent about death and suffering, dogmatic about essences, universals, and foundations, and superficial about truth, objectivity and disinterestedness. This, on any estimate, is rather a huge slice of human existence to fall down on.”¹²⁸ The task of ideology-critique, then, is theological, in that the goal of Marxist theory and analysis - to reestablish a basis from which to approach questions of beauty, truth, morality, evil, etc., - are ideas that are difficult to think through adequately without some recourse to the theological. A critique of postmodern ideology is a rather constructive enterprise; it calls for a retheorization of the

¹²⁸ Eagleton, *After Theory*, 101-102.

body, one that accounts properly for the messy and historical particularities of human embodiment, and to think about what solidaristic practices are necessary to care for and represent this body in light of the common openness to both truth and morality, but also death, evil, and ‘non-being.’ But what is even more intriguing (and infuriating for others) is Eagleton’s defense of God as an ideologico-critical concept. And it is here - from a Marxist perspective - that he takes up a defense of Christianity against its most vocal and public critics: the “New” Atheists.

In Defense of God

The question of God becomes an important topic in which Eagleton wrestles theology away from its critics, both “the gnostic Left” and the “fundamentalist right” - both of which he faults for their arrogant, ignorant, and prejudiced harangues which are usually little more than “a worthless caricature of the real thing”: “it is as though one were to dismiss feminism on the basis of Clint Eastwood’s opinions of it.”¹²⁹ Eagleton promotes instead a certain “radical” version of Christianity: the reading of it that makes the most “urgent human and political sense.” Many commentators will point out the Christocentrism in Eagleton’s theology, a feature that allows Eagleton to focus on the lessons that the political left (and all of us, really) should learn from Jesus Christ and the ethical and political conception of love, forgiveness, sacrifice, and freedom found in the New Testament gospels. However, Eagleton is just as interested in the question of God; it is here that Eagleton finds theology to be at its most material - and as such, its most ideologico-

¹²⁹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, xi.

critical. Eagleton is not interested in promoting Christianity for its own sake. The impetus for taking up the question of God as he does is apologetic and critical; he is eager to oppose the rise of the New Atheists, contesting their theology, their atheism, and their politics.¹³⁰ He does so by revising some of the dominant themes of his earlier theological work, marshaling Thomas Aquinas and Herbert McCabe together in defense of a Christianity “worth rejecting.” He defends Christianity against “the enormous condescension” against it by those like “Ditchkins”¹³¹ who, due to their collective ignorance, arrogance, and sloppiness¹³², “fail to grasp the nature of a theological claim.”¹³³

This is not a nostalgic turn for Eagleton; it bears directly on the core of his critical work. It mirrors the approach he has taken repeatedly in reference to radical politics: the work of critical theory is to reclaim ideas, concepts, and terms as valid and relevant for political radicals in and through ideology-critique. Eagleton has longed criticized leftist theory for its political weakness and its critical reticence, caused in large part by its obsession with identity politics, preoccupation with categories of minority (class, race, gender), and its unreasonable shyness about things that matter.

¹³⁰ For details on why Eagleton finds it politically important to defend Christianity - while remaining skeptical that any of it might indeed be “factually” true, see Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 32-34.

¹³¹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 34. “Ditchkins” is the comically dismissive name he gives to the collective critique issued by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett.

¹³² Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 49-53.

¹³³ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 54.

He faults the New Atheists like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, for making a key ‘category mistake’ about the kind of thing Christian belief is. Contrary to the New Atheist’s mischaracterizations, Christianity is not ‘a pseudo-science’ that ‘dismisses with evidence’, but rather “Christianity was never meant to be an explanation of anything in the first place.”¹³⁴ He finds in Dawkins, Hitchens, and the like, an account of religion, Christianity specifically, that is grossly misinformed, poorly researched, and narrowly interpreted: that is, a reading of religion as “false consciousness.” For Eagleton, “it is entirely logical that those who see religion as nothing but false consciousness so often get it wrong since what profit is to be reaped from the meticulous study of a belief system that you hold to be as pernicious as it is foolish?”¹³⁵ In their rush to dismiss ‘faith’ as the opposite of ‘reason’, Ditchkins entirely miss the point of faith: “faith is a commitment and allegiance - faith in something which might might a difference to the frightful situation you find yourself in... Christianity... is not primarily a matter of signing up for the proposition that there exists a Supreme being, but the kind of commitment made manifest by a human being at the end of his tether, foundering in darkness, pain, and bewilderment, who nevertheless remains faithful to the promise of transformative love.”¹³⁶ Eagleton is eager to convince both fundamentalists and their liberal/rationalist opponents of this interpretation - and its political implications.

¹³⁴ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 7.

¹³⁵ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 51.

¹³⁶ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 37.

Of course, what liberals, secularists, fundamentalists and rationalists have in common is that they routinely ignore this and turn a blind eye to the critical role that Christianity has played in formation of liberal and secular society.¹³⁷ In fact, the replacement of religion by culture is part of a broader attempt to suppress this dirty little secret¹³⁸, complicated by the fact that western postmodernism has at its root an extreme history of failure and loss that it has not yet come to terms with.¹³⁹ The flip side of this “culturalism” is the attempt to replace politics with religion¹⁴⁰ out of its own disillusionment with the former: “If politics has failed to emancipate you, perhaps religion will fare better.”¹⁴¹ It is this ‘sacred resonance to culture’ that authorized it as “the new absolutely, bottom-line, conceptual end-stop, or transcendental signifier.”¹⁴² But it has proven itself to be inadequate as a replacement for politics or religion¹⁴³ and so there is space for theology to reassert itself, not as a legitimation of culture or politics, but as an immanent critique of culture. It is clear that not all is right with religion, least of all theology: “what is distinctive about our age when it comes to religion, then, is not just that it is everywhere on the rise...it is also that this resurgence often seems to take a political form. Yet this reflects a

¹³⁷ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 18.

¹³⁸ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 38.

¹³⁹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 164; Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism*, chapter 1.

¹⁴⁰ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 42ff. For all their differences, most religious varieties of fundamentalism have this in common.

¹⁴¹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 44.

¹⁴² Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 158-159.

¹⁴³ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 164ff.

failure of politics proper rather than a reinvigoration of it... This is a religion that is once more prepared to agitate and kill.”¹⁴⁴

And yet, not only does Eagleton defend theology, but also uses it as ideology critique. This has everything to do with Eagleton’s Marxism and his unmistakable disappointment in its failures. The promise of Marxism, Eagleton says, has faced a “staggering political rebuff; and one of the places to which those radical impulses have migrated is - of all things - theology.”¹⁴⁵ Eagleton finds the latest form of technological and finance capitalisms to be “inherently atheist. It is godless in its actual material practices... A society of packaged fulfillment, administered desire, managerialized politics, and consumerist economics is unlikely to cut to the kind of depth where theological questions can even be properly raised, just as it rules out political and moral questions of a certain profundity.”¹⁴⁶ And so, the task of raising theological questions in such an economic and social context, “which tends to be secular, relativist, pragmatic, and materialistic”,¹⁴⁷ turns out in itself to be both critical and ultimately materialist. Eagleton, in other words, understands theology to be at its political best when it is fundamentally concerned with naming human conditions, which is precisely what Marx considered it unable to do – or at least not in the politically and economically proper way. For Marx, as for Eagleton, religion is

¹⁴⁴ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 44.

¹⁴⁵ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 167.

¹⁴⁶ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 39.

¹⁴⁷ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 143.

ideology precisely because it is the only kind of heart and soul that a heartless and soulless world can come up with: “it offers a refuge from the world, not a mission to transform it.”¹⁴⁸ As a “sigh”, religion is “a pathological symptom of what is awry with us...and expresses a thwarted desire which it simultaneously displaces...it therefore represents a protest against a spiritual bankruptcy with which it remains thoroughly complicit.”¹⁴⁹ The function of theology as immanent critique is sharpened into a political vision when it comes to the negative aspect of critique:

The problem that theology confronts is the idea that the social order is “pretty well self-sufficient”, as being more or less as good as it gets, or at least as a spectacular advance on what went before. It is hard to see what role faith could play, other than sheerly ideological one, in a Western world which some of its inhabitants see it as nothing less than the very consummation of human history, lacking nothing but more of the same. How could such a form of life accept that there is something profoundly amiss with our condition - that it simply does not add up, that it is in several respects intolerable and that one of the chief signs of this incoherence and intolerability is the plight of the poor?¹⁵⁰

And so, coming back to Eagleton’s defense of theology as ideology critique, “the trouble with the Dawkins of this world, however, is that they do not find themselves in a frightening situation at all...it is natural then that they have no use for such embarrassingly old-fashioned ideas as depravity and redemption.”¹⁵¹ The theology of Christianity, Eagleton maintains, “represents a view of the human conditions which is far more radical than

¹⁴⁸ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 41.

¹⁴⁹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 42.

¹⁵⁰ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 45.

¹⁵¹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 38.

anything Richard Dawkins is likely to countenance.” This “more radical” view is that of tragic humanism, which is another way of saying that “our experience of the world is a function of our bodily engagement with it”¹⁵², which turns out to be both profoundly Christian and radically materialist in that it believes that “only by confronting the very worst”, “only by a process of self-dispossession and radical remaking can humanity come into its own.”¹⁵³

Eagleton rejects what he calls here the “Satantic” image of God proliferated by Dawkins, Hitchens, and their fellow critics: “a way of seeing God as a great bully”¹⁵⁴ or a ‘super-egoic’ image of God in Jesus.¹⁵⁵ God is not a “mega-manufacturer or cosmic chief executive officer” and considers any “notion of God as a very large and powerful creature”, to be a “idoltrous” betrayal. Contrary to this, Eagleton presents God, in a thoroughly traditional fashion, as “the reason why there is something rather than nothing, the condition of possibility of any entity whatsoever. God is not a sort of entity, a being itself. God is rather non-being, a non-entity.”¹⁵⁶ If one is to say that “God exists”, it displays a serious ontological misunderstanding both about the nature of God and existence. God is not that transcendental force that enslaves humanity but is the “the connection of

¹⁵² Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 80.

¹⁵³ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 169.

¹⁵⁴ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 50f.

¹⁵⁵ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 21.

¹⁵⁶ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 7.

love and creativity”¹⁵⁷ that generates human persons in “pure liberty.”¹⁵⁸ “God is gloriously pointless, a kind of perpetual critique of instrumental reason.”¹⁵⁹ Eagleton goes on: “For orthodox Christian doctrine, it is our dependence on God that allows us to be self-determining. . . . God, for Thomas Aquinas, is the power that allows us to be ourselves. . . .”¹⁶⁰ Again, what is of interest to Eagleton here is the political point that this theology makes: “if we are God’s creatures, it is in the first place because, like him, we exist (or should exist) purely for the pleasure of it. The question raised by. . . Karl Marx, is that of what political transformation would be necessary for this to become possible in practice.”¹⁶¹

When it comes to Jesus Christ, Eagleton argues that “Ditchkins rejects him for reasons which are both boring and politically disreputable.”¹⁶² Of course, what is most worth defending about Christian theology is its politics - and nowhere is this displayed more clearly than in the exemplary figure of Jesus Christ, whose “tortured and murdered body” tells the tragic story about the depravity of human persons and the cost of political

¹⁵⁷ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 6-8.

¹⁵⁸ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 17.

¹⁵⁹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 32.

¹⁶⁰ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 17.

¹⁶¹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 10. Again: “One of the best reasons for being a Christian, as for being a socialist, is that you don’t have to like having to work, and reject the fearful idolatry of it so rife in countries like the United States. Truly civilized societies does not hold predawn power breakfasts.” Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 11.

¹⁶² Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 38.

love:¹⁶³ “Which is to say that those who are faithful to God’s law of justice and compassion will be done away with by the state. If you don’t love, you’re dead, and if you do, they’ll kill you. Here then is your pie in the sky or opium of the people, your soft-eyed consolation and pale-cheeked piety.”¹⁶⁴ Contrary to those who find Christian teaching innocuous and atavistic, Eagleton insists that “God’s love and forgiveness are ruthlessly unforgiving powers which break violently into our protective self-rationalizing little spheres, smashing our sentimental illusions and turning our word brutally upside down.”¹⁶⁵ Christianity is not to be mocked or scorned: it is in the serious political business of critique.

Contrary to those who claim that the Christian ‘god’ has little to do with the materialist realities of the everyday, Eagleton underscores the primary thesis of liberation orthopraxis, which he considers to be the only authentic theological claim available to us:

things are that God’s include working for justice, welcoming the immigrants, and humbling the high-and-mighty. the whole cumbersome paraphernalia of religion is to be replaced by another kind of temple, that of the murdered, transfigured body of Jesus...this body is dedicated in particular to those losers, deadbeats,

¹⁶³ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 10-19. For more discussion on the ethical-political example set forth by Jesus Christ as the “flayed and bloody scapegoat of Calvary”, see Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, p. 22ff. Eagleton calls upon the theopolitical logic of the *imitatio Christi* to link Jesus Christ to the *anawim* (Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 23), and to applaud both Jesus’ laid-back attitude about sexuality (Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 28-29), and his hostility towards the family (Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 31) as evidence of Jesus’ unsafe, critical, and revolutionary character. Eagleton’s point is that Jesus is hardly the safe, boring, “establishment” religious figure that so much of Christianity - and their liberal and rationalist critics makes him out to be.

¹⁶⁴ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 22.

¹⁶⁵ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 22.

riffraff, and colonial collaborators, who are not righteous but flamboyantly un-righteous—who either live in chronic transgression of Mosaic law or like the Gentiles, fall outside its sway altogether.¹⁶⁶

Against the liberal and rationalist critics who see Christianity (and all religion, actually) as a threat to the autonomous workings of modern State, Eagleton agrees and so asserts Christianity's ideologico-critical credentials: "The New Testament is a brutal destroyer of human illusions. If you follow Jesus and don't end up dead, it appears you have some explaining to do. The stark signifier of the human condition is one who spoke up for love and justice and was done to death for this pains. the traumatic truth of human history is a mutilated body."¹⁶⁷ This is what the God of Christianity really means, and "Ditchkins" is simply unable to see it. Eagleton goes on: "The difference between Ditchkins and radicals like myself also hinges on whether it is true that the ultimate signifier of the human conditions is the tortured and murdered body of a political criminal and what the implications of this are for living."¹⁶⁸

So what *are* the "implications of this for living" and for ideology critique? As I have shown, radical thought must start with the "lamentable state of humanity", and of course, Christian theology is good for this as it points out the "the prevalence of greed, idolatry, and delusion, the depth of our instinct to dominate and possess, the dull persistence of injustice and exploitation, the chronic anxiety which leads us to hate, maim, and

¹⁶⁶ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 20.

¹⁶⁷ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 27.

¹⁶⁸ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 37.

exploit, along with the sickness suffering and desire which Jesus associates with evil. All this is what Christianity knows as sin.”¹⁶⁹ Of course, religion and its institutions have been and continues to be a significant factor in the persistence of these problems - Eagleton is the first to admit this - and “yet it is from the standpoint of values which spring, among other places, from the Judeo-Christian legacy itself that we identify these failings in the churches - just as liberal civilization is, so to speak, its own immanent critique, as a culture which allows us to castigate its shortcomings by reference to its own commendably high standards.”¹⁷⁰ In this way, Christian beliefs about the fallenness of human nature are an immanent critique of the predominant social order, acting as a sort of negative image for the kind of political arrangements and affective attachments befitting the freedom and full-flourishing of human persons. “The Christian faith is absurdly, outrageously more hopeful than liberal rationalism, with its apparently unhinged belief that not only is salvation of the human species possible but...it has already taken place.”¹⁷¹ But here again, redemption looks a lot more like social justice than legal justification, a whole lot more like materialist transformation than spirituality:

Salvation...turns out not to be a matter of cult, law and ritual of special observance and conformity to a moral code, of slaughtering animals for sacrifice or even being splendidly virtuous. It is a question of feeding the hungry, welcoming the immigrant, visiting the sick, and protecting the poor, orphaned and widowed

¹⁶⁹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 24.

¹⁷⁰ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 58.

¹⁷¹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 48-49.

from the violence of the rich. Astonishingly, we are saved not by a special apparatus known as religion, but by the quality of our everyday relations with one another.¹⁷²

The resonance with ideology critique and Eagleton's (selective interpretation of) Christianity is made clearer here. Theology is shown to be rather materialist and materialism as rather theological, insofar as it is fundamentally concerned about the everyday workings of human social life and is eager to redirect and orient social relations and productive forces by "placing love at the center of its vision of the world", which is also "the ethical basis for socialism."¹⁷³ While this is a liberation theology, Eagleton also considers it to be "thoroughly orthodox, scriptural and traditional"¹⁷⁴: "one can be a fan of the New Testament but not of the Vatican."¹⁷⁵ The political benefit of theology is that it is "a lot more realistic about humanity...it takes the full measure of human depravity and perversity...at the same time, it is good deal bolder than the liberal humanists and rationalists about the chances of this dire condition being repaired."¹⁷⁶ Here, the materialism driving its critique comes into play: "It also believes that the very frailty of humanity can become a redemptive power. In this, it is one with socialism, for which the harbingers of a future social order are those who have little to lose in the present."¹⁷⁷ Eagleton assures us that many of

¹⁷² Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 19.

¹⁷³ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 31-32.

¹⁷⁴ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 47.

¹⁷⁵ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 66.

¹⁷⁶ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 47.

¹⁷⁷ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 48.

the theological claims of Christianity are undoubtedly not true, but even if that is so, “it may serve as an allegory of our political and historical situation.” He rigorously maintains “a distinction between a scriptural and an ideological kind of Christianity”, the primary criterion being that “any preaching of the Gospel which fails to constitute a scandal and affront to the political state is in my view effectively worthless.”¹⁷⁸ It is in this way that theology can be critical rather than ideological, for even “the Enlightenment was deeply shaped by values which stemmed from the Christian tradition... it inherited its brave campaign against superstition partly from Christianity itself, with its rejection of all false gods and prophets, all idols, fetishes, magical rituals, and powers of darkness, in the name of human flesh and blood.”¹⁷⁹

Conclusion

In the final chapter of Eagleton’s *Literary Theory*, he zeroes in what he considered to be the enduring contribution of the volume: the need to rethink the task of reading

¹⁷⁸ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 57-58.

¹⁷⁹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 69. The perverse potentiality of the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ is not lost on Eagleton. He plays careful attention how Adorno/Horkheimer’s thesis on the Enlightenment can also be applied directly to both Marxism and Christianity, whereby their values have ended up at odds with themselves (Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 67-76). “Its ability to spawn its own opposite” (Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 90) only underscores for Eagleton the potential of Christianity as an kind of immanent critique of ideology (whether it be, of Marxism, culturalism, postmodernity, or fundamentalism), “namely because it has very little quarrel with its mighty ideals, but simply inquires with a certain faux naïveté about why whenever there is an attempt to realize them, they tend to twist by some inexorable logic into their opposites, so that freedom for some become exploitation for others, notional quality generates real inequalities, and so on.” (Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 93-94) Again, “Marxism began... as a response to a Christian movement which had betrayed its origins and ended up in a whole sector of the globe doing much the same.” (Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 67)

literature as political criticism. This means, Eagleton proposes that it functions as a critique of ideology based in concrete political interests: radical human freedom, appreciation for the bodily conditions of human social life, and the need for developing solidaristic relations and affective attachments, based on said conditions.¹⁸⁰ He called this task “political criticism”, something that was already taking place in many disciplinary forms because he wanted it to be installed at the core of what we all think we are doing when we read, when we interpret, when we try to make sense of text, reference, meaning, and significance. To read, or to interpret, is to be political - and so, it is to be critical. It is to directly consider fundamental questions about freedom, truth, and subjectivity. We must recognize that all that is written - indeed all that *is* - is not merely contextualized (that is, that has a context), but is indebted to all the messy particulars of that situation and all that this means for concrete human goals. The term ‘political criticism’ has to do with undoing the pretense of disinterestedness, of impartiality, of neutrality, of relativism - of exposing all this as idolatry. It is surprising that Eagleton includes the theological as the way of thinking most well suited to expanding this task beyond the literary. To do ‘political criticism’ is to do ideology critique, and for Eagleton, to do ideology critique is to do theology. But what does it mean to do theology *as* ideology critique?

The purpose of this chapter is to use Terry Eagleton’s perspective to explore one possibility for how to link between theology and ideology critique. His use of theology for radical politics is good example for how to start a new beginning for the the question

¹⁸⁰ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 169-177.

how ideology critique can and should be related to theology. I wanted to shed light on the political use of theology in philosophical versions of ideology critique, specifically those that are indebted to and are located within a Marxist legacy. If we are able to get a better sense for why Eagleton turn to theology in the name of its radical and emancipatory political for critique, we are in a better position to understand the Marxist legacy of ideology critique as it relates to political theology. For Eagleton, his desire to articulate a materialist basis for universal solidarity and common culture leads him to adopt a critical strategy of ‘using what one can’, both to critique the ways things are and to articulate revolutionary possibilities for a different social future. The strength of Eagleton’s eclectic and strategic approach is that he is most concerned with how to pragmatically use theological ideas to critique ideology. This rings true to the Marxist critical tradition in which ideology critique is about how ideas function in relation to both historical circumstances and relevant political concerns: ideology critique is really about politics and not so much about truth.

Eagleton insists that Christianity can indeed function as ideology critique. Refusing to dismiss theology as “false consciousness”, Eagleton celebrates its purported stress on and ethical commitments to the *anawim* and demonstrates how classical theological ideas are indeed compatible with Marxist theory and politics and so deserves to be taken more seriously by what he sees as an anaemic political left. It outlines in detail how Eagleton develops and reinterprets traditional theological themes of sin, Christology, evil, the body, God, and salvation as ideology critique. For Eagleton, ideology refers to that specific political status of ideas in that are formed and deployed in ways that lose sight of

the various arrangements and practical positions of the human body, particularly in relation to other bodies, all of whom are connected by patterns of interdependency, and so effectively keeps human persons silent, reticent, and complicit in their own unhappiness. Eagleton finds in theology some ideas about love, evil, meaning of life, suffering, and community that do not conceal or cover that which is most important and crucial for human flourishing, but instead names it all in ways far more critical, radical and materialist than critical theory does today. Theology in this way sharpens the critical posture of theory in relation to praxis.

And yet, Eagleton is deftly aware that one cannot simply appeal to these critical theological ideas (love, justice, redemption, solidarity, community) as if it protects or screens praxis itself from the self-reflexivity of critique. These ideas have such uniquely transformative power insofar as they are immanently critical; that is, they engage and respond to their own activity, their own usage, as vigorously as they critique their function in social and political life. When love, Christology, or justice, for example, are put to work, not just in reference to how political theology is actively shaping the social world according to “the emancipatory goals of transformative praxis” but as critical terms in the immanent relation of theory and praxis within political itself, what is the effect on political theology itself?

And yet, political theology, in order to avoid betraying its revolutionary center, must itself turn to critique of ideology and to immanent critique in order to avoid betraying its radical, revolutionary potential. In this way, Eagleton takes the Marxist point about

the critique of religion as ideology (that self-reflexive critique is necessary to truly understand the “truth” of theology as its social impact in material realities) that was discussed in the preceding chapter, and so serves as an important example of what political theology can learn from political philosophers who are turning to theology at the same time they reach for ideology critique. In the next chapter, we will explore yet another possibility in the work of Slavoj Žižek, who also argues that Christianity has enormous political potential as ideology critique, albeit when reconfigured as an atheistic theology of the ‘death of God.’

CHAPTER THREE

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Introduction

The present chapter analyzes Žižek's theory of ideology as a political-theological perspective. It is curious why Christian theology plays in his critique of ideology and his political thought in general, and so I try to clarify the general parameters of Žižek's political theology of critique and then explore in implications for the relation of theory to praxis. Žižek's critical engagement with Christianity plays a unique role in his philosophical and political work, which is made to appear even more strange by who acts as his primary theological guides: a unholy mix of Hegel, G. K. Chesterton, and St. Paul. Žižek discovers in Christian theology certain key elements that inform modes of critique, the Act, and social change, elements that usher forth critiques, not only of current political institutions and systems, but also of the failure of Christianity to be its critical self. Namely, he finds in Christianity an exemplary form of ideology critique, but does so through certain interpretation of the "death of God" theology that presents it as the 'theologico-political suspension of the ethical', the core of the Christian position.

With this in hand, Žižek presents a negative politics of active refusal, an approach that differs considerably from Karl Marx and Terry Eagleton, but which presents theological and political problems of its own. To address these, I will begin by discussing the way that Žižek rethinks the Marxist theory of ideology (discussed in chapter one)

along Lacanian lines. I pay particular attention to the place of the notion of the Big Other, cynicism, and belief, especially in terms of the role they each play in Žižek's theory of ideology critique. I argue that what lies at the heart of Žižek's attention to theology *as* ideology critique is the negative political effect of ideology critique itself. While Žižek claims that this negativity about praxis opens up material conditions of possibility and clears the way for truly political Act, it is not clear that Žižek's position fully explains the relation between critique and the practical demands to respond actively to the order we live in or why theology, even the radical revolutionary impulse of "its perverse core", is absolutely necessary to address them. These problems notwithstanding, it is important to bring Žižek's argument to the surface, and so I will reserve critical comments for the end, after first following his interpretation of Christianity as ideology critique as it relates to subjectivity and the political.

Žižek's Theory of Ideology

The relation between theology and ideology in Žižek's critical theory is organized around three major ideas: his psychoanalytic critique of the big Other, his critique of cynicism through unbelief, and his political understanding of the Act. While Žižek's politics lack doctrines, he is motivated by a desire to provoke the authentic political Act and to explain its relation to the political subject.¹ Žižek is responding to what he sees as the primary ideological trap of liberalism, multiculturalism, toleration, and so on, all of which tries to convince subjects of the inevitable success of capitalism and the impossibility of

¹Adrian Johnston *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 85-126.; Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 60-86.

radical social change. This means that “the cadence of change” must be thoroughly pragmatic and gradual - that large scale shifts in the prevailing order are simply not necessary or desirable.² The whole point of Žižek’s theory is to inquire forcefully about the conditions of possibility for revolutionary subjectivity, despite the current coordinates that define political life today incessantly repressing and stifling it. Thus, for Žižek, “ideology is always a field of struggle.”³

Žižek’s ideology critique is a ‘philosophy under the condition of the political’, and so is an attempt to produce and establish the kind of subject necessary for this work; in this way, Žižek’s theory of ideology is always a philosophy of the subject. An early introduction to Žižek identifies three central areas of Žižek’s work (which has grown considerably since, in both volume and breadth), the last of which was the defense of ‘the subject’⁴, and more specifically, the Cartesian *cogito*.⁵ Since the advent of postmodernity, the *cogito* has fallen on hard times and has more than its fair share of critics, most of whom are eager to decenter and disintegrate the subject, holding it responsible for “damaged human life” caused by the instrumentalization of reason with modern society. That said, the Cartesian *cogito* has also been very important for nearly all post-Enlightenment

² Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, 23.

³ Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then As Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 37.

⁴ Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2003), 26.

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject. The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 2; Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek* (London: Routledge, 2003), 31.; Slavoj Žižek, “Cogito, Madness and Religion: Derrida, Foucault and then Lacan.” <http://www.lacan.com/zizforest.html>.

emancipatory movements, Marxism included, and so Žižek finds it to be more worthwhile to rehabilitate the *cogito* rather than try to do away with it all together.⁶ And so, Žižek turns to Jacques Lacan, enlisting him in the effort to reactivate the more materialist and political aspects of modern subjectivity, as found within Kant and Descartes, and to save the Subject from the postmodernists and the left-liberal academy who are all too eager to announce its premature death.⁷ How Žižek interprets Lacan's views on the subject is central to the relationship between the Event of the political act, ideology critique, and Christianity. Žižek is led by Lacan to argue that the prospect of critique starts and ends with the subject, since ideologies reside in how political subjects repetitively enact social reality. Ideology, then, acts within and as the fundamental contradiction, the Gap, between what the subject believes and how the subject acts. The aim of critique is not to resolve this antagonism or to uncover or reveal its true nature, but to own up to it, to acknowledge its inescapability, and to strive forward by struggling to think and establish new, unforeseen forms of collective life in spite of its brute facticity,

But how does this explain the importance that Žižek places on theology? Žižek's aim in ideology critique is to identify the traumatic Gaps, the 'non-All' in reality where its utmost, fundamental antagonisms reside, in order to negatively clear an 'empty'

⁶ Razmig Keucheyan. *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today*, ed. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2014), 183.

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, "Preface: Burning the Bridges," in *The Žižek Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Leo Wright (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), vii-x.

space, free from “any positively determined reality.”⁸ This is politically important because it is only when these spaces are cleared, when the gaps are negated, that subjectivity is made possible again, and with it, the authentic political acts which do not exist within the coordinates of currently available options. This means that critique must hold open the space of the pre-ideological kernel, which, as the traumatic gap that engenders subjectivity, is nothing less than ‘True Openness’ of revolutionary politics. This calls for a kind of apocalyptic thinking, such as that which Žižek finds in the structure of the Event.⁹ As it turns out, one of the foremost theorists of the Event, Alain Badiou, is also fascinated with the political import of St. Paul’s theology for rethinking revolutionary subjectivity.¹⁰ Žižek follows him there and in so doing, finds in Christianity, a “subversive kernel” of materialist theology that lies at its “perverse core.”¹¹ For Žižek, “what is revealed in Christianity is not just the entire content, but more specifically that there is nothing – no secret – behind to be revealed... what God reveals is not His hidden power, only His impotence as such.”¹²

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “The Spectre of Ideology,” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), 17.

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “Paul and the Truth Event,” in *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology*, eds. Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010), 76-87, 90; Slavoj Žižek, *The Event: A Philosophical Journey Through A Concept* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2004), 159-169.

¹⁰ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). For more on the link between Badiou's and Žižek's theologies, see John Caputo and Linda Alcoff, ed., *St. Paul Among the Philosophers* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).; Douglas Harink, ed., *Paul, Philosophy, and the Theopolitical Vision: Critical Engagements with Agamben, Badiou, Žižek, and Others* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010).

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003).

¹² Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 127.

To prefigure the chapter a bit, Žižek's argument is that Christian theology is ideology critique at its best, most specifically in those places where one least expects it, places like the book of Job and the crucified Christ's 'cry of dereliction', both of which express the single most important – and revolutionary – moment of theological truth: divine abandonment. "Insofar as we conceive of ideology as the imaginary mitigating of a traumatic Real", says Žižek, "the Book of Job provides what is perhaps the first exemplary case of the critique of ideology in human history, laying bare the basic discursive strategies of legitimizing suffering: Job's properly ethical dignity lies in the way he persistently rejects the notion that his suffering can have any meaning...and surprisingly, God takes his side at the end, claiming that every word that Job spoke was true."¹³ This admission by God to God's own impotence is the theological moment of ideology critique par excellence, leading Žižek to pursue its theoretical and political lessons.

From Althusser to Lacan

To this point, I have been concerned with the newer philosophical interest in political theology coinciding with the resurgence of a heretofore submerged element within the Marxist legacy: the critique of ideology. But what is most unusual about this convergence is not the theological interest, but rather the turn to ideology, especially in the wake of post-politics of the contemporary Left. It is not at all clear why the theory of ideology is so important, especially in light of the near universal consensus that our social, political, and economic problems are not about ideology, but instead about discourse, power, narratives, bodies, and micro-politics - to name a few of the most common candidates.

¹³ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 124-125.

For Žižek, the relevance of ideology critique for radical and emancipatory politics is in the way in which it exposes, in a traumatic and rupturing way, the uncontainable and unbearable gap between social reality and social possibility, or put differently, the way it opens up a “materialism without ‘materialism.’”¹⁴ For Žižek, “an ideology is really ‘holding us’ only when we do not feel any opposition between it and reality, that is, when the ideology succeeds in determining the mode of our everyday experience of reality itself.”¹⁵ To push back against the “post-ideological” and “post-political” spirit of the age¹⁶, Žižek employs key Lacanian concepts to explain the relevance of Marxist theory of

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014), 5; Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 157.

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 49.

¹⁶ For Žižek, this announcement of the end of ideology by critical sociology in the 1950-60s and then again by political theorists in the late 1980s (after the downfall of Soviet communism in Europe) signaled a new ‘post-political’ era against which rationality, deliberation, and the processes of consensus-building were privileged, all in service to a global concord that accepted both the capitalist free market and the liberal state. This “post-political” era is also marked, in Žižek’s mind, by its claim to be “post-ideological” in the sense that it believes that the major political questions had more or less been resolved or had become irrelevant under the new modern agreement around western, liberal values and the rise of technocratic knowledge as the primary way of solving social and political problems. See R. Aron, “The end of the ideological age?,” in *The end of ideology debate*, C.I. Waxman, ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), 27-48; Daniel Bell, *The end of ideology* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960); Edward Shils, “The end of ideology?,” in *The end of ideology debate*, C.I. Waxman, ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), 49-63.; Edward Shils, “The concept of ideology,” in *International encyclopedia of the social sciences*, D. Sills, eds (New York: Macmillan & Free Press, 1968), 66-75. For a critical examination for this literature, J.T. Jost, “The end of the end of ideology,” *American Psychologist* 61 (2006): 651–670.

For Žižek, all this establishes a “post-ideological” era that acts a systematic and strategic foreclosure of politics for the sake of governmentality, discipline, and policing: supervision, administration, and technology overtook struggle, critique, and disagreement as political modes of life. Critique, Žižek argues, is necessary for reinstatement of the “properly political dimension” (which is inherently differential and antagonistic) because critique is inherently oriented and structured by dissensus, rather the consensus model of liberal democracy. “Authentic politics... is the art of the impossible – it changes the very parameters of what is considered “possible” in the existing constellation.” (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 199) Žižek insists that a situation only becomes political when “a particular demand... starts to function as a metaphoric condensation of the global [universal] opposition against Them, those in power, so that the protest is no longer just about that demand, but about the universal dimension that resonates in that particular demand... What

ideology for contemporary questions and to advance its development by making serious updates to the Althusserian reading of Marx's views on ideology and critique.

First, we must address the role of Lacanian psychoanalytic categories in Žižek's ideology theory. Žižek's theory of ideology is driven by his political interest in applying Lacanian terms to classical philosophical questions. From the beginning, Žižek identified ideology critique as his main philosophical interest for political reasons.¹⁷ At first, Žižek was eager to reassert the psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan as a philosopher, arguing that he belongs in the same conversation with Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, and has been grossly overlooked in recent debates.¹⁸ Žižek connects the dots between Hegel and Lacan, primarily through Marx, which partly explains the significance of the theory of ideology for his early philosophical project. This objective of this triangulation was to rehabilitate Lacan's usefulness for radical Leftist politics during a time of significant upheaval and uncertainty after the significant defeats in the late 1980s. The shift from the 'New Left' to the 'post-political' Left¹⁹ culminated in the early 1990s with the downfall

post-politics tends to prevent is precisely this metaphoric universalisation of particular demands." (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 171–244)

¹⁷ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 12.

¹⁸ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, x-xi.

¹⁹ When Žižek refers to the 'post-political' Left, he includes 'agonistic' political theorists such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, authors of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985). Žižek's early work had more common with these "post-Marxist" voices than his later work, as represented in the dialogues published in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000). He will also cite Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, and Simon Critchley as 'opiniers' of the 'post-political' Left, in addition to naming, in a rather generic and vague way, social movements, such as feminism, anti-racism, academic trends, like postcolonial and multiculturalist studies, as well as "the pseudo-radical academic leftists [whose] own radicality ultimately amounts to an empty gesture that obliges no one to anything determinate." He does not follow up with a specific list, leaving us all to wonder about and to whom

of the USSR, and was promptly followed by giddy announcements by western liberals of the “end of history”, who promised “the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”²⁰ Žižek, who came of academic age in the backdrop of the revolutions of 1989 (the year that *The Sublime Object of Ideology* was published in English), believed it to be crucial that radical politics take center stage *in theory*, even if the vision of the Left seemed inconceivable within the established coordinates of contemporary political life.

Situated in the shadow of the resistance to the Yugoslavic communist regime, Žižek justifies the turn to Louis Althusser precisely because so many in academic circles considered him to be anemic and passé.²¹ To Žižek, their rejection showed that Althusser posed a threat to their political dominance. Althusser broadened the standard Marxist understanding of ideology (as described in chapter 1) to include not only how certain ideas are used to mislead political subjects in favor of the dominant economic system, as imposed by the ruling classes, but also how ideology resides within the concrete institutions and practices that give rise to these ideas: families, schools, and religious communities, as

he is speaking. Cf. Slavoj Žižek, “Have Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri Rewritten the Communist Manifesto for the Twenty-first Century?,” *Rethinking Marxism*, Vol. 12.3/4 (2001): 190-198.

²⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 3.

²¹ Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, 95.; Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, 26. There is a pattern here: if something is trendy or in fashion, Žižek finds it incredibly suspect. If it is considered out-dated and irrelevant, this is a sign to Žižek that it may be of great theoretical and political value. Žižek’s motivation for engaging theology in a serious way is due, in some part anyhow, to this pattern, as is his commitment to doing politics out of ideology critique.

the key examples.²² In turning his attention to “the soft power” of these ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ (‘ISAs’), Althusser argues that ideology is not directly based on the economic system, but lives primarily within the concrete practices and habits of everyday life; it has a “material existence.”²³ These practices are doubly ideological in the sense that they reinforce the “imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of experience”, but also are the very form in which the ideological system maintains the hold of this ‘imaginary relationship’ on the subject itself. This happens in the “interpellation”, the call whereby the subject’s dependence on ideology is naturalized and universalized as “the way things just *are*.” To make matters more troubling, this interpellation is the founding gesture of subjectivity itself; it is made clear to the subject that, *as a subject* tout court, she is subjugated to the ideological demands. It cannot be any other way. *C’est la vie*, or as Žižek says, “like love, ideology is blind, even if the people caught up in it are not.”²⁴ The transition from Althusser to Lacan comes down to a cynical acceptance of ideology’s ubiquity rather than a relentless critique of it, based on the conviction that a state beyond or outside ideology is possible, necessary, even for effective political change. Once you follow Althusser, Žižek maintains, there becomes little reason to directly oppose ideology, and so critique becomes neutral rather than negative, strategic rather than suspicious.

²² Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 127-188.

²³ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus,” 162, 165.

²⁴ Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 37.

Žižek is clearly concerned about the political ramifications of a *cynical* theory of ideology that abdicates to the post-political milieu by thinking that it can so easily dispense with the critique of ideology, as if it has no active political purpose, and so is no longer required. If we all know that we are duped by the ideological system, the critique of ideology (which purports to expose us to this fact) seems redundant and unnecessary – it simply tells us what we already know. But for Žižek, it is at this point that ideology is most dangerous and effective, for “an ideology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favor.”²⁵ The strongest case, in Žižek’s mind, for the urgent need to rehabilitate the theory of ideology for contemporary political concerns, is the neutralization of ideology critique by admitting to ideology’s pervasive ubiquity: “this denial of ideology only provides the ultimate proof that we are more than ever embedded in ideology.”²⁶ It is when we claim to be most fully aware of ideology (but cynically enact it nevertheless through our social practices) and therefore no longer see the need for ideology critique, that we are at our *most* ideological point: “the stepping out of ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it.”²⁷

For Žižek, Althusser’s mistake is that he fails to theorize ideology beyond the “critique of cynical reason”, whereby subjects are thought to be enlightened to their own false consciousness, even if that consciousness takes concrete form via the very practices

²⁵ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 49.

²⁶ Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 37.

²⁷ Matthew Sharpe, *Slavoj Žižek: A Little Piece of the Real* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 60.

that produce it.²⁸ Traditional views of ideology are mistaken about where ideology happens and what it looks like, and as such, misdirects its critique. Ideology, for Žižek, happens not at the level of knowledge (*pace* Althusser and the cynics who dismiss the ideology critique as passé), but at the level of social reality itself: “what the individuals are *doing*, and not only what they think or know they are doing.”²⁹ To correct this mistake, Žižek argues, we must turn to Lacan, whose understanding of the traumatic and unbearable gap between the Symbolic system and the order of the Real, clarifies precisely how and why ideology is so effective. Žižek relies deeply on Lacan’s work throughout his philosophy, but the most important concepts have to do with the traumatic relations of the Symbolic and the Real, the ‘big Other’, and the role of all three in subjectivity. Žižek explores these connections through the interplay between cynicism, belief, and fantasy in reference to ideology and social reality, to which we will now turn.

Ideology: the Symbolic Order and the ‘big Other’

Žižek finds Lacanian psychoanalysis to be indispensable for understanding the constraints of human behavior under ideological conditions, which is itself necessary for any attempt to rethink and rework political possibilities under the present system we live in. Among the most important of these concepts is the now infamous Lacanian triad: the relation between the orders of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.³⁰ For Lacan

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 226-227.

²⁹ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 31.

³⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992), 1-38; Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

(and so, Žižek), it is the interaction between the Symbolic and the Real, or more precisely, the traumatic rupture or gap produced by the failure between them, that yields the insubstantial space of the subject. For Žižek it comes down to the way the subject ‘learns’ to respond to the founding Cut, the wound at the core of the subject, that stands in for its failed state: its non-identity. This non-identity is then written into the socio-structural fabric of how and why political subjects act the way they do, or in other words, ideology and its alliance with the big Other.³¹

Ideology originates from the traumatic gap between the Real and social reality, as structured by the Symbolic order. The Real is the unbearable, abyssal “leftover” that the Symbolic cannot express or enclose within its system of signification. Žižek describes it this way: “the Real is simultaneously the Thing to which direct access is not possible and the obstacle that prevents this direct access; the Thing that eludes our grasp and the distorting screen that makes us miss the Thing.”³² In this way, we must say that “the Real is not external to the Symbolic: the Real is the Symbolic itself in the modality of ‘non-All’...and to step into the Real does not entail abandoning language, throwing oneself into the abyss of the chaotic Real, but on the contrary, dropping the very allusion to some external point of reference, which eludes the Symbolic.”³³ But, since ideology belongs to

³¹ Žižek’s theory of subject construction, developed with help from Hegel, Lacan, Marx, and Freud is highly complex, and will not be treated with the requisite specificity here. However, Žižek’s interest in the relation of ideology and theology is based on his theory of political subjectivity, and so it is important to at least sketch out how fantasy and ideology structures the subject and its acts, and how theology helps introduce a critical negativity that shifts political possibility.

³² Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 77.

³³ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 69-70.

the Symbolic, it cannot be said that ideology critique frees the subject to grasp of the Real, namely because it cannot close the gap between the Symbolic and the Real, the deadlock is that the traumatic remainder of non-representation itself. The Symbolic order uses social reality to try shield us from the unbearable trauma of this, our founding gap. Subjectivity owes its incomplete and contingency, its Wound, to this primordial, founding trauma.³⁴ This abyssal Lack, this wound/cut has traumatic effects on the subject insofar as it is produced by the failure of the Symbolic to account for the whole of the Real, to contain its unpredictability of the Void's ontological multiplicity and incompleteness.

Žižek cautions us not to reify the Real, thereby glossing over its negativity: “the Lacanian Real is not another Center, a ‘deeper’, ‘truer’, focal point or ‘black hole’ around which symbolic formulations fluctuate; rather it is the obstacle on account of which every Center is always displaced, missed.”³⁵ Speaking of the Real, “there is nothing outside it, no external limits, yet it is not all, it can break down.”³⁶ Only when we come to terms with the ‘non-All’ character of the Real (and the traumatic impact of this on the subject) are we able to see how ideology emerges. The Real is both traumatic and unbearable to the subject because it wreaks havoc on the gentrifying and censoring gestures of symbolization that constitute and stabilize the subject's concrete acts in the world: “the Lacanian

³⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 78.

³⁵ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 67.

³⁶ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 72.

Real – the Thing – is not so much the inert presence that ‘curves’ the symbolic space (introducing gaps and inconsistencies in it), but, rather, the effect of these gaps and inconsistencies.”³⁷ There is always an *apocalyptic* remainder, the harrowing kernel of the Real which is always missed by the Symbolic order, the inconsistency that haunts the subject, despite our repeated attempts to neutralize, sublimate, and integrate it into the symbolic order.³⁸

Žižek uses Lacan’s description of the Symbolic order which is based on the essentially structuralist insight that language is a differential system of signifiers and as such, is self-reflexive, rather than referring directly to that which stands external to them, what is commonly referred to as ‘the real world.’ Ordering and stabilizing this chain of signification is ‘the Big Other’, which, due to its tautological and auto-referential character, is useless as a *signifier*,³⁹ despite operating as one. As the Transcendental master-signifier, the big Other justifies its place in the order by structuring the open-ended void of multiple ‘floating signifiers’ into an united field with itself as “the nodal point”, that ‘pure signifying’⁴⁰ force that creates and sustains the identity of the ideological field⁴¹ by holding together its differential and antagonistic elements.⁴² This point contains them and ‘quilts’

³⁷ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 66.

³⁸ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 74.; Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 75.

³⁹ Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, 29.

⁴⁰ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 108.

⁴¹ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 95.

⁴² Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 111.

them together⁴³, so as to keep them from sliding out of place as part of this structure network of meaning; in doing so, the big Other ‘fixes’ their meaning, however artificially, effectively holding off, if only for a time, the unbearable fact that the Void, the space that the big Other holds close, will eventually show itself again. This is, in fact, the ruptural Event sought by ideology critique: to hold up on the Void, the ‘non-All’ of social reality, long enough so as to produce and generate political subjects.

As the subject is thrown into the Symbolic order, this ‘nodal point’ takes up the role of the big Other as “the unquestionable authority which can impose limits”⁴⁴, the master-signifier in the symbolic system that claims its authoritative function only insofar as subjects activate it by assuming its place and role as the guarantor of that virtual symbolic order that structures social reality for us. For Žižek, the big Other is not a single subject, but rather a function of ideology filed under a plurality of names (i.e., God, the Party, Freedom, the People), all of which share the basic structure as the assumed guarantee of the accepted social order, as the “rules of the game” that regulate the established field of possibilities for thinking and acting, and holds its all together in some semblance of intelligibility.⁴⁵

Žižek will turn repeatedly to the function of big Other as the underwriter for the ideological fantasy, as that which promises to stabilize the subject as it emerges from the traumatic experience in between the Real and the Symbolic orders, but at great cost: that

⁴³ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 81.

⁴⁴ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, xxxiii.

⁴⁵ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 163.

it must exist with ideology, “as if he had already chosen.” The results of the Real working underneath the big Other so as to topple and expose the ideological fantasies at work within social reality can be devastating for the subject, which is why the Big Other is installed and reinforced, so that it can resist the antagonistic Real trying to break through the Symbolic façade of the currently existing social bond. The big Other works to install peace, order, and coherence to what will otherwise be chaos, contradiction, violence, and upheaval. Politically speaking, the big Other, as the master signifier, imposes itself upon social reality in an effort to forestall the traumatic irruption of the Real and so produces ideology as such, making it appear to the subject as if it is inexorable as a ‘given’ characteristic that governs and structures the field of (currently available) political options. This is why Žižek is so eager to topple the big Other, using ideology critique as a political tool of instigation, to bring this original condition, the pure multiplicity of the negative Void, back to the foreground of politics, as scary as this sounds. His primary reason, as we shall see, is to expand the field of currently existing political choices and options by reopening “the Communist hypothesis”⁴⁶, the condition of possibility for political Acts themselves, acts that issue forth from the Real.

The big Other performs as ideology by totalizing the symbolic order, effectively screening the subject off from the radical multiplicity of the pre-ideological kernel of

⁴⁶ As will be explained later, Žižek borrows this phrase from Badiou, but explores it more thoroughly with other Leftist thinkers in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *The Idea of Communism* (London: Verso, 2010) and Slavoj Žižek, ed., *The Idea of Communism. Volume 2* (London: Verso, 2013; Also, see Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London: Verso, 2010).

Symbolic surplus, that traumatic gap from which subjectivity emerges that bares the unbearable truth of our contingency, our groundlessness, the arbitrary spontaneity with which we enter and exit the world. The big Other tries to objectify and occupy “the empty space”, the uncontainable remainder, after symbolization. Žižek describes it in ideological terms as the *point de capiton* which reassures the subject of the veracity and reliability of the Symbolic order, even while the symbolic order is itself dependent on the concrete practices of the subject: “The *point de capiton* is rather the word which, as a word, on the level of the signifier itself unified a given field, constitutes its identity: it is, so to speak, the word to which ‘things’ themselves refer to recognize themselves to their unity.”⁴⁷ It is here that the ideological function of the big Other is most clear. It is not “a point of supreme density of Meaning, the kind of Guarantee which by, being itself, excepted from the differential interplay of elements, would serve as a stable and fixed point of reference.”⁴⁸ It is quite the contrary, actually. It is indeed, nothing but “‘pure difference’: its role is purely structural, its nature is purely performative – its signification coincides with the its own act of enunciation; in short, it is a ‘signifier without the signified.’”⁴⁹ Žižek writes that “this dimension of the ‘big Other’ is that of the constitutive alienation of the subject in the symbolic order: the big Other pulls the strings, the subject doesn't speak, he "is spoken" by the symbolic structure.”⁵⁰ The cunning of the big Other

⁴⁷ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 105.

⁴⁸ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 99.

⁴⁹ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 109.

⁵⁰ Žižek, “The Matrix, or, the Two Sides of Perversion”, <http://www.lacan.com/Žižek-matrix.htm>

is that it is rarely questioned; it is highly invisible, naturalized, and universalized, not because everyone actually believes in it and is committed to its continuance, but rather because “nobody really knows what it means, but each of them somehow presupposes that others know, that it has to mean ‘the real thing’, so they use it all time.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, it is “the element, which represents within the field of Meaning, the agency of pure signifier... as the point which ‘gives meaning’ to all the others and thus totalizes the field of (ideological) meaning.”⁵²

The danger of the big Other is precisely the same in psychoanalysis as it is in politics: “as kind of a transcendent guarantee, [it is] the element which only holds the place of a certain lack, which is in its bodily presence nothing but an embodiment of a certain lack which is perceived as a point of supreme plenitude.”⁵³ It allows the subject to avoid the full interrogation of her conditions; it keeps the “error of perspective” alive, allowing us to think that there is really something there, some real kernel of truth about ourselves and the world to be found, if we can free ourselves from our fantasies and illusions. It keeps the subject from encountering herself as such; it precludes the subject from experiencing the void of multiplicity and contingency, through which the subject must navigate, if she hopes to live authentically. It is in owning up to the groundlessness of her language, the failure of her attempts to identify with herself, that actual freedom, rather the forced choices of “mindfulness” or “democracy”, is made possible again.

⁵¹ Slavoj Žižek, “The Real of Sexual Difference,” in *Interrogating the Real*, ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2006), 58.

⁵² Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 99.

⁵³ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 110.

The big Other is the truly ideological fantasy, not because it hides the truth from the subject, but because it *is* truth, and as such, effectively screens the subject off from her constitutive Lack. Žižek’s modification of the critique of ideology procedure is specifically designed to counter the big Other without at the same time replacing it. The ideologico-critical project of “traversing the fantasy” of the big Other is not to restore to the subject her immediate access to reality “outside of fantasy”, but as Žižek says, “to fully identify oneself with the fantasy, to bring the fantasy out... Once we do this, its hold over us is suspended - why?”⁵⁴ It is only by ‘over-identifying’ with the fantasy, being brought into an deeply intimate relation with it, to be claimed by it more than ever, that we are able to disable it. It possesses operative strength only when it is able to act as the transparent background to the subject’s experience of self and world.⁵⁵

Cynicism and Belief

What is missing at this juncture is the link between fantasy and the act, especially as that relation is structured through ideology. This connection is provided, at least provisionally, by how Žižek theorizes the *critical* function of belief in the midst of cynical reason. This sets the stage for the crucial role that religion, and ‘Pauline’ Christianity in particular, plays in elevating the place of ideology critique in Žižek’s political thought. The problem, as Žižek sees it, with ideology critique today is not that no one believes in it anymore, but that we are all too certain that we are aware of and awakened to, their ideological state. It is cynicism about ideology - the sense that we know we are being duped, but

⁵⁴ Žižek, *Event*, 27, 29.

⁵⁵ Žižek, *Event*, 29.

do little about it - that troubles Žižek: “the very concept of ideology implies a kind of constitutive naiveté, the misrecognition of its own presuppositions, of its own effective conditions, a distance, a divergence between so-called social reality and our distorted representations, our false consciousness of it.”⁵⁶ It is our knowledge of and belief in ideology that will prove to be most ensnaring. Peter Sloterdijk argues for the end of ‘ideology’ talk by theorizing the contemporary mood of cynicism which problematizes the procedure of critique itself.⁵⁷ Cynical reason, or “enlightened false consciousness” refers to how the contemporary subject can be quite aware that the ideological mask she wears conceals or obscures social reality, but nevertheless still wears the mask, even though she knows that it is obfuscating, distorting, and hiding the truth.⁵⁸ She also knows that every subject around her *also* knows this (both that she is living in ideology, but is doing nothing differently, and that they are too). They too know that she knows, but they all nevertheless opt to not behave differently, to act as if they do not know that they know what they are doing. The formula for ideology is no longer, “they do not know what they are doing”, but rather “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.” In the traditional view, ideology depends on naiveté in order to be effective, but as it turns out, ideology actually thrives on knowledge, on an ‘enlightened consciousness’ that is aware of its spuriousness, but rather than getting rid of it, actually maintains it. Cynical reason does not denounce ideology even though it is aware of it and its effects on the subject. Rather,

⁵⁶ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 28.

⁵⁷ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 6-21.

⁵⁸ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 5-8.

cynicism actively sustains it, reinscribing it willfully into the everyday acts and practices that shape human life. Indeed, for Žižek, cynicism is “an exact inversion of Marx’s formula: today, we only imagine that we do not ‘really believe’ in our ideology – in spite of this imaginary distance, we continue to practice it.”⁵⁹

Cynical reason apparently challenges the necessity of ideology critique in a situation where we consider ourselves to be fully aware of ideology and the effects of its hold on us. Everyone knows that ideology is in place, that it is acting upon their knowing, their way of being, but they act as if they do not. How ideology acts - and the form it takes - in our world today is not as the shadowy specter who is present precisely in its absence, whose purveyors try to maintain its power on the subject by avoiding its detection, keeping it and its effects hidden. In this cynical time, ideology has become bold and audacious; it protects itself by not hiding at all. We all see it, we all know it, we all perceive ourselves acting and living into it, but its presence is so mundane and boring; it has become naturalized. What good will ideology critique do if we are already disabused of ideology’s presence and action in our social order? We do not need to be told ideology is all around us; we know that already. Everyone is aware that the ideas that support and legitimate the social system that we participate in are ideological, and so ideology critique seems redundant in a situation where everyone is conscious of it. But Žižek argues that cynicism, rather than spelling the end of ideology, does not understand how ideology actually works in its current form. Ideology is not a matter of holding false beliefs, but is “an illusion, an error, a distortion which is already at work in the social reality itself, at

⁵⁹ Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 3.

the level of what individuals are doing, and not only what they think or know they are doing.”⁶⁰ For Žižek, cynicism does not render the critique of ideology pointless, but rather helps us clarify how ideology is functioning, namely that subjects never fully go ‘all in’, that there remains some traumatic leftover, a point Althusser missed, but that Lacan made clear.

In response to cynicism, the early (and more Marxist) Žižek departs from the traditional view of ideology critique that “the ideological is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence, the social effectiveness, the preproduction of which implies that the individuals ‘do not know what they are doing.’”⁶¹ The way to respond is to replace the binary of reality and appearance (which the culture of cynicism itself maintains) and reconnect critique with action instead of knowledge or belief. Rather than trying to convince the political subject that the reality that she accepts as real is actually false, ideology critique is about identifying “a certain fissure asymmetry, a certain pathological, imbalance...which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genus.”⁶²

The political subject cannot escape, or somehow suspend, ideology or its effects. But critique is misguided if it considers its primary objective to be to show the truth of something, as if it must reveal that one what believes to be true is actually not. The problem of ideology, as Žižek sees it, is a more fundamental and dialectical contradiction

⁶⁰ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 31.

⁶¹ Žižek, “Spectre of Ideology,” 305.

⁶² Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 21.

between knowing and acting that always already precedes both. Since, for Žižek, “the fundamental level of ideology, however, is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things, but that of an unconscious fantasy structuring our social reality itself”⁶³, the task of the critique of ideology, then, is to “[detect] a point of breakdown heterogeneous to a given ideological field and at the same time necessary for that field to achieve its closure, its accomplished form.”⁶⁴ This ‘point of breakdown’ is synonymous with the reality itself, that aspect ‘in-itself’ whereby it simply dissolves, changes, and causes a shift in desire, residing in yet another *objet petit a*, provided by ideology.

The paradox is that ideology “can reproduce itself only in so far as it is misrecognized and overlooked.”⁶⁵ Once we “see reality as it is”, it is no longer real. The misrecognition of social reality is part of this reality itself. The constitution of social reality requires ideological distortion, and so it relies upon fetishes, language, fantasies, and symbols to sustain itself. However, the ideology of social reality does not require subjects to believe in it for it to exist, only that subjects act ‘as if’ they do. Ideology is not a dream-like illusion that we build to escape an insupportable reality; it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for reality itself, an illusion that sutures the fundamental antagonistic gap enforced the insupportable, impossible kernel of the Real, “the traumatic so-

⁶³ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 33.

⁶⁴ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 16.

⁶⁵ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 25.

cial divisions that cannot be symbolized, that cannot be contained in the system of signification.”⁶⁶ Žižek contends that cynicism only helps to illustrate that ideology happens at “the level of what the individuals are doing”, their real social activity, rather than at the register of knowledge: “What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality, but *the illusion which is structuring their reality*.”⁶⁷ This “illusion” is the fundamental antagonism that exists between belief and action, a contradiction that is thoroughly political in form and psychological in structure, insofar as it resides within the subject itself.

For Žižek, the political question becomes “why?” Why do even “cynically enlightened” subjects not act any differently, despite their awareness of ideology? What structures and supports this illusion of social reality, and how must the critique of ideology shift itself, so as to encounter ideology more productively? Why do people, who as political agents are “the subjects who are supposed to know”⁶⁸, consistently act directly counter to their own interests?⁶⁹ We are no longer unaware that what we see, that what we are told is true, what we act in and towards, is *not* “that-which-is”; we know perfectly

⁶⁶ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 45.

⁶⁷ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 30.

⁶⁸ In psychoanalytic terms, Lacan uses this concept to speak of how the analysand relates to the analyst in situations of transference. The analyst becomes “the subject is supposed to know” when she is assumed to have the answers, the truth behind the analysand’s symptoms. In a cynical world where the subject’s knowledge always excess reality, the subject always already has access to the key to make sense of herself and her world. She assumes the position of analyst in relation to her own speech of analysand; she is not longer “probing [herself] with different hypotheses, searching for proofs, etc.; [s]he embodies the absolute certainty (which Lacan compares with the certainty of Descartes' cogito ergo sum) of the analysand's "guilt," i.e. of [her] unconscious desire.” She knows her own secret, but knows it through the analyst position, in an “externalization of belief.” Žižek, “The Interpassive Subject”: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavojo-Žižek/articles/the-interpassive-subject/>

⁶⁹ Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 33.

well that the chimera presented to us as “the thing in itself” is indeed a fallacious representation, full of manipulation, deceit, and caricature. The place of illusion proper to ideology, then, is in the reality of *activity*, so that “they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still they are doing it.”⁷⁰ This ‘enlightenment does not seem to lead to a different way of life, even when armed with the knowledge that things are not as the media or the market suggest them to be. In this culture of cynicism, ideology acts as the foundation to “belief before belief” that shapes the very activity that exhibits our adhesion to the social order even as we are aware that it is neither natural, universal, or given.⁷¹ Žižek exaggerates when he writes: “nobody takes democracy or justice seriously, we are all aware of their corrupted nature, but we participate in them, we display our belief in them, because we assume that they work, even if we do not believe in them.”⁷² Indeed, it is obvious that Žižek is incorrect when he argues that “nobody takes democracy or justice seriously”, but I take his point being that the ideological state of political subjects make it very difficult for them to really take upon themselves the radical demands of democracy or justice, or solidarity, love, and compassion, for that matter.

If the traditional critique of ideology is the unveiling or exposure of the ‘false consciousness of a (social) being’, which illuminates to the subject the truth of her situation, and so makes authentic revolutionary praxis possible, the cynical critique of ideology is to point out that the traditional critique of ideology is indeed ideological itself,

⁷⁰ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 16.

⁷¹ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 40.

⁷² Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 51.

namely that its view of critique as ‘deideologization’ of the social order is naive, considering how savvy we all are about knowing what it is we do not know. The pedagogical aim of this critique to teach subjects how to, in fact, act in the world otherwise; that is, to act like in light of what they know to be true. However, in Žižek’s mind, both the traditional and ‘cynical’ critique of ideology are inadequate because they do not understand the *critical* structure of belief: the way it traverses fantasy, through ironic stages of its own negation⁷³, or what Žižek terms elsewhere its “fetishistic disavowal.”⁷⁴ This is the position of cynical compliance or conformity in full knowledge and recognition that the particular order is false, absurd, or otherwise not credible. How does this work in ideology? Žižek’s critical theory of belief is best described as an ‘over-identification’ with belief that actively unveils the structure of critical disavowal itself. It renders clear “the way that a belief is a reflexive attitude: it is never a case of simply believing - one has to believe in belief itself.”⁷⁵ It works in either direction: by believing and acting as if I do not, or by not believing, but sincerely acting as if I do.⁷⁶ Either way, the ideologico-critical effect of this un/belief is the same: it “objectifies” and externalizes it, bringing to the surface the precise manner in which belief is way of acting, and that we act into social real-

⁷³ Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 88-89; Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 25.

⁷⁴ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 353, 347-348.; Žižek, *On Belief*, 109-113, 125-127, 148-151.; Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 4-8, 101-104, 138-140. For more on Žižek and disavowal (as it relates to ideology and religious belief), see Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey Robbins, *Religion, Politics, and the Earth: The New Materialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 27-29.

⁷⁵ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 353.

⁷⁶ Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile, 2009), 53.

ity ‘as if’ we believe in it. It is only by *over-identifying* with belief, by acting in our belief, and doing so sincerely, that we are able to see what we believe in and why we believe, and thus able to get rid of our beliefs.⁷⁷ The idea of belief as a strategy for unbelief explains why “those who actively try to prevent themselves from getting caught in ideology by way of knowledge, who continue to doubt rather than believe, are the ones most likely to get wrapped up in ideology.”⁷⁸ Put differently, “a cynic who ‘believes only his eyes’ misses the efficiency of the symbolic fiction, the way this fiction structures our experience of reality.”⁷⁹

Žižek’s Critique of Ideology

With this in mind, what does ideology critique achieve for the subject, and what are its political implications? Žižek turns to psychoanalysis as a model for its critically negative procedure. It “transverses the fantasy”, rather than uncovers the Real, and as such, it lays bare the fundamental Lack that accompanies the symbolic order - *without covering it up again*. It allows the subject to face into, to confront, the ‘Non-All’ of reality without trying to explain it, contain it, or symbolize it in any way. Ideology critique frees the subject, not to see the way things really are, but to recognize this misses the point - and is ideological itself. To critique ideology is to renounce all attempts at filling out the void, or explaining it away; it is to admit that the Lack which establishes the coordinates of desire and so is the origin, source, and condition of the subject, must remain

⁷⁷ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 353.

⁷⁸ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 102.

⁷⁹ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 323.

‘empty’. But this emptiness is not vacancy but negation, provided of course by the Hegelian dialectical process: it is a “materialism without matter.” The spirit of the ‘antimony of critic-ideological reason’ protects the Voided ‘empty place’, the gap or lack of the Other, through a dialectical movement that has no final closure, that offers no hope of being fully explained or completed. This surely wrecks havoc on the subject, eventually dividing it, leaving it destitute due to the unbearable pressure that comes with being thrown without choice into the contingency, openness, and sheer unpredictability of the primordially repressed fact that ‘there is no Big Other.’

The goal of ideology critique is to to lay bare this empty place, this Nothing that undergirds subjectivity, and that renders reality incomplete, insubstantial, and truly open the possibility of the New. Critique itself is possible because of this primordial antagonism of social reality itself, that fact that reality can never be whole, that it can never be identified with itself. It is never “there” for the taking. So, the critical perspective on ideology is not about acquiring the truth about reality, but to surface the repressed Real of the fundamental antagonism that social reality itself represses in service to the Symbolic order. The point here is not to point out and then resolve this antagonism, but to own up to it as the essential human condition. Like fantasy, what we are to do when faced with it is not to try to expose it, so that it can be erased, but rather to “over-identify” with it, for when we ‘pretend to pretend to believe’ in it, it disarms its effect on the subject.⁸⁰ What is left to do after the critique of ideology is *not* to return that primordial kernel of the truth or the Real upon which we establish new norms, a better Law, a more adequate political

⁸⁰ Žižek, *Event*, 27-30.

order, but rather to actively resist any and all efforts, no matter their aims or label, thereby objectifying this emptiness as the very act of exposure; it is to say “there is nothing, but this nothing itself, the nothing that is the subject.”⁸¹

Indeed, Žižek interprets all politics to be attempts to harmonize this inconsistency, to heal the rupture, to fill in the gaps with one suturing strategy or the other, so as to abolish and eradicate this tension, and so secure the subject.⁸² The search for the original purity of the harmonious order, so as to recover or return to some original, non-alienated state, is not possible – there is no ‘outside’ or ‘beyond’ ideology. Social reality itself is not possible without it. What the critique of ideology tries to get at, then, is not the liberation of human knowers from false representation, erroneous beliefs, or a transformation of social practices and institutions whereby we are returned to an original condition, free of antagonism or repression. Rather, ideology critique concerns the material conditions under which the authentic political act is made possible. Put differently, ideology critique in Žižek’s vision is a theory of Event, a project in which theology plays a major role.

By attempting to “to detect beyond the dazzling splendor of the element which holds it together, this self preferential, tautological, performative operation”⁸³, critique takes up the big Other as “the ideological edifice, as this phallic, erected Guarantee of Meaning” and “recognizes in it the embodiment of lack, the chasm of non-sense gaping

⁸¹ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 195.

⁸² Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 21.

⁸³ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 109.

in the midst of ideological meaning.”⁸⁴ Politically speaking, Žižek’s critique of ideology hopes to lay bare how ideology *is* our (experience of) reality; like Marx and Eagleton, he does not claim to strip from the subject all instances of its “false consciousness”. What we get “on the other side” of ideology critique is not an innermost, authentic self, but a traumatic Void of multiplicity whose negativity renders us entirely bereft of all guarantees, all external limits. Ideology critique is not necessarily good news for the subject; by and large, the subject much prefers fantasy - and for good reason. Politics, theology, and psychoanalysis share a family resemblance as instances of ideology critique - they are all interested in showing the subject that “the big Other does not exist.” What the critique of ideology does when faced with the fantastical operations of the big Other is to reassert the fundamental antagonism between the Symbolic and Real, reminding social reality (and political subjects, for that matter) of its traumatic origins. Only here can ideology critique hope to make a political difference. It does this by demonstrating the failure of social reality to heal or cope with this trauma, and so serves as a kind of Socratic psychoanalyst, whose midwifery brings forth that apocalyptic “zero point”, the condition of absolute freedom, which helps the subjects eschew “the forced choices”⁸⁵ of merely ‘formal’ freedom, opting instead for something altogether different, albeit New and as of yet, unseen.\

⁸⁴ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 100.

⁸⁵ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 96. Žižek repeatedly interprets “the paradox of the forced choice” (‘you are free to choose - on condition that you make the right choice’) theologically, although it originates in his reading of Lenin. See Žižek, *On Belief*, 2-4, 113-122. Christianity’s theo-logic animates a “radical break” with this ‘forced choice’ by undermining the coordinates of the normal flow, “the smooth running of things”, that constrain the chimera of choice/decision within the coordinates of existing power relations.

The 'Eventfulness' of the Act

In the essay, “St. Paul and the Truth-Event”, Žižek turns to St. Paul (through Badiou) in order to suggest that when “short-circuited”, both authors together present Truth as an Event that perverts the structure of Being and belongs to a wholly other register, ‘the pure Multiplicity of Nothing.’⁸⁶ “A true Event emerges out of the ‘Void’ of the situation”⁸⁷, and so its radically undecidable and spontaneous activity has neither an ontological guarantee nor a hidden content or agency.⁸⁸ It attaches itself to that localized Void inherent in the inconsistencies and transgressions of every situation, making a new Subject visible and intelligible *ex nihilo*: it ushers in the Subject from the empty Void. This “Void” is the ontological incompleteness of reality itself, a point that Christianity makes particularly well (as we shall see). It is not the nihilist ‘nothing that is still something’, but rather the materialist ‘something that is nothing’, that truly terrifying and abyssal truth that is always already the site where consistent subjectivity is borne. While Žižek links the Event to subjectivity itself, “In this precise sense, an Event involves subjectivity; the engaged “subjective perspective” on the Event is part of the Event itself”⁸⁹, the

Christianity provides the political logic of ‘concrete universality’ where all actors have direct access to reality that transgresses the ‘big Other’ of ordered hierarchy. Its critique instigates a withdrawal whereby the social actor experiences herself as fully responsible.

⁸⁶ Žižek, “Paul and the Truth Event,” 75.

⁸⁷ Žižek, “Paul and the Truth Event,” 87.

⁸⁸ Žižek, “Paul and the Truth Event,” 82-83.

⁸⁹ Žižek, “Paul and the Truth Event,” 38.

Event-structure of ideology critique is not good news for the Subject, for “the Event necessarily appears as standalone, as an undesirable, chaotic intrusion that has no place in the state of the situation.”⁹⁰ Žižek is clear that “what defines the subject is his or her fidelity to the Event: the subject comes after the Event and persists in discerning its traces within his and her situation.” If this is true, the Subject is clearly not good news either, not only for itself, but for the socio-symbolic order. It is imbued with all the Event’s characteristics; its contingency, its partiality, its instability. It is here that Žižek describes ideology critique and subject formation in the same terms: “the truth-Event is simply a radically new beginning: it designates the violent, traumatic and contingent, intrusion of another dimension not ‘mediated’ by the domain of terrestrial finitude and corruption.”⁹¹ The question is what role does theology have in instigating this “new beginning” in a way that does not devolve into another ideology, but rather keeps the pure multiplicity of Void open? In what way does Žižek see Christianity as the Event?

Žižek acknowledges that there are close similarities between Badiou’s notion of the subject viz a viz the Event and Althusser’s notion of ideological interpretation, noting in particular the central place that theology has in calling subjectivity forth from individuals. For Žižek, as for Badiou, the biblical Paul is uniquely helpful for identifying this, in that he argues that Christ’s death clears the way for a subjectivity that eschews the marks

⁹⁰ Žižek, “Paul and the Truth Event,” 85.

⁹¹ Žižek, “Paul and the Truth Event,” 93.

and conditions of individual and is based instead on “universal singularity.” Žižek follows Badiou in arguing that Christianity houses the paradigmatic truth Event in its attestation to divine death and crucifixion⁹², in the way that “the truth Event is truth in itself for its agents themselves, not for external observers”, and so “truth is discernible only for the potential members of the new community of believers, for their engaged gaze.”⁹³ It invokes the ultimate Impossibility (love, miracle, resurrection, and so on) that resets the parameters of what counts in the situation; it “unplugs” itself from the dictates of the accepted, putting into motion an universal power, a political work that mocks and shatters the predominant patterns, the stylized and scripted “quiet rooms”⁹⁴ where the actual *political* decisions are made.⁹⁵ As an Event, the death of God becomes a truth-Event ‘after the fact’, “that is, when it leads to the constitution of the group of believers, of the engaged community held together by the fidelity to the Event: the traumatic encounter with the Real in Christ’s death.”⁹⁶ Christ’s death prepares the site for the Event by identifying God as humanity,⁹⁷ but identifying oneself with Christ’s death and abandonment by God

⁹² Žižek, “Paul and the Truth Event,” 88.

⁹³ Žižek, “Paul and the Truth Event,” 86-87.

⁹⁴ During the 2012 U.S. Presidential campaign, the Republican nominee Mitt Romney was asked to clarify his comments that President Obama’s emphasis on income inequality was tantamount to “the bitter politics of envy.” He elaborated saying, “I think it's about class warfare”, accusing Obama of “dividing America based on 99 percent versus 1 percent.” The interviewer followed up: “Aren’t there questions about the distribution of wealth without it being seen as envy?” Romney’s replied: “I think it's fine to talk about those things in quiet rooms and tax policy and the like.” <http://www.today.com/video/today/45955255>

⁹⁵ Žižek, “Paul and the Truth Event,” 90.

⁹⁶ Žižek, “Paul and the Truth Event,” 87.

⁹⁷ Žižek, “Paul and the Truth Event,” 93

means that one opts out of the ethical turn to real political decisions and the legislative and judicial arena of polices and policing, suspending its “stubborn attachments”, and choosing instead the liminal domain of the ‘Holy Spirit’, the social bond of love that links the revolutionary collective together amidst the radical absence of the big Other.⁹⁸

Speaking of the ‘eventfulness’ of Christianity, Žižek writes: “Christian revelation is thus an example (although probably *the* example) of how we, human beings, are not constrained to the positivity of being; of how, from time to time, in a contingent and unpredictable way, a truth-Event can occur that opens up the possibility of participating in another life by remaining faithful to the truth-Event.”⁹⁹ This is how theology *is* ideology critique. Structured as a truth-Event, it is the procedure that clears the way for political subjects who are capable of acting within this life. This “magical break” is accomplished by what Žižek terms the “theologico-political suspension of the ethical.”¹⁰⁰ Here, Christianity is thought to have dismissed the hold of the law on the subject, breaking the vicious cycle of law and transgression by instigating the death of the big Other, that quilting “nodal point” that dominates and regulates the subject’s life within the symbolic order: “there is no experience of the divine without such a suspension of the Ethical.”¹⁰¹ This marks the new beginning of and for the subject, who in the absence of the deadlock of

⁹⁸ Žižek, “Paul and the Truth Event,” 93.

⁹⁹ Žižek, “Paul and the Truth Event,” 94.

¹⁰⁰ For vacations on this theme, especially as it pertains to ideology critique, see Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 963-1010.; Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2011), 80-135, especially 116-118.; Slavoj Žižek, “For a Theologico-Political Suspension of the Ethical” in Slavoj Žižek and Boris Gunjević, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2012), 7, 27-102.; Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 103-111.; Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 129-130, 311-312.

¹⁰¹ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 120.

fantasy (rendered by Žižek as the ideological demands of the Ethical universal), is given the opportunity, in absolute freedom, to intervene into authentic political acts that generate Events, rather than Orders.

Here we can see more clearly that, in Žižek's view, ideology critique is guided by psychoanalysis, but is rerouted through Christianity. The proper relation to the "empty space" of the Void – that "true openness" which is leftover after ideology critique – is not to maintain our distance, but rather to view it as that through which we must tarry in order for the subject to materialize. But the effect of the Void on the subject is not creative, but dialectic in that it empties the gap – rips open the sutures of social reality – with a negative force that assumes positive existence *only as it is left open*. Ideology critique clears the way for authentic political subjects by bringing out "the acceptance of the very fact that our lives involve a traumatic kernel, beyond redemption, that there is a dimension of our being which forever resists redemption-deliverance."¹⁰² This "entails the acceptance and admission that all our discursive formations are forever haunted", but that life must go on. "Christian materialism" seems uniquely positioned to disseminate this message, and to unfold its unrealized political implications, precisely because it models how best to "unplug" from the social order and confess the very antagonisms that the Symbolic order have been designed to resist and repress. Žižek's interest in theology is clarified when one looks at its political utility in critiquing ideology, and not the political utility of theological 'content' itself, which is not operative for Žižek. The political significance of Christian theology is second-order and derivative; it gains its political import

¹⁰² Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, 91.

through its work as a negatively dialectical force that sets in motion a form of ideology critique that is both properly negative and materialist. It is a thought-form, a critical form of rationality that is unique in its enduring negativity, and so in theology, Žižek finds a political ‘kernel’ capable of setting the political subject free, not from ideology, but from the ideologico-critical fantasy itself. Only then is the Act possible.

Žižek’s Theology as Ideology Critique

But is not theology yet another iteration of ideology? How is it not another, albeit more politically radical, fantasy that protects the Subject from its traumatic origins, from the pure negativity of the Lack at its heart? Even if one concedes to Žižek the ideologico-critical dimension of theology, it is not altogether clear how it is that theology does not eventually “fold over” the ideological Gap, suturing the very openness and instability upon which Žižek’s materialist ontology (and so, his theory of the Act) is built. Žižek, however, seems quite convinced that there is something unique about the “perverse core” of Christian materialism that is worth fighting for.¹⁰³ Žižek accounts for this unique contribution through a Hegelian “death of God theology”, tied to the theology of divine suffering and abandonment, and signaled in the crucified God’s “cry of dereliction” at his death. This event results in the formation of the ‘Spirit’ of love, the collective and democ-

¹⁰³ Žižek’s enthusiasm for religion and theology is not unbridled. *Pace* both fundamentalism and liberal toleration, we should not be “trying to redeem the pure ethical core of religion against its political instrumentalization, we should ruthlessly criticize this core - in *all* religions.” What is required for this criticism is not secularism or atheism, but “a truly ascetic militant ethical stance”, and as we shall see, it is, ironically, Christianity who provides this.

ratized social bond that lives and acts in the radical absence of the big Other, finally disabused of and ‘subtracted’ from the “forced choices” of currently available political options.¹⁰⁴ This clears the way for the authentic Acts of political subjects, acts that emerge from “absolute freedom” that makes real intervention and apocalyptic possible, acts that are discontinuous and transgressive of established political coordinates.

This kind of “unplugged” politics is made possible only by theology¹⁰⁵, says Žižek, for its uniquely apocalyptic message is capable to instigating the conditions of possibility for revolutionary subjectivity without ceding to the sutures of ideology. The Christian declaration is the confrontation of the horrifying truth of the Lack: God has become human, died, and was given new life in the new beginning of the collective, who must nevertheless strive forward, but are no longer beholden to “this” life. The Christian life is the political life of the liminal “undead.”¹⁰⁶ In this way, Žižek interprets the cruci-

¹⁰⁴ References to “the Spirit” as the dialectical ‘point’ of Hegelian negativity (or theologically interpreted, the ‘uncoupling’ accomplished in the ‘Fall’ of God into humanity through Christ, ‘God’s thorough desubstantialization’) are scattered through Žižek’s work. A the political community of love, the Spirit is describe as ‘uncoupled’, ‘destitute’, ‘collective’, ‘outcasts’, the ‘undead ghosts’ who are ‘redeemed of all particular links’, “a new subject no longer rooted in a particular substance.” See Slavoj Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 29-33, 61, 74, 283-285, 289, 295.; Žižek, *God In Pain*, 55.; Žižek, *On Belief*, 83, 91. Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, 110-111, 115-120, 148-150.; Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 114-8, 130, 138-139, 171., Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 79-80.

¹⁰⁵ Žižek, *On Belief*, 106-127.; Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, 118-120, 140.; Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 118-119.

¹⁰⁶ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 93, 100.; Žižek, *On Belief*, 104.; Žižek frequently likens Christian ‘unbelief’ to the ‘undead’ existence of zombies, and it is frequently linked to the ‘negation of negation’ involved in ideology critique. Zombies are “embodied apparitions of the spaces between life and death”, and so they extend imaginings of the future as the ‘living dead.’ Zombies are from the ‘forbidden domain of the Thing.’ Insofar as they are reminders of the End, they underscore a partial future that is somewhere between hopeful and catastrophic. See Slavoj Žižek, “Neighbors and Other Monsters” in *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries*

fied Christ as the “vanishing mediator” between the law of the divine Father and the absolute freedom of the Holy Spirit, and so in doing, narrates ‘the passage’ from Judaism to Christianity as one from “law to love.”¹⁰⁷ This amounts to a ‘Christian materialism’ (the dialectical successor to current orthodoxy, which is itself a betrayal of Christianity’s revolutionary Truth) that Žižek endorses as essential to the critique of ideology and the authentic political Acts that follow.

The Death of God Theology and the ‘Negation of Negation’

Key to understanding how and why Žižek reconfigures political theology as ideology critique is his interpretation and use of the negation of negation, a key element of his engagement with dialectical materialism, which he believes, is best found in the work of

into Political Theology, ed. Slavoj Žižek, Eric Santer, and Kenneth Reinhard (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 25.

Theology and zombies are connected to Žižek’s affinity for the politically apocalyptic (in the ‘revolutionary’ sense) wherein theology is the ‘zombie’ figure in thought capable of resisting the form of “cultural criticism [that] shares the blindness of its object.” See Theodor Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society” in *Prisms* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 27. For a detailed description and analysis of this link, see Ola Sigurdson, “Slavoj Žižek, the Death Drive, and Zombies: A Theological Account,” *Modern Theology*, vol. 19.03 (2013): 361-380.

¹⁰⁷ Whereas supersessionist Christianity has viewed the Jewish law as something to be escaped, to be overcome, whether by ‘gospel’, *metanoia* or love, for Žižek, the Jewish stance toward the law affords us a modality that is “unplugged” or “decoupled” from the ideological order. In this way, Christian love does not supersede Jewish “law” as much as it suspends it by exposing its “obscene superego supplement” (*Puppet and the Dwarf*, 127) and revealing God to be impotent, the horrifying secret kept so well by Jewish iconoclasm. See Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 123-129, and Žižek, *On Belief*, 126-133, 137-151.

Hegel.¹⁰⁸ Žižek is eager to defend the political usefulness of the Hegelian dialectical process, specifically related to the confusing phrase, the “negation of negation.”¹⁰⁹ For him, Hegelian dialectics is not a “vulgar evolutionism” whereby one finds the ultimate answers by reconciling apparent opposites through a totalizing and harmonizing process of synthesis and resolution. Instead, the negativity of this dialectic, with all its disruptive power, “has a positive function” of coming upon the truth, and so requires a series of errors – one must first make the wrong choice¹¹⁰ – but this wrong choice is not merely discarded, but is sublated into the final truth (which not the same as a reconciliation or grand synthesis of with the prior error).¹¹¹

The ‘negation of negation’ is not ancillary to the essential nature of Spirit (which otherwise works to progressively raise something to a higher level), but is the core of dialectics. Dialectics is the critical act which shows that the negation (the first move, ‘... of

¹⁰⁸ Žižek is often read as attempting to activate or rehabilitate Hegel in Lacanian terms, but what is often overlooked is that Žižek readily defends a reading of German Idealism *as a Marxist*. If the standard line is that Marx corrects or defends Hegel by upending his idealism in favor of materialism, Žižek negates this reversal by arguing that the only way to preserve the practical and liberative aspect of philosophy for emancipatory politics, that is, to generate a true materialism (Marx’s goal), is through the idealism of (Hegel’s) dialectical process. This, anyway, is the argument in his recent, and rather large work on Hegel. See Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 241-264, and Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 31-40, 192-193.

¹⁰⁹ Žižek’s use of Christianity as an exemplary form of this ‘downward-synthesis’ is particularly of note here, as it demonstrates the ‘negation of negation’ that serves as a focal point of Žižek’s philosophy, and so, his political theology. The self-reflexive character of Žižek’s ‘materialist theology’ is animated by “the Hegelian self-negation that is also the fundamental procedure of the Marxian critique of ideology.” Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 52, 87. For more on Žižek’s reading of Hegelian “negation of negation” as the link between theology and ideology critique, see Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 199.; Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), 185-187, 266.; Žižek *The Ticklish Subject*, 72-77.; Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 86-88, 100.; Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 70-73, 101.; Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 292-305, 787-804.; Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 9-12, 27-30, 346-354, 397n30.; Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 330-349.

¹¹⁰ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 83-84.; Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 69-70.; Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 33ff.

¹¹¹ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 27-29.

the negation’) is indeed still entangled in the master-signifier, the ‘big Other’, and so it calls for a secondary move (‘the negation ...’) that acts upon the first one. The effect of this procedure is the realization that nothing is beyond or outside the big Other and that as the master-signifier, the ideology of the big Other only serves to fill in the space of the ‘non-All’ of social reality, so as to make the scripted life in social reality bearable. This “negation of negation”, while being purely negative (in the sense that it shows the Void to be void without replacing it), nevertheless becomes the basis of all authentic political acts insofar as it is the “loss of loss”: it is a “negation without a filling.”¹¹² This negativity opens up the act itself so that it does not obey or submit itself to any pre-existing coordinates of social consensus or political options, but rather actively mocks the symbolic order by its self-enunciation as the “exception” to the big Other.

Žižek does not turn to Christian theology because of its present fashionable status in (some corners of) philosophy, but because he thinks it *does* something, namely that it represents a critical and dialectical ‘thought-form’ of negativity that clears the way for “authentic political acts.” For Žižek, Christianity is the properly materialist vector for any authentically political Act. Critical materialist thinking is as theological as theology is *critically* materialist. He affirms the “direct lineage from Christianity to Marxism” in order to marshal its resources to combat “the onslaught of new spiritualisms”: “the authentic Christian legacy is much too precious to be left to the fundamentalist freaks.”¹¹³ While

¹¹² Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 312-325.

¹¹³ Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, xxiv.

he finds the “return of religion” to be “deplorable”, (he is as critical of Derrida’s “religion without religion” as he is of New Age spiritualisms)¹¹⁴, Žižek nevertheless finds in Christianity a unique kernel of truth, a ‘perverse core’ that incubates a political legacy and emancipatory logic that betrays its creedal repression.¹¹⁵ This, he is convinced, is essential for revitalizing truly dialectical critique in the Hegelian vein, so much so that “this kernel is accessible only to a materialist approach – vice versa: to become a dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience.”¹¹⁶ This plays itself out in a number of ways in Žižek’s theological interpretation of Christianity, most distinctly in his elaboration of the death of God theology, of God’s response to Job’s suffering, the passage from Judaism to Christianity, and finally, the Spirit as a theology of the collective.

Žižek interprets Christian theology as ideology critique through the prism of a “death of God” theology. He does not claim to draw on the actual tradition of the death of God in Christianity, whether its instantiation in the 1960’s “radical theology” or its more classical, patristic, or biblical roots. Žižek casts his theology as a part of the “new” reading of Hegel¹¹⁷ as well as role that Hegel is playing in the reconsideration of Radical

¹¹⁴ Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, xxix.; Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 139.

¹¹⁵ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 53, 169-170.

¹¹⁶ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 6.

¹¹⁷ While it has been called the “new” reading of Hegel, it is important to point out that it aims to correct what Žižek, Catherine Malabou, and others consider to be a distorted caricature of Hegel that was popularized by anti-modern and postmodern readers of Hegel, many of whom are eager to lay the blame of the “totalizing” gesture of modernity on Hegel’s philosophy of history and ontology. For more on this, see Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett, and Creston Davis. ed. *Hegel and the Infinite Religion, Politics, and Dialectic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Andrew Hass, *Hegel and the Art of Negation: Negativity, Creativity and Contemporary Thought* (London : I.B. Tauris, 2013).

and Secular currents in theology.¹¹⁸ These theologies, which originated in Paul Tillich's theology of culture, gained some currency first in the 1960s 'death of god' theology and then reemerged in the 1980s 'postmodern' theology, but eventually faded in large part due to the success of the narrative and post-liberal trends in the 1990s and 2000s. The sobering geo-political events of the early 2000s and 2010s, as well as the return of religion in academic discourse more broadly, has caused many to question the localist, ecclesio-centric, and sectarian aspects of those theologies, however. Radical theologies are well-suited as alternative candidates because they are post-metaphysical and rely on social vocabularies and cultural categories. Žižek's atheistic theology perhaps best fits as a continuation and elaboration of this tradition, something that he himself has readily admitted, even though Žižek has only minimally engaged this work.¹¹⁹

Instead, Žižek turns to the kenotic elements of Protestant *theologia crucis*, where God empties Itself into the divine Son through a traumatic death that, in Žižek's reconstruction, represents the death of the Big Other, performed expertly by Christianity. This

¹¹⁸ Clayton Crockett, ed. *Secular Theology: American Radical Theological Thought*. London: Routledge, 2001.; Noëlle Vahanian, *The Rebellious No: Variations on a Secular Theology of Language* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); F. LeRon Shults, *Theology After the Birth of God: Atheist Conceptions in Cognition and Culture* (New York, NY : Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Clayton Crockett, and Jeffrey W. Robbins. *Religion, Politics, and the Earth: The New Materialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹¹⁹ Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, 152. In Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 97, Žižek's affirms the "death of God" theology because it "marks the moment when the only way to keep [Christianity's] truth alive was through a materialist heresy split from its main corpse." Žižek and the leading "death of God" theologian Thomas J.J. Altizer spoke together at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting in Montreal on 8 November 2009. Altizer's paper was later published as Thomas J.J. Altizer, "The Self Annihilation of God," *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, Vol 4, No 4 (2010), and Žižek's rejoinder, "'Whither the 'Death of God': A Continuing Currency?'" can be found here: <http://vimeo.com/12744096>. For contrastive readings of the link, see Cyril O' Regan, "Žižek and Milbank and the Hegelian Death of God," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 2 (2010): 278-286.; and Katherine Sarah Moody, "Between Deconstruction and Speculation," in *The Future of the Continental Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Clayton Crockett, et. al. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2104), 108-126.

establishes a homological relationship between theology and ideology critique, between the Christian death of God and what Žižek stylizes as a Hegelian “negation of negation.”¹²⁰ The death of God displays “the epochal political achievement” of Christianity itself, wherein the dialectics of the Incarnation, we discover the materialist immanence of theology ‘In itself’: “God Himself is Man, ‘one of us’”, meaning that “there is no mystery, no hidden true content behind the mask (deceptive surface) of the other.”¹²¹ Žižek argues that “if, as Hegel emphasizes, what dies on the Christ is the God of beyond itself, the radical Other, then the identification with Christ (“life in Christ”) means precisely the suspension of Otherness.”¹²²

Christianity testifies to the content of this experience in the crucified Christ’s “cry of dereliction”: ‘My god, my god, why have you forsaken me?’ Here we find God admitting that God has abandoned God’s self and as such, left humanity to itself – incapable of serving as its ontological guarantee, the ground of its acts.¹²³ By admitting to God’s self-abandonment, and by virtue of the logic of the incarnation, the abandonment of humanity, Christianity “traverses the fantasy” and divulges itself *as* ideology critique by denouncing the big Other. This makes Christianity, says Žižek, the “first religion without the sacred”;

¹²⁰ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 101: “The death of Christ is also the death/end of human mortality, the “death of death”, the negation of negation, the death of God is the rise of the undead drive.”

¹²¹ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 138.

¹²² Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 138.

¹²³ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 13-15.

it does not long for an external or transcendental limit and instigates the ruptural, practical stance that follows.¹²⁴ This is why Žižek insists that “the longing for a new external/transcendent limit, for a divine agent who imposes such a limit, is profoundly non-Christian.”¹²⁵ Christianity, rather, possesses a kind of revolutionary courage, the courage of Christ’s ‘empty sacrifice’¹²⁶, wherein “it was God Himself who made a Pascalian wager: by dying on the Cross, He made a risky gesture with no guaranteed final outcome, that is, He provided us—humanity—with the empty S₁, Master-Signifier.”¹²⁷ The incarnation is revelatory, but not in the sense that God shows himself to humanity as what God is to Godself, but that God shows Godself to God as what God is to humanity.¹²⁸

And so, when Žižek says that “what dies on the Cross is not God’s earthly representative-incarnation, but God of beyond itself”¹²⁹, it is clear that the incarnation is cannot be unambiguously good news for humanity, especially since it ends with God’s death.¹³⁰ Christ’s death reveals God to Godself, and that revelation is traumatic for God as God finds Godself utterly abandoned, alienated from itself, which mirrors the human experience of the same. To take the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ seriously is to

¹²⁴ Žižek, *God in Pain*, 68-69 and 47, respectively.

¹²⁵ Žižek, *God In Pain*, 47.

¹²⁶ Žižek, *On Belief*, 68-89; Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 79-80; Žižek, *God In Pain*, 55-63.

¹²⁷ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 136.

¹²⁸ Žižek, *God in Pain*, 164-165.

¹²⁹ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 29, 60.

¹³⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (London: Verso, 2001), 56-57.

know “Christ as the God who, in His act of Incarnation, freely identified Himself with His own shit.”¹³¹ And so, it is in the death of God that Christ is shown to be most human and where God is shown to be most divine, whereby “the radical gap that separates God from man is transposed into God himself.”¹³² It is here that shows us that “we are one with God only when God is no longer one with himself, but abandons Himself, ‘internalizes’ the radical distance which separates us from Him. Our radical experience of separation from God is the very feature which unites us with Him.”¹³³

Recalling the earlier discussion on belief as critique, this confession by God is God’s own ‘fetishistic disavowal’ of belief¹³⁴; The critical structure of belief is tied directly to the ‘negation of negation’, whereby we see that

the properly Hegelian negation of negation is not the return to direct belief, but the self-relating fake: ‘I fake to fake to believe,’ which means: ‘I really believe without being aware of it.’ Is, then, irony not the ultimate form of the critique of ideology today - [the] irony of taking the statements more seriously than the subjects who utter them themselves?¹³⁵

In short, this illustrates how and why Christian theology of God (namely, of God’s death) is indeed a critique of ideology. Christianity is at its critical best when it confesses, while talking about God, that ‘I pretend to pretend to believe’ (rather than ‘I do not believe’). Žižek explains theological structure of this ironic unbelief this way:

¹³¹ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 23.

¹³² Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 106. See Depoortere, *Christ In Postmodern Philosophy*, 115.

¹³³ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 91.

¹³⁴ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 352-353.

¹³⁵ Žižek, “With or Without Passion” What’s Wrong with Fundamentalism: Part 1.”, <http://www.lacan.com/zizpassion.htm>

“When Christ dies, what dies with him is the secret hope discernible in ‘Father, why hast thou forsaken me?’, the hope that there is a Father who abandoned me.”¹³⁶ This is the moment of ultimate irony where God attests to God’s own atheism, not by denying or negating claims to God’s existence, but by calling out to Godself in the moment of God’s non-identity.¹³⁷ This stunning admission is the political ‘calling card’ of Christianity, and so becomes the key to thinking through the triangulation of theology, materialism, and ideology critique.¹³⁸

The political meaning of Christianity is not Jesus’ benevolent ministry, social vision in the synoptic gospels, solidarity with human suffering in death, or purported victory over death in resurrection, but rather is found in how Christian theology admits to the “negation of negation” that most clearly visible in the death of God in the crucified body of Jesus Christ. The theologic of the incarnation, which is then reinterpreted in the Event of divine death, shifts the perspective on the divine-human relationship. As such, Žižek’s thesis is that Christian materialism betrays its ‘orthodoxy’ by performing this negation as negation as ideology critique: namely, a critique of the ideology of big Other as the divine guarantee, the transcendental signifier that affords meaning, coherence, and sense to the world and human experience. Theology participates in “the same matrix of Hegelian paradoxical self-negating reversal” that is “also the fundamental procedure of

¹³⁶ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 171.

¹³⁷ Slavoj Žižek, “The Atheist Wager,” *Political Theology* 11, no. 1 (2010): 136-140.; Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 48-50.; Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 14-15, 171.

¹³⁸ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 354.

Marxian critique of ideology”¹³⁹ that enacts “the radically negative break, rupture, with the old substantive order as the condition of a new universality.”¹⁴⁰

And so, for Žižek, Christianity is ideologico-critical because it is “far from boring, humdrum, or safe”; it is indeed, “perilous”, “daring”, “subversive, even revolutionary”¹⁴¹, characteristics given to it by its most orthodox, but also ‘heretical’ aspects, most notably the doctrine of the Incarnation.¹⁴² For Žižek, “religion has two possible roles: *therapeutic* or *critical*. It either helps individuals to function better in the existing order, or it tries to assert itself as a critical agency articulating what is wrong with this order as such, a space for the voices of discontent—in this second case, religion *as such* tends toward assuming the role of a heresy.”¹⁴³

Considering the ‘classic’ Marxist position on ideology, this appears as a startling reversal. For Žižek, “the point of Christianity as the religion of atheism is not the vulgar humanist one that the becoming man of God reveals that man is the secret of God (Feuerbach), rather it attacks the religious hard core that surfaces even in humanism, even up to Stalinism, with its believe in history as the “big Other” that decides on the objective

¹³⁹ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 53.

¹⁴⁰ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 109.

¹⁴¹ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 35.; Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 12-14.

¹⁴² Heresy, for Žižek, is an internal transgression to ‘orthodoxy’, inherent to its own failure to identify with itself; it is the parallax gap, the Void that resides within the symbolic order of “right belief”, that show itself to be the same with itself, only upon view of the ‘minimal difference’, the shift in perspective that shows ‘Good and Evil’ to be not, obverse, but symmetrical. There is nothing more heretical (and so, traditional) than the Christian declaration that, as Jesus Christ, God became human, and in so doing, displayed the human being as divine. See Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 96-98.; Žižek, *On Belief*, 7-8.

¹⁴³ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 3.

meaning of our deeds.”¹⁴⁴ Žižek finds the theological structure of ideology critique to be politically important because it is negatively critical, not because the content of Christian theology is any way true. He does not think that even *Christianity* believes its declarations about God to be true! Its own teachings are ironic disavowal, not by abandoning itself, but in clinging to itself evermore. That is to say, “what if one kneels down and prays not so much to regain one's own belief but, on the opposite, to GET RID of one's belief, of its over-proximity, to acquire a breathing space of a minimal distance towards it?”¹⁴⁵

And so, here we can see more clearly than before that the political thesis of Žižek's ideology critique is that the lesson of Christian theology and Lacanian psychoanalysis turns out to be the same: “the big Other does not exist.”¹⁴⁶ Through this, the analysand (as the subject) accepts the absence of a guarantee and as such is able to access the obscenity of its core in the traumatic Void. The point is not to say how “truth” is defined as knowledge of the real state of things, but rather that it is the Real of the antagonism itself: “the fundamental feature of today's society is the irreconcilable antagonism...it is that which prevents us from accessing the Thing directly is the Thing itself.”¹⁴⁷ Put differently, “If we can think our knowledge of reality (the way reality appears to us) as having radically failed, as radically different from the Absolute, then this gap (between For-us and In-itself) must be part of the Absolute itself, so that the very feature that seemed

¹⁴⁴ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 171.

¹⁴⁵ Žižek, *On Belief*, 101.

¹⁴⁶ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 169.

¹⁴⁷ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 633.

forever to keep us away from the Absolute is the *only* feature which directly unites us with the absolute.”¹⁴⁸

The practice of ideology critique teaches the political subject, not only about the failure that conditions our knowledge, but also about the Absolute freedom that comes from recognizing that the traumatic Gap gives rise to political subjectivity in the first place. If, as Žižek claims, this is the lesson of ideology critique, “does not exactly the same shift happen at the very core of the Christian experience?”¹⁴⁹ For Christianity, “it is the radical separation of man from God which unites us with God, since, in the figure of Christ, God is thoroughly separated from itself - the point is not to ‘overcome’ the gap that separates us from God, but to take note of how this gap is internal to God Himself.”¹⁵⁰ This is accomplished in the person of Jesus Christ, in which the original negation (‘the Fall’) is shown via a subsequent negation (‘the death of Christ’) to be, in a startling reversal, “the emergence of freedom.”¹⁵¹ Žižek describes the fall as ‘redemption’ and ‘freedom’ this way: “The explosion of freedom, the breaking out from which we fall, that is, it is in the very movement of the Fall that creates, opens up, what is lost in it.”¹⁵² Ideology critique then is the “breaking out” whereby the shift in perspective activates the subject from the position of ultimate failure. Žižek puts it theologically this way: “this is

¹⁴⁸ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 635-636.

¹⁴⁹ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 91.

¹⁵⁰ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 78.

¹⁵¹ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 86.

¹⁵² Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 118.

the key ‘Hegelian’ point of Christianity: the resurrection of the dead is not the ‘real event’ which will take place sometime in the future, but *something that is already here*.¹⁵³ That ‘something’ is God’s own fall from grace, God’s kenotic admission to impotence, illustrated in the book of Job and performed by the crucified Christ, and it is this divine Fall is at the very same time, our human redemption.

Job, Jesus, and Divine Weakness

Job is the central theological figure that guides Žižek’s reading of Christianity through the death of God.¹⁵⁴ Not coincidentally in my opinion, the book of Job is also an extraordinary and exemplary case of ideology critique for Žižek.¹⁵⁵ In Žižek’s telling of the biblical narrative, Job experiences immense suffering, and as the story plays out, struggles to understand and explain this suffering in various ways.¹⁵⁶ Job’s three friends – the theologians! – eventually show up and spew “standard ideological sophistry” about divine justice and the harmony of history.¹⁵⁷ Against them, Job asserts strongly “the apparent meaninglessness” of this suffering¹⁵⁸, and in a radical reversal of what one might expect to hear from God on the matter, Žižek argues, “God takes his side at the end,

¹⁵³ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 89.

¹⁵⁴ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 124.

¹⁵⁵ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 21.; Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 125.

¹⁵⁶ Whether Žižek is faithful to the biblical narrative of Job is another question altogether. Here, I strictly follow Žižek’s telling of the story and his theological analysis, leaving aside the question of whether it adheres to the biblical framing of the story and its theological meaning.

¹⁵⁷ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 125.

¹⁵⁸ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 53.

claiming that every word Job spoke was true.”¹⁵⁹ God shows God’s true self to Job, contrary to the witness of his theological friends, as “a God who acts like someone caught in a moment of impotence.”¹⁶⁰ It is through the narrative of Job that we can properly interpret the Crucifixion as a instance of ideology critique. Like Christ, Job instigates the death of the Big Other by calling attention to the facticity of divine impotence and abandonment. Job interrogates God and finds God to be powerless, unable to do much of anything in the face of Job’s struggles - and God agrees. God is impotent, subject to the same radical contingency and openness that conditions human thought and action. God’s highly defensive and overcompensating reaction is shameful, as it only underscores the scandalous truth embedded (not so subtly) within the Hebrew narrative.¹⁶¹ Job's silent response to God is one of embarrassment and solidarity: Job realizes that God stands in the same relation to the world as Job does, and when faced with divine flaccidity, Job rests his case against divine injustice.¹⁶²

By Žižek’s reading, the book of Job displays the approach of the Jewish law’s “stubborn attachments” to the traumatic truth of divine impotence.¹⁶³ Whereas Judaism repressed this truth and “refused to give up their ghost, to cut off the link to their secret, disavowed tradition,” says Žižek, seen most directly in the prohibition of graven images,

¹⁵⁹ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 125.

¹⁶⁰ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 14-15.

¹⁶¹ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 124-125.

¹⁶² Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 126-127.

¹⁶³ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 129-131.

Christianity is the radical religion of revelation, in that it brings it all out in the open - it admits to its most guarded secret, or, what Žižek is fond of calling, “the matter most dark and awful.” In Christ’s crucifixion, God takes Job’s place in the narrative of revelation.¹⁶⁴ As the crucified Jesus, God has Job’s experience and encounters his own impotence, and confesses to it in the divine cry of dereliction: “My God, why have you forsaken me?” Žižek writes: “since we are dealing here not with the gap between man and God, but the split between God Himself, the solution cannot be for God to appear in all His majesty...it is rather like a child who, having believed in his father’s powerfulness, discovers with horror that his father cannot help him.”¹⁶⁵

It is here that Christianity divulges its own heretical core as ‘the religion of atheism’¹⁶⁶ wherein the disclosure of divine powerlessness amounts to the death of God, the admission that ‘the Big Other does not exist.’¹⁶⁷ Žižek elaborates on this, saying

The point of Christianity as the religion of atheism is not the vulgar humanist one that the becoming-man-of-God reveals that man is the secret of God (Feuerbach et al.); rather, it attacks the religious hard core that survives even in humanism, even up to Stalinism, with its belief in History as the “big Other” that decides on the “objective meaning” of our deeds.¹⁶⁸

What happens to God in Christ’s death is that God is finally shown to be ‘just one of us’, is included in “the series of ordinary creatures”¹⁶⁹, and so ‘traverses the fantasy’,

¹⁶⁴ Žižek, *On Belief*, 146.

¹⁶⁵ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 126.

¹⁶⁶ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 352.; Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 14.

¹⁶⁷ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 126.

¹⁶⁸ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 171.

¹⁶⁹ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 136ff.

thereby linking the theological gesture of divine death to the political procedure of ideology critique. This incarnational logic disavows the ideological fantasy of the big Other through the Event of the cross, thereby opening up new space, not to be filled up again by some substitute, but with excessive negativity that refuses suturing up the central void of our desire. God admits to being human in Christ, to being impotent in the face of suffering: how do you come back from that?

This is how ‘the Christian breakthrough’ is, after all, ideology critique. The principal theological lesson that Žižek learns from Christ's death is the fact that “the function of the obscene superego supplement of the (divine) Law is to mask this impotence of the Big Other.” In the crucified Christ, Christianity reveals this impotence and so “it is quite logically the first and only religion radically to leave behind the split between the official and public text and its obscene initiatory supplement; *there is no hidden, untold story in it*. In this precise sense, Christianity is the religion of Revelation: everything is revealed in it, no obscene superego supplement accompanies its public message...what is revealed in Christianity is not just the entire content, but, more specifically, that *there is nothing - no secret - behind it to be revealed*.”¹⁷⁰

In their attestation to divine impotence, Job and Christ teach us how to ask “do we need God?” in new political ways. Put differently, it interjects into the political situation the properly Christian declaration that ‘the big Other does not exist.’ This means that

¹⁷⁰ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 127.

“there is no one to turn to, to address, to bear witness to, no one to receive our plea, or lament.”¹⁷¹ This is Christianity’s gospel, its ‘good news’: “the miracle of faith is that it IS possible to traverse the fantasy, to undo the founding decision, to start one’s life over again, from the zero-point...”¹⁷² This is what Job’s narrative teaches us, by telling us that God in God’s self admits that Job is right, that there is no meaning to suffering, that there is no transcendent God pulling the strings, no big Other guaranteeing the coherence of the socio-symbolic order, and as such, “we, humans, are left with no higher Power watching over us, just with with the terrible burden of freedom and responsibility for the face of divine creation, and thus of God himself.”¹⁷³ It is through Job that we understand Christ’s suffering as equally meaningless, if “meaning” is that coded language for something that lies beyond or outside us that promises some stability and harmony as a part of the Whole. It is through Christ’s death that God “falls into” materiality, subjects Itself to the incompleteness, the Truly Open character of the Real, and shows itself to be “one of us”, rather the grand Master-Signifier: the big Other.¹⁷⁴ And, while this is certainly a kind of atheism, Žižek maintains it is a distinctively *Christian* atheism, which is better named a ‘materialist theology.’¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 168.

¹⁷² Žižek, *On Belief*, 148.

¹⁷³ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 26.

¹⁷⁴ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 50.

¹⁷⁵ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 101.

This unlocks Christianity's essential political truth: the perversality of Christ's death. A 'materialist theology', says Žižek "is a position that accepts the ultimate void of reality – the consequence of its central thesis on the primordial multiplicity is that there is no 'substantial reality', that the only 'substance' of the multiplicity is void."¹⁷⁶ But for Christianity to realize this materialist core, "it has to sacrifice itself – like Christ who had to die so that Christianity could emerge."¹⁷⁷ For Žižek, "the 'death of God theology' marks the moment when the only way to keep its truth alive was through a materialist heresy split from its main corpse."¹⁷⁸ This Christian materialism is the dialectical successor to Christianity insofar as it owned up to what the immanence of God as humanity, the transubstantiation of the divine as the human, tells us that, when it comes to reality, all we can say is that there IS only Nothing: that reality is in itself, non-All."¹⁷⁹ As a theological position, it is ideology critique in that it teaches us that "the only true belief is belief without any support in the authority of some presupposed figure of the Big Other."¹⁸⁰ Theology as critique of ideology, then, is shown to be "a kind of infinite negation, not so much "I believe in un-God" but rather something "unbelief", the pure form of belief deprived of its substantialization – "unbelief" is still the form of belief, like the undead who, as the living dead, remain dead."¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 97.; Žižek, "Paul and the Truth Event," 89f.

¹⁷⁷ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 171.

¹⁷⁸ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 97.

¹⁷⁹ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 100.

¹⁸⁰ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 101.

¹⁸¹ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 101.

What makes Christianity politically instructive is the way it inaugurates the apocalyptic explosiveness of the Event; it makes no claims to the big Other, but quite the opposite. It puts it to rest, quite literally, in the Christ-Event whereby God dies as a purely negative matter of immanent critique. As such, “the ultimate horizon of Christianity” is that “there is no mystery, no hidden true content, behind the mask (deceptive surface) of the Other. The ultimate idolatry is not the idolizing of the mask, of the image, itself, but the belief that there is some hidden positive context beyond the mask.”¹⁸² Indeed, as Žižek continues elsewhere, “Christ’s death on the cross is the death of this God, it repeats Job’s stance, it refuses any “deeper meaning” that obfuscates the brutal reality of historical catastrophe.”¹⁸³ This homology between Job and Christ is expressed in a “double kenosis”: God’s self-alienation and the alienation of God from human persons overlaps at God’s death, where “the distance of man from God is thus the distance of God from himself.”¹⁸⁴ But what makes this kenotic self-emptying of God so politically important is that it allows political subjectivity to emerge:

In order for (human) subjectivity to emerge out of the substantial personality of the human animal, . . . as *the self-relating negativity of an empty singularity*, God himself, the universal Substance, has to “humiliate” himself, to fall into his own creation, “objectivize” himself, to appear as the singular miserable human individual, in all its abjection, i.e., abandoned by God.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 138.

¹⁸³ See Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 55 for why he disagrees with Caputo’s theology of the “weak God.”

¹⁸⁴ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 59.

¹⁸⁵ Žižek, *God in Pain*, 169. Emphasis mine.

The alienation of God from Godself, evinced in both the death of Christ and the divine cry of dereliction, produces “the split, negativity, particularization, self-alienation” between God and humanity “must be posited as something that takes place in the very heart of the divine Substance, i.e., the move from Substance to Subject must occur within God himself.”¹⁸⁶ This effects the situation of absolute freedom deemed necessary for the political subject to take form in a political world, emptied of ‘the big Other.’¹⁸⁷ This ideologico-critical clearing leaves room for the subject to act authentically, unconstrained by the ‘forced choices’ inherent to the dictates of ‘formal’ freedom.¹⁸⁸

The ‘Passage’ from Judaism to Christianity

Another theological area of interest to Žižek’s ideology critique is what he perceives as Christianity’s radical “break” from Judaism.¹⁸⁹ The origin-point of Christianity is in its dialectical sublation of law and its self-grounding in the democratization of political love, which it cannot do without reference to Jewish law. Again, with law as with fantasy, belief, trauma, and (as we are seeing) ideology, the proper stance is not to resist or supplement, nor to abolish or strike against it, but rather to accomplish, actualize, and re-

¹⁸⁶ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 59.

¹⁸⁷ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 59.

¹⁸⁸ Žižek *On Belief*, 112-127.

¹⁸⁹ Unsurprisingly, Žižek’s troublesome account of Judaism’s relation to Christianity is controversial, and although not essential for his use of theology as ideology critique, the role it plays in his lauding of the ‘death of God’ and his “Paulinist” defense of Christian love as violently ‘universalist’ makes it a consequent matter here.

alize it in full, even to excess, for the ‘Fall into law is precisely that which brings freedom.’¹⁹⁰ As Lacan points out in reference to the big Other, “one can get rid of it (ignore it: *sen passer*) on condition that one makes use of it.”¹⁹¹

Whereas pagan religion posits divinity as the “given spiritual essence”¹⁹², Jewish theology effectively “abolished any reference to the unapproachable, transcendent God, the absolute Master”¹⁹³ through its iconoclastic prohibition.¹⁹⁴ There is within Judaism, Žižek argues, a founding traumatic experience expressed in the “excessive violent nature of the very gesture of repressing the pagan universe and imposing the universal rule of the One of Law.”¹⁹⁵ Judaism externalizes this haunting truth through the Law as a way of repressing this core, but even “as nonexistent, it continues to persist, that is, its spectral presence continues to haunt the living.”¹⁹⁶ This gnaws at Judaism, and at times it threatens to break out and to pierce the surface. Judaism is founded by its “stubborn attachments to the unacknowledged violent founding gesture that haunts the public legal order as its spectral supplement.”¹⁹⁷ Far from being anemic and banal, the power of Judaism stems from its disciplined response to this trauma: “this ‘repressed’ status of the Event is

¹⁹⁰ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 117-121.

¹⁹¹ Jacques Lacan, “Seminar XXIII”, as quoted by Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 102.

¹⁹² Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 201.

¹⁹³ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 201.

¹⁹⁴ Žižek, *On Belief*, 127-134.

¹⁹⁵ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 63.

¹⁹⁶ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 59.

¹⁹⁷ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 97.

what gives Judaism its unprecedented vitality.... They refused to give up the ghost, to cut off the link to their secret disavowed tradition.”¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, the pressure of maintaining the appearance of the radical *nómos* is unbearable, not because of its transgressive presence, but because of its excessive absence: it cannot be accounted for. Its truth, its identification with itself, is unattainable since its own transgression, ‘the crime’, is written into the ethico-legal aspect of law.

The political problem is in how the trauma of this theological truth acts upon the subject as “the indivisible remainder, the spectral ‘rest’ that resists ‘confession’, that can never be redeemed-delivered, laid to rest, pacified/gentrified.”¹⁹⁹ Christianity enters the scene as the Event that finally accounts for this Lack (which is actively repressed by the very Law it transgresses) and so makes its enunciation finally possible. This frees the subject to finally come to grips with the horrifying secret; it follows Judaism’s example, in its ideologico-critical gesture of ‘unplugging’, by articulating the baselessness of Christianity: it lacks roots, is beholden to the dictates of the social order, and is able to be itself in an unmediated and universal way.²⁰⁰ This is the *apocalyptic* character of Christianity, not the sense that it brings out the “end of days”, but instead, through its violent revelation of what was previously spectral and absent within the Jewish penchant for Law. Žižek is fond of saying that “the secret to which the Jews remain faithful is the horror of the divine impotence – and it is this secret that is ‘revealed’ in Christianity. This is

¹⁹⁸ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 89.

¹⁹⁹ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 90.

²⁰⁰ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 118-121.

why Christianity could occur only after Judaism: it reveals the horror first confronted by the Jews.”²⁰¹ Christianity becomes ideology critique insofar as “[it] is the religion of confession... they are ready to confess the primordial crime (in the displaced form of murdering not the Father but the Christ, the son of God) and thereby betray its traumatic impact/weight.”²⁰² Furthermore, “it is the Jewish religion which remains an ‘abstract/immediate’ negation of anthropomorphism, and as such, attached to it, determined by it in its very direct negation, whereas it is only Christianity that actually sublates paganism.”²⁰³

It is in the way that the political love in “Christianity” unplugs the political subject from the vicious cycle of Law and transgression in “Judaism” that Žižek finds the materialist principle guiding his political theology: “Christianity then goes a step further by asserting not only the likeness of God and man, but their direct identity in the figure of Christ: ‘no matter man looks like God, since the man (Christ) *is* God.’”²⁰⁴ The Incarnation acts upon theology so as to show that “man directly is part of the Divine life, that is, because it is only man, in human history, that God fully realizes Himself, that He becomes an actual living God.”²⁰⁵ The materialist kernel that is so *critically* productive is the “direct identity of God and man” in the doctrine of the incarnation, which is precisely that repressed core that Judaism sought to repress, but Christianity - in the death of God -

²⁰¹ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 129.

²⁰² Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 90.

²⁰³ Žižek, *On Belief*, 131.

²⁰⁴ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 95.

²⁰⁵ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 96.

admits to. Christianity brings divinity and humanity together through the doctrine of divine Incarnation which teaches that “in the figure of Christ, God himself becomes man.”²⁰⁶ For Žižek, the distinctiveness of Christian theology lies in how it freely admits to “the very same perverse core”, that “spectral history” that Judaism is consistently working to anxiously repress and suture.

The point here is not that Christianity tells Judaism’s repressed truth for it, but that “in contrast to the Jewish religion of anxiety, Christianity is a religion of love.”²⁰⁷ Lest we think Žižek to be turning sentimental on us, love is understood “in its dimension of fundamental deception: we try to fill out the unbearable gap of ‘che vuoi’, the opening of the Other’s desire, by offering ourselves to the Other as the object of its desire.”²⁰⁸ In this way, “Christianity is therefore to be conceived as an attempt to gentrify the Jewish ‘che vuoi’ through the act of love and sacrifice.”²⁰⁹ The most notable example of this is how Christ sublates himself into love through his death, serving as the ‘vanishing mediator’ between the Law of the divine-Father and the Holy Spirit, interpreted politically by Žižek as the social bond of love that holds the revolutionary collective together, so that they are able to live and work after the death of the big Other is exposed. The real ideologico-critical move made by Christianity in its passage from Judaism lies in how it faces up to its traumatic Origins through the intervention of *agape*, which, as it turns out, is

²⁰⁶ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 202.

²⁰⁷ Žižek, *On Belief*, 132.

²⁰⁸ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 116.

²⁰⁹ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 116.

“the unheard of gesture of leaving behind the domain of the law itself, of ‘dying to the law.’ Christian redemption is not the rectification of its traumatic origins. It is in the anti-nomian refusal to support the spectral power of the “vicious cycle of the Law and its founding Transgression.”²¹⁰ Christianity is “a religion of Love”, because in love, one singles out and focuses on a finite temporal object, which means more than anything else, and chooses it as the universal, yet singular. For Žižek, this “universal singularity” marks the political space made possible through Christian theology’s unique willingness to confess that which other religions ideologically suppress: “Christianity, far from claiming fully realization of the promise, accomplishes something far more uncanny; the Messiah is here, he has arrived, the final Event has already taken place, yet the gap (the gap which sustained the messianic promise) remains ...”²¹¹

It remains highly questionable whether Žižek is as theologically supported in this argument by the dark trajectory of Christianity as he seems to think, especially since Christianity is stubborn in its commitment to the idea that redemption comes through pattern of both life and death, that death only makes sense in life, and that death itself cannot be redemptive, for God, for humanity, or for the social world. Žižek argues that the death of God is a prime theological example of the ‘negation of negation’ central to any ideology critique, and that it models the kind of thinking necessary for ideology critique to be effective in confronting the predominant ideologies of our time. In this way, the death of God is a “theologico-political suspension of the ethical”; that is, that it suspends actions

²¹⁰ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 92.

²¹¹ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 141.

that are undertaken with the assumption of any ontological coherence, guarantee, or order, and instead takes up critique as the effort to undercover the antagonisms, the contradictions, the empty places between critique, action, and political change.

How, then, is this “death of God” theology operationalized as a critique of ideology? Christianity’s supposed renunciation of the big Other in the theological form of the death of God generates what Žižek has termed (idiosyncratically borrowing from Kierkegaard) “the theologico-political suspension of the ethical”²¹² or, as Žižek is fond of saying, “if God does not exist, than everything is prohibited.”²¹³ This opens up the political space for a new kind of collective, a new social bond, that relies not on some final guarantee, but is capable of matching the cruel world with an equally brutal realism, what he describes as “an ethics without morality”, but what might better be called, “a politics without ethics”, made possible in the negation of negation of ‘transcendence’ (which Žižek interprets as the ‘big Other’) by the double kenosis of incarnation and crucifixion. Žižek describes the interplay between ideology critique and the sublating ‘negation of negation’ as that which gives way to the revolutionary community of believers, whose kenotic acts of love, sacrifice, conversion, and yes, even death, give rise to a new kind of subject, a new political community whose unique founding moment promises to bring something altogether different to the political landscape: “what is sublated in the move

²¹² Žižek, *God in Pain*, 36, 47ff; Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 116-118.

²¹³ Žižek, *God in Pain*, 27-34.

from the Son to the Holy Spirit is thus God Himself; after the Crucifixion, the death of God incarnate, the universal God returns as a Spirit of the community of believers.”²¹⁴

“The Spirit”: A Theology of the Collective

So far, I have argued that, for Žižek, ideology critique accomplishes politically what psychoanalysis works to bring to the forefront for the subject: to disrupt the fantasy of the big Other. In this way, the power of Christianity lies in its Event-structure, its apocalyptic ‘revealing.’ But this is anything but good news systems and institutions, for “Christianity is the miraculous Event that disturbs the balance of the One-All; it is the violent intrusion of Difference that precisely throws the balanced circuit of the universe off the rails.”²¹⁵ The death of God does not inaugurate a political nihilism or a celebration of the Nothing of the Void left after the death of God, but it is Christ’s death, says Žižek, that “designates a rupture with the circular movement of death and rebirth, the passage to a wholly different dimension of the Holy Spirit.”²¹⁶ In so doing, Christian theology clears the way for a revolutionary kind of community that gains its revolutionary political character as “the community deprived of its support in the Big Other.”²¹⁷

The ‘negation of negation’ of Christ’s death that clears the way for this collective subjectivity is internal to the very kenotic act of God in the Incarnation. God dies as the crucified Christ and “what emerges in its place is the Holy Spirit, which is not Other, but

²¹⁴ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 61.

²¹⁵ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 121.

²¹⁶ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 110.

²¹⁷ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 171.

the community (or, rather, collective) of believers”²¹⁸, all of whom are “persisting only in and through their activity.”²¹⁹ They are organized around the unconditional and brutal dictates of political agape.²²⁰ The political act of ‘God-becoming-human’ brings forth a new kind of subject, a new political community whose unique founding moment promises to bring something altogether different to the political landscape. The political payoff of Žižek’s use of Hegelian death of God theology is found in this collective social body: “with Christ’s incarnation, the externalization/self-alienation of divinity, the passage from the transcendent God to finite/mortal individuals is *a fait accompli*, there is no way back, all there is, all that “really exists”, from now on are individuals.”²²¹ That “the finite existence of moral humans is the only site of the Spirit, the site where the Spirit achieves its actuality”²²² is certified in Christ’s own manifestation of itself as love “In-itself”, the social bond present when “two or three are gathered in my name.”²²³

Made possible by theology's ideology critique, the subjectivity of the Spirit thrives in ‘the empty space’ of the Real, the leftover after Christ’s death, for “the Incarnation is the birth of Christ, and after his death, there is neither Father nor Son, but ‘only’

²¹⁸ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 147.

²¹⁹ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 33.

²²⁰ Žižek, *God in Pain*, 55.

²²¹ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 61.

²²² Žižek, *God in Pain*, 171.

²²³ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 101.

the Holy Spirit, the spiritual substance of the religious community.”²²⁴ The death of God is negative, indeed, but as, Žižek insists, “the divine Substance itself (God as a Thing-in-Itself) which is sublated, negated (what dies on the Cross is the substantial figure of the transcendent God), is simultaneously maintained in the transubstantiated form of the Holy Spirit, the community of believers which exists only as the virtual presupposition of the activity of finite individuals.”²²⁵ What is particularly unique about the Holy Spirit, the social bond that makes emancipatory political acts possible, is that “it is the ‘spiritual substance’ of the individuals who recognizes themselves in it, the ground of their entire existence, the point of reference which provides the ultimate horizon of meaning to their lives, something for which these individuals are ready to give their lives.”²²⁶ Žižek discerns in the Holy Spirit “a collective *not* held together by a Master-Signifier, but by a fidelity to a Cause, by the effort to draw a new line of separation that runs ‘beyond Good and Evil’ that is to say, that runs across and suspends the distinctions of the existing social body.”²²⁷

Žižek finds immense political potential in love, which he identifies as the “elementary Christian gesture” because of the way it directs the subject outside the established bounds of political coordinates. When put to use in the right (or left) way, Christianity is uniquely valuable because it gets the *violent* and *subtractive* character of love

²²⁴ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 33.

²²⁵ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 60.

²²⁶ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 74.

²²⁷ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 130.

right. This love opts for the sword over peace, the division of family orders and social structures, and the hatred and abandonment of one's family; it is the love that acts not through submissive non-resistance, but through "fire, sword, [and] war."²²⁸ Love is that political force that acts indiscriminately and unconditionally towards the neighbor, not for sentimental or self-interested reasons, but for the brutal and crude fact that the neighbors *are*.²²⁹

For Žižek, this is a radical break with the logic of the world at present, challenging the limits of what counts as politically possible. Pauline *agape* is as thoroughly political as it is violent because it "enjoins us to unplug from the organic community into which we were born."²³⁰ "Agape as political love means that an unconditional egalitarian love for Neighbor can serve as the foundation for a New Order. Love is the force of this universal link which, in an emancipatory collective, connects people directly, in their singularity, bypassing their particular hierarchical determinations."²³¹ Its break with the world takes the form of an "unplugging", an opting out from "the very vicious cycle"²³² of prohibition and transgression that generates the social game, a refusal to follow the

²²⁸ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 100-101. Žižek cites Matthew 10:34-9, Luke 12:49-53, Luke 14:26, and Thomas 16 as biblical examples where Jesus preaches the "unplugged" dynamics of Christian love, and as such, sets forth a politics of "divine" violence, the core of which is ideology critique.

²²⁹ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 100.

²³⁰ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 106.

²³¹ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 117.

²³² Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 126.

chimeric Big Other, and the Law which serves as its “implicit spectral obscene supplement.”²³³ Love also rejects the standing and accepted the coordinates of identity and belonging that assign established levels and orders of disposability and desire, and invites us to withdraw from the hierarchy of the global social order through the “gesture of separation, of drawing the line, of clinging to an element that disturbs the balance of all.”²³⁴

This suspension is not roughly anarchic, nor it is a ‘state of exemption’. Rather, it is negatively constructive in that it establishes a new kind of community, a new social bond, but this time as “a collective of outcasts, the antidote to any established ‘organic’ group.”²³⁵ This Christoformic “uncoupling” is the direct expression of radically political love, and so redefines the parameters of collective belonging and social attachment by providing the pathway to opt out of the socio-political game, to own up to the fact that we all know that ‘the Big Other does not exist’, and that the only thing left to do is lean into “the terrifying violence at work in this ‘uncoupling’, that of the death drive, of the ‘radical wiping the slate clean’, as the condition of the New Beginning.”²³⁶ We are led to do this by the radical demands made by love “to disengage ourselves from the inertia that constrains us to identify with the particular order we were born into.”²³⁷ This requires that “one should first renounce the transgressive fantastic supplement that attaches us to it.”²³⁸

²³³ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 120.

²³⁴ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 121, 136.

²³⁵ Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 123.

²³⁶ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 118.

²³⁷ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 119-120.

²³⁸ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 139.

This is best accomplished through the radical gesture of striking at one's self, "at what it most precious to himself", what God does to Godself in the incarnation, suffering, and death of God in Jesus Christ. This is the condition of subjectivity itself, actually, and so also *sin qua non* of authentic political acts, the most apropos model of which is provided by Christianity itself, namely in the divine abandonment of Jesus Christ upon the moment of God's own death.

Another key political aspect of the Holy Spirit, says Žižek, is that it displays how the 'negation of negation' works to produce a charged negativity within the traumatic Gap left over from ideology critique *without* replacing with another form of positivity, another 'big Other.' Describing the connection between 'the negation of negation' and the Holy Spirit, Žižek suggests that

the Spirit's negativity is not relativized, subsumed under an all encompassing positivity, it is on the contrary the "simple negation" which remains attached to the presupposed positivity it negated, the presupposed Otherness for which it alienates itself, and the negation of negation is nothing but the negation of the substantial character of this Otherness itself, the full acceptance of the abyss of the Spirit's self-relating.²³⁹

No longer stuck within "the force choice" of the particular coordinates of political possibility, "we catch a glimpse of Another Space which can no longer be dismissed as a fantastic supplement to social reality."²⁴⁰ This is the Christian legacy of ideology critique

²³⁹ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 72.

²⁴⁰ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 149.

that Žižek finds so important. There is a thought-form, a critical rationality, a ‘short circuit’ within Christianity that promises to bring forth “the brief apparition of a future Utopian Otherness to which every authentic revolutionary stance should cling.”²⁴¹

The Limits of Žižek’s Christianity

Before moving on, a few closing interpretive notes are in order. Žižek’s theoretical apparatus presents the theologian with a difficult challenge. The earlier chapters proceeded with Marx in hand asked both of Eagleton and now Žižek how they maintain both their theological turn on political grounds and their unique Marxist readings of ideology critique. Žižek accomplishes this through an idiosyncratic and certainly questionable reading of Christianity as the dialectical materialist core of ideology critique because of how it deals with the void, the negativity of Real, the incompleteness of ontological reality, and the revolutionary collective, all of which are theologically interpreted as flowing from, and a consequence of, the “death of God.” Žižek does this without suggesting that theology is ‘deideological’ or that ideology is merely a broad, neutralizing account of how the structures of knowledge and beliefs are produced and determined by social context or location. Christianity is a negative and materialist form of thinking and acting that exemplifies an open and eventful form of criticality.

However, the notion of critique itself is unclear. A thick description of what it means to be critical gets lost as it is suspended into other concepts like ‘pure difference’,

²⁴¹ Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 150.

parallax gap, the interpassivity of the subject, and so on. Insofar as Žižek considers ideologies to be the fundamental antagonisms of the symbolic order that social reality, it is the actions of political subjects which generate the sutures of ideology, actions that directly contradict their beliefs and not the beliefs themselves, that are ideological. The “way out of” ideology is the ‘eventfulness’ of the authentic political act: it introduces negativity, dissensus, and non-contemporaneity, the vicissitudes offered by critical politics, into a situation rife with reasoned and careful acceptance of the global coordinates of capitalist and technocratic oppression. And so, while the meaning of critique itself in such a scenario is hard to pin down, Žižek turns to Christianity as an example of such an ideology critique. The ‘death of God’ theology that Žižek lifts up to make his case is problematic, or at least in need of serious revision, from a strictly theological perspective, leaving us to wonder whether it is up to the task that Žižek assigns it. His case is selective, uneven, and often times so overwrought with ironic cleverness and disarming comedic allusions that it is hard to see its value as an analytic proposal. What precisely constitutes the moment of critique gets lost, even with all the examples, jokes, stories, and illustrations that Žižek gives us along the way.

This is due in large part to the fact that Žižek’s ‘Christianity’ is decidedly superficial, and based largely on oblique readings of readings, rather than direct engagements with the gamut of its polyphonic and multilayered tradition. This leaves it incomplete and selective; in the sense that one can certainly say that what Žižek offers is a ‘christianity’, but certainly this cannot be said of Christianity in general, much less what it looks like

for Christianity (and Christian theology) to become critical, not just political. For example, there are many reasons to be skeptical of his narrative of how critique was bestowed to Christian theology as it came out through the passage of Judaism, an account that is unjust to both religions. In *The Fragile Absolute*, Žižek describes the ‘repressed’ within Judaism as the “disavowed excessive nature of its own fundamental gesture”, “its own ‘anthropomorphization’/‘personalization’ of God”, which leads to its iconoclastic ban on images.²⁴² Christianity departs from Judaism, not by disagreeing with this repressed truth and exposing its fallacy, but by ‘over-identifying’ with its spectral fantasy, “asserting not only the likeness of God and man, but their direct identity in the figure of Christ.”²⁴³ This brute honesty, the willingness to declare “that God is NOTHING BUT the excess of man” is the theological model for ideology critique because it lacks the superego supplement expressed in Judaism iconoclasm. As such, there exists no tension between law and crime, between transgression and guilt, and so “it is possible to step out...into the Real of an act.”²⁴⁴ In trying to articulate what transpired in the ‘Paulinist’ move from Judaism to Christianity, Žižek stumbles, unable to depart from the not-so-subtle anti-Judaism that has haunted psychoanalytic understandings of religion since Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*.

²⁴² Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, 57.

²⁴³ Žižek, *On Belief*, 131.

²⁴⁴ Žižek, *On Belief*, 137.

Žižek is erratic, confusing, and at times, it is hard not to accuse of being disingenuous. His theory is hardly systematic and so any attempt to give a structured, plotted account of his work on any given subject is troublesome. As interested as Žižek is in interpreting Christianity as a material religion ‘without the sacred’, he gives us precious little in terms of understanding the impact of critique on political theology. Aside from confirming the Lacanian psychoanalytic thesis that “the big Other does not exist” through its affirmation of the death of God, what exactly does critique mean for the material and substantive claims of theology, specifically those that concern the immanent relation between theory and praxis? What impact does the negativity of critique have on theological relationship to authentic political action or to transformative praxis?

Admittedly, the best we can do at times is gather fragments and piece them together, which always requires a level of strategic thematization. By trying to schematize the relationship that Žižek posits between ideology and theology, I have lifted out of Žižek a critical thread: a series of links between fantasy, belief, the act, and Job, the death of Christ, and the collective Spirit. The benefit of such a project is that we are able to then test this schematic against his theory of political activity, to see where it gets us in terms of further understanding the relationship between ideology and theology, and most importantly, the impact of this relationship on practical reasoning, political practices, and social arrangements. The result of such a project may well be that conceptual analysis ideology as a category is increasingly unhelpful. I believe that ultimately what Žižek clar-

ifies for us is that the best way to apprehend the relationship is through the notion of critique itself. This is illustrated by how Žižek applies what he has found about the relation of ideology and theology to ideas about the political, and the political Act itself.

Žižek and Political Theology after Ideology Critique

In this closing section, I return to one of the haunting questions of the dissertation, namely how political theology shapes the relation of theory and practice, especially when configured by ideology critique. I discuss Žižek's controversial "I prefer not to" perspective here, but will take up the question of theory and praxis (as it concerns the relation of political theology and critical theology) in more detail in the final chapter of the dissertation. There I will explain my position, in conversation with Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, that is informed by Žižek's concerns about the complicity of political practice in ideology, but hopefully sidesteps the many problems with Žižek's troublesome position.

I have argued that, for Žižek, ideology is politically important because of its deleterious effect on the viability of an emancipatory subjectivity, most notably in the way it naturalizes the current state of affairs as the only possibility, even while all the alarm bells are going off, signaling the upcoming apocalyptic 'zero-point.'²⁴⁵ It is increasingly rare that one would dare to dream that a possible alternative to the present social order was possible, much less conceivable. Certainly, such a notion may not fit well within the parameters of what options are currently available, but is this not the political burden of ideology critique? Indeed, the primary obstacle facing a 'critical political theology' is that

²⁴⁵ Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 37-51.

politics is often restricted to what is “realistic”, to what is thought to be possible to achieve within the coordinates of political options currently available to us.²⁴⁶

It is precisely at this juncture that Christianity bursts forth with negative political promise. “At the very core of Christianity”, says Žižek, “there is a radically different project: that of a destructive negativity which ends not in a chaotic void, but reverts (organizes itself) into a new Order, imposing itself on reality.”²⁴⁷ Christian theology offers a uniquely emancipatory ideologico-critical logic because it “madly insists on the impossible.”²⁴⁸ It is adept at thinking the world apocalyptically²⁴⁹, which we so badly need if we have any hope of reaching political actors and transforming them into revolutionary subjects in a context where emergency, crisis, fear, panic, and threat are the basic coordinates for the functioning of contemporary ideology.²⁵⁰ Žižek makes his point very clear: “the authentic Christian apocalyptic tradition rejects the wisdom according to which some kind of hierarchical order is our fate, which means that any attempt to change it or create an alternative egalitarian order will necessarily end in destructive horror.”²⁵¹ It is theology’s truth, says Žižek, not its content, that politically matters; its truth is measured in politics like it is in psychoanalysis: “‘it is only true inasmuch as it is followed’...the ‘test’

²⁴⁶ Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 78.

²⁴⁷ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 116.

²⁴⁸ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 116.

²⁴⁹ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 336-352.; Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 75-84.; Žižek, *God in Pain*, 69-71.

²⁵⁰ Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 37-65.

²⁵¹ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 117.

of the analyst's interpretation lies in the truth-effect it unleashes in the patient."²⁵² As we have already seen, the self-emptying of content for the sake of political truth reflects Christianity's own theological Event of divine self-kenosis whereby God empties God's self in death and pours its new life as the Holy Spirit.²⁵³ It is a form of collective belief in the impossible and absurd that refuses to give in to the suturing impulses of politics. Theology is akin to the Hegelian 'weaving of the spirit': "that underground work of changing the ideological coordinates, most invisible to the public eye, which then suddenly explodes into view, taking everyone by surprise."²⁵⁴ It is theology, at least in its atheist, heterodox, and materialist form, that keeps politics both critical and negative.

So what kind of politics does Žižek's political theology support and produce? For Marx, ideology critique was requisite for the formation of the proletariat and for their acts of revolutionary praxis. It cleared the way for political subjects to see their material conditions as they actually were, rather than how the ideas of the ruling class made them appear. For Eagleton, ideology critique was important for 'thinking the world otherwise'. It diagnosed situations of oppression as evil, giving us all the chance to argue for a different world. It was the condition of possibility for radical politics. Žižek's views on ideology are quite different, but it is important to him for some of the same reasons. If the cri-

²⁵² Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, xiii.

²⁵³ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 118-134.

²⁵⁴ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 96.

tique of ideology is constitutive for Žižek's "theologico-political suspension of the ethical", what is left for the human subject to do? How is the subject to act in praxis? Is there not some kind of deadlock here, and does theology become complicit in it?

We see Žižek turn to theology (as ideology critique) here, not out of necessity, but because his intention is intentionally subversive, like that of a psychoanalyst. He is eager to lead the analysand to a "Christian" position whereby she recognizes that her reliance on the big Other is faulty and that the authenticity and efficacy of her political acts are dependent on the fetishistic disavowal of her belief. John Caputo describes it this way:

His whole point, as he says elsewhere, is subversive: to build a Trojan-horse theology, to slip the nose of a more radical materialism under the Pauline tent of theology in order to announce the death of God... "Christ" for him is a nickname for a way to contract the void, and the Passion story is an allegory or *Vorstellung* of a philosophical point he can make in any number of ways.²⁵⁵

That "point" is the effect that ideology critique can have on establishing the conditions of possibility for authentic political acts. In psychoanalytic terms, it insists that until we come to grips with this terrifying fact and confront the truth that we are on our own in this world, 'that everything has already happened', we will never have the actual freedom required for 'Acts' that are both ruptural and inaugurative. Rather than chaining us to some deflated sense of catastrophic fear and anarchic inevitability, this death of the Big Other resists the tyranny of forced choices and institutes actual freedom. We are not caught in the endless relay between hope and misery, but must insist that:

the arrangement that has persisted since Antiquity—is not inevitable; it can be overcome... that a different collective organization is practicable, one that will

²⁵⁵ John Caputo. "The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?" *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* September 2009:. Available at: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=17605>

eliminate the inequality of wealth and even the division of labour... In fact, what we ascribe as a philosophical task, we could even say a duty, is to help a new modality of existence of the hypothesis to come into being.²⁵⁶

From this, it is clear why no ordinary politics will do. As a Marxist, Žižek lives in constant awareness that “the actual history that we live is itself a kind of realized alternative history, the reality we have to live in because, in the past, we failed to seize the moment and act.”²⁵⁷ That said, Žižek is equally critical of the anemic left whose “fetishistic” proclivity towards populism produces an truly ideological *passage à l’acte*, where people cry out with frustration, “This cannot go on! It must stop!”, but it never ends. Nothing actually changes. All action ends up being nothing more than a “depoliticized pseudo-activity (new life-styles, etc.), the very form of social passivity”²⁵⁸ that put on full display a reactive and impatient refusal to confront the complexity of the situation.

What, then, is an “authentic political act”? Speaking about Julian Assuage, Chelsea (Brandon) Manning, ‘Wikileaks’, and its relationship to, and role in, the case of Edward Snowden, Žižek cites his Slovenian colleague Alenka Zupančič:

Even if Snowden were to sell his informations discreetly to another intelligence service, this act would still count as part of the ‘patriotic games’, and if needed he would have been liquidated as a ‘traitor’. However, in Snowden's case, we are dealing with something entirely different. We are dealing with a gesture which questions the very logic, the very status quo, which for quite some time serves as the only foundation of all ‘Western’ (non)politics. With a gesture which as it were risks everything, with no consideration of profit and without its own stakes: it takes the risk because it is based on the conclusion that what is going on is simply wrong. Snowden didn't propose any alternative. Snowden, or, rather, the

²⁵⁶ Alain Badiou. “The Communist Hypothesis,” *New Left Review* 49 (2008): 35.

²⁵⁷ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 87.

²⁵⁸ Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 61.

logic of his gesture, like, say, before him, the gesture of Bradley Manning – *is* the alternative.²⁵⁹

For theology to fulfill its function as ideology critique, it must take part in a politics that, rather than proposes alternatives, actually is the alternative, one that simply works to amend the status quo of politics, but rather an alternative to the way that praxis often plays into and supports the the status quo despite its subversive and provocative aspirations. An authentic political act is always ‘the event’: “the successful imposition of a new narrative which makes a historical situation readable again to those caught in it”; it is an interruption of the normal flow that brings forth a qualitatively different set or possibilities. This political reality is full of equivocation and ambiguity; its unpredictability hardly endears it those for whom the universal demands of ethical judgement and political praxis are the instruments of social change and political hope.

Žižek’s alternative is a “subtractive politics” that expresses its negativity in the Bartlebyian phrase, “I would prefer not to”, rather than the ethical demand, “I must.”²⁶⁰ The best course is a committed stance of aggressive passivity until the condition of possibilities have shifted, to refuse to allow one’s acts to be co-opted by the parameters of currently existing options. The substantive point of this aggressive passivity is that while acts of commitment, resistance, protest and action may seem to be interrupting, subversive, or emancipatory, they may well be protecting the grounding antagonisms of social

²⁵⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “What is an Authentic Political Event?,” *New Statesman*, February 12, 2014: <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/02/slavoj-zizek-what-authentic-political-event>

²⁶⁰ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 381-385.

reality that are the underneath our experiences of injustice, violence, and social inequality. These acts become the very sutures that ideology critique tears open. The only thing, given the established coordinates of political possibility, to do is to do nothing, to institute a politics of active refusal, with the hope this ‘short-circuits’ the system and instigates an apocalyptic Event.

For Žižek, this is the political goal of theology as ideology critique: to keep thinking openly about an altogether different world, one where the big Other is no longer present, and where the field of possibility for political action is interminably open and undetermined. The hope of such a world is for the political mobilization of “the Excluded” who presently suffer personal disrespect, social discrimination, and denial of rights that make their equal and just participation in our social, legal, and political sphere of global life appear impossible. Žižek interprets the “death of God” Christianity as ideology critique because they both share, in his view, a joint goal to keep open this “empty space”, the traumatic gap that is continually sutured by the ideologies of the Symbolic, so that something like a “different collective organization” can emerge from within the Void as an unexpected alternative. This eschatological hope for the genuinely New, promised in the Event, is best sustained by the theological vision of Christianity’s “perverse core.”

This position is not without its strident critics. Does Žižek overcome the objection that this unplugging, this opting out, slides into an apolitical quietism, or worse, a nihilistic and cynical indifference? It is entirely unclear whether his call for a political theology that acts as ideology critique that suspends the ethical for the sake of the political Event actually opposes ideology or merely allows it to continue. Simon Critchley identifies

what he calls, the “obsessional fantasy”, at the core of Žižek’s ideas, which infects both his critical politics and its link to theology.²⁶¹ Žižek seems caught in “a fearful and fateful deadlock” between the materialist paralysis of the “(not) to do” and his dreams for an amoral ethic of the exception, the sovereign deed of brutal cruelty that radically ruptures the ideological sutures and dismantles the very coordinates that cover up our original trauma.²⁶² The result: at best “endless postponement and over-production”²⁶³ and worst, “a nostalgia-which is macho and finally manneristic- for dictatorship, political violence, and ruthlessness.”²⁶⁴ The negativity within Žižek’s posture of ‘aggressive passivity’ leads him to a political paralysis that just ends up in a cynical and implicit endorsement of the status quo because, in the end, nothing really changes.

Žižek reminds us that what makes his politics of ‘aggressive passivity’ so dangerous to the current bourgeoisie obsession with acting urgently and immediately in the face of global crisis is that “Bartleby couldn’t even hurt a fly - that’s what makes his presence so unbearable.”²⁶⁵ What Critchley sees as ‘an internal deadlock’ is really just Žižek’s patience with history: his openness to the unforeseeable inevitability of change mixed his stubborn unwillingness to allow praxis to be mistaken for the Act. The fetishistic disavowal of commitment is not the crude abandonment of belief or action, but rather the

²⁶¹ Simon Critchley. *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2013), 212.

²⁶² Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 210-213.

²⁶³ Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 213.

²⁶⁴ Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 234.

²⁶⁵ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 385.

subtle preparations of authentic political act, an “politics of love” that Žižek interprets as ‘divine violence’²⁶⁶ which counters the more insidious ‘systemic violence’: “forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation.”²⁶⁷ Žižek clarifies the meaning of this term when he says that “authentic revolutionary liberation is much more directly identified with violence – it is violence as such (the violent gesture of discarding, of establishing a difference, of drawing a line of separation) which liberates. Freedom is not a blissfully neutral state of harmony and balance, but the very violent act which disturbs this balance.”²⁶⁸

Žižek’s position is also not without its theological predecessors. It can be linked with a relatively prominent tradition in Protestant ethics that gives theological reasons to “opt out” from political acts, even as a form of protest or resistance. Published in the context of the Sino-Japanese War, H. Richard Niebuhr’s essay, “The Grace of Doing Nothing” advocated for a political theology that called for an “active inactivity.”²⁶⁹ Niebuhr recognized that “unplugging” from immediate demands for political activity brought more attention to that which lay ahead: the weight of the future. Whatever the present

²⁶⁶ There is a long-standing ‘war of words’ between Žižek and Critchley on the subject of violence, originating from Žižek’s critical response to Critchley’s *Infinitely Demanding*. Cf. Žižek, “Resistance is Surrender,” *London Review of Books*, November 15, 2007. The points and counter-points are outlined in Critchley, 276n3.

²⁶⁷ Žižek, *Violence*, 8.

²⁶⁸ Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 31. He clarifies it still: when speaking of violence, “although it has no intrinsic value, it is a sign of the authenticity of the revolutionary process, of the fact that this process is actually disturbing the existing power relations.” Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 381.

²⁶⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Grace of Doing Nothing,” *The Christian Century*, March 23, 1932. Reprinted in *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology*. ed. William T. Cavanaugh, Jeffrey W. Bailey, and Craig Hovey, (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2012), 254-258.

conflict may be, it served as an indictment of policy as such, helping to prepare the groundwork for a more radical transformation of the future, one that requires something else altogether. Niebuhr recognizes that the politics of active refusal, to choice to do nothing, the “I chose not to” of political inactivity was actually an *ascesis*.²⁷⁰ It taught us how to open ourselves up to the invisible, the unexpected, the impossible, to prepare ourselves for future action that promises to provide basis for an authentic political act of the Event, not unlike the radically emancipatory shift demanded by critical theory and for which ideology critique prepares political subjects. Niebuhr argues that “the inactivity of radical Christianity is not the inactivity of those who call evil good...It is not the inactivity of a resigned patience, but of a patience that is full of hope and is based on faith. It is not the inactivity of the non-combatant, for it knows that there are no non-combatants...”²⁷¹ This inactivity is not the indifferent abdication of sitting on one’s hands, the cynical indifference too the world because one does not really believe that change is possible. What it does involve, however, is an immanent critique that analyzes why we feel so drawn to intervene and why we find political immediate action so compelling and seductive, and wonders aloud whose interests are served by that action.

Conclusion

One of the many questions we are left with after exploring Žižek’s understanding of political theology as ideology critique is the way it impacts the relation of theory and praxis immanent to political theology. Ideology critique directly concerns how political

²⁷⁰Niebuhr, “The Grace of Doing Nothing,” 257.

²⁷¹Niebuhr, “The Grace of Doing Nothing,” 258.

theology takes up the question of how are we able to keep the political-theological efforts of love, struggle, resistance, protest, solidarity or advocacy from becoming inevitably swallowed up by ideology, sublated and absorbed into its logic?

Žižek wants to imagine the possibility of acting in the world, against the order we live in and are formed by, in ways that cannot be absorbed, sublated, or recycled into the inner contradictions, whether it be of global capital, the deadlocks of liberal democracy, or the identitarian problems of multiculturalism. Žižek sets out to articulate a radical political vision that is capable of thinking towards such a project, and for this he finds Christianity and ideology critique to be politically indispensable because of the unique way it presents the inescapable truth about the death of God and its implications for political activity. Christianity is not merely pragmatically useful in Žižek's vision, but politically necessary because it affords us the critical distance between theory and action that Žižek considers to be essential for any "really existing change": namely, the authentic political Event proleptically announced in the theological figure of the crucified God.

Serious problems arise, however, when it comes to the relation of critique and practice in Žižek's political Christianity. First, theologians ought to be wary of how Žižek uses Christianity; is the choice to deploy Christianity more than just a convenient opportunity to ironically use that which is otherwise utterly pointless and vacate, (especially when one discovers that the theological idea that Žižek finds to be the most ideologico-critical is the death of God in the crucified Christ), or is an arbitrary choice that can just as easily be substituted or replaced? Žižek is apparently convinced that the gift that Chris-

tianity gives to ideology critique is its suspension of the ethical for the sake of ‘the authentic political Act’; this “suspension” is most clearly discerned in the traditional theological scenes of creation, incarnation, crucifixion, namely that these theologies are exemplary sites of ideology critique whose political importance is often overlooked, and so indeed possess a critical political legacy worth fighting for? But what is this legacy? And does it produce a world that is actually more livable, more suitable to human freedom and happiness, one that actually makes sense of and is able to reverse the dark trajectory that Žižek is so skilled at bringing into the light: the crises (many of which were produced by the very emancipatory politics promised by liberal democracy): economic meltdown, ecological disaster, a financial techno-capitalism whose thirst for profit and power is insatiable, and the seductive dogmas of neo-liberalism that not even an anemic left seems able to escape?

Žižek seems content to argue that we ought to suspend normal activity of political action for the sake of the Act, which is itself is made possible by the event, that *sui generis* experience of apocalyptic disturbance that forces ‘really existing change’ since things simply cannot go on as before. He makes this argument by turning to Christianity and to ideology critique, insisting that within the latter is the exemplary case of the former: with the announcement of the death of God, Christianity waives its claims to orthodoxy and so adopts a ‘dialectical materialism’ that repeatedly makes the case, like psychoanalysis, that “the big Other does not exist.”

This ‘revelation’ is of the apocalyptic kind, and this figures directly into how Žižek theorizes critique, specially in relation to how critique is supposed to relate to, and

generate, forms of praxis, in relation to our socio-symbolic order. Žižek works this out, at least in word, as a politics of aggressive passivity, the first task of which is to consider whether political activity is sublated by the Order we live in, whether it is global capitalism, Euro-American neoliberalism, or liberal multiculturalism, among other systems and orders, all of which determine the conditions of human being and acting. What is far from clear, however, is whether, as theologically grounded argument, this makes sense of the Christian framework as expressed by its political theology: the possibility for the world's redemption rests in forms of revenant action (i.e., love, compassion, accompaniment, recognition, advocacy) that is grounded and motivated by divine solidarity with the excluded: the poor, the suffering, and the dead. It appears in the end that Žižek gets neither his theology or politics quite right.

In what follows, I argue that it is the function of immanent critique to disrupt the circumscriptions of praxis by the politics of the possible, to get theory involved in a more thorough-going break with the way state agencies, capitalist economies, and complex cultural mechanisms control and regulate human being and acting; the extent to which political theology can effectively contribute to this work as ideology critique is an open question, one that draws us directly into theology and idolatry critique. We turn to idolatry critique in the next chapter precisely because it is often thought of as the properly theological form of immanent critique and so shares a certain homological relationship to ideology critique in philosophy.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE CRITIQUE OF IDOLATRY

Introduction

In this chapter, the dissertation takes a decisively theological turn. It takes up the question of idolatry and its critique. Why the turn to idolatry? The critique of ideology is not only a lesson that philosophy teaches to theology; theology has within itself its own version. But when theologians take up ideology, they do through the critique of idolatry as if these concepts are terminologically interchangeable, or at least cognate. In my view, they are neither and in fact, name very different problems. This problem also touches on continued misunderstandings of the Marxian position as stated in the first chapter, a mistake that repeatedly takes political theology out of its critical position. And so, after first identifying the ambiguous relation of ideology to its theological cognate, 'idolatry,' I set out to clarify the meaning of idolatry in terms of its contemporary usage and significance for thinking about the meaning and place of ideology critique within political theology as a version of the *Bilderverbot*. To do so, I need to retrieve the historical emergence of the concept of idolatry before moving on to think about the meaning and place of ideology critique within political theology, given that the latter frequently links ideology to idolatry.

This chapter explores the concept of idolatry in theology, starting first with the development of aniconistic theology in the Hebrew bible, which originated in the Decalogue's first two commandments. I want to clarify the meaning of idolatry from a theological perspective, taking its usage in the biblical material as the point of departure and then proceed to its reception history in modern theologies. Any theological perspective on idolatry must take up its social origins in the Hebrew biblical material, and when we do so, we encounter a number of factors, most of which complicate the picture rather than clarify it. It shows that idolatry is not solely a theological question (about how best to worship the right god), but has significant political and philosophical aspects as well. Despite the complexity of the biblical critique of idolatry, we are better prepared to contextualize idolatry critique as a question about the nature of the political in modern theology itself with it in hand. This sheds light on the reception history of the Marxist theory of ideology as ideology critique in political theology, and sets the stage for the work on 'critique' in the final chapter.

It also carries forward a thread from the first chapter on Marx where we saw him turn to a critique of idolatry as fetishism as an analogue to ideology critique of alienated social conditions. From the beginning it seems there has been an ostensible kinship of sorts between ideology critique and idolatry critique. And yet, in this chapter, we search further for the immanent critical force with Christianity, and in turning to idolatry critique as the theological version of immanent critique, we find that the theology of idolatry critique is too tightly linked to an ethnocentric, identitarian politics and so reinforces, rather than critiques, ideology.

Also, the political character of the relation of ideology to idolatry is not immediately clear. In what follows, I try to make sense of idolatry through the politics of Israelite aniconism as well as its iconoclastic theology, explaining the significance of the social origins of aniconic theologies as key indicators of major political and theological shifts to solidify social cohesion and collective identity during the exilic and post-exilic periods of early Judaism. This clarifies the meaning of idolatry as a political gesture, used to both explain Israelite/Judaic civil/social divisions, as well as a rallying cry after their defeat, occupation, and enslavement during ‘the Babylonian captivity.’ I will argue that the construction and deployment of “idolatry” as ‘perverse or strange worship’ was designed as a distinguishing rhetorical ploy to generate and enforce a whole series of social and political relations of otherness, establishing ‘self’/‘other’ alignments as constitutive of religious identities of fidelity, obedience, and allegiance to one god over the other gods. An account of idolatry as a political polemic used to generate social and religious relations of otherness and foreignness resonates with major and ongoing debates about the construction of politico-religious identity. To counter idolatry critique within theology (as an example of the ‘theologization’ of politics), a further account is needed of the ideologico-critical potential of the prophetic traditions which criticize the theology of idolatry, interpreted here as an immanent critique of identity politics.

Idolatry and its Critics

I will argue three things in this section: that the problem that idolatry critique names is as political as it is theological, that its origins are distinctly material, and finally

that the problem it names is different from that of ideology. The term 'idolatry' is a critical concept; it is always essentially defined by its opponents. "Idolatry" typically refers to a negative and pejorative critique of a certain set of religious beliefs or practices, usually associated, in some form, with image-veneration or 'false or strange worship' (e.g., its rabbinic term, *avodah zarah*). I want to argue that 'idolatry' has persistent value as philosophical and political idea, a characteristic that comes from its early social origins in the religion of the biblical Israelites. Idolatry is not simply a critique of 'false representation,' 'bad worship,' or 'wrong theology.' I follow Jan Assmann in arguing that idolatry critique may end up being a "theologization" of political relations that is engineered to be, at the same time, a "discourse of othering" and a *political* invention. That is, idolatry critique is not only or even primarily a claim about how best to speak of God but also an attempt to organize and arrange collective attachments. The critique of ideology may not lead us to a critique of idolatry, but perhaps to an argument that questions the strong synonymous or interchangeable relation between idolatry and ideology in much of theological studies today.

The General Concept of Idolatry

What is the exact nature of the problem that is named in and by idolatry? A standard view of idolatry is that it describes the oppositional relation between monotheism and polytheism. Halbertal and Margalit's classic *Idolatry* is one such example.¹ Halbertal and Margalit's 'history of ideas' approach to the study of idolatry examines the different conceptualizations of idolatry in Jewish, Christian, and secular discourses in modernity. This

¹ Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

conceptual analysis acknowledges its polemical and contested character, as there are multiple understandings of idolatry with no universal or common character. Halbertal and Margalit typologize the philosophy of idolatry into five different conceptual perspectives: idolatry as betrayal, idolatry as rebellion, idolatry as false representation, idolatry as error, and idolatry as strange, or alien, worship.² For Halbertal and Margalit, the essence of idolatry critique is the way it marks out the space of the strange, the foreign, and the pagan. They delineate the various modes that communities, again self-defined as non-idolatrous, define their opponents as idolatrous: bad belief (betrayal), wrong belief (error), bad worship (mistaking an intermediary for the the real thing), and wrong worship (false representation). When speaking from the perspective of the Hebrew Bible, this position is derived from the Decalogue's first and second commandments. From its inception, idolatry has been a site of an on-going debate about representation, or put differently: what a sign is thought to stand for in the minds of those who use the sign. In this way, images are false representations and as such, are idols. Idolatry, as an anxiety about false or failed images, is based on a set of theological positions about how god and/or the gods can and should be properly represented. But this is only one aspect.

As a proscription of images, idolatry is a ban on the worship of other gods, which presumably involves the use of images, and on certain ways of representing the right god. It declares what ways of worship are permitted and which ones are forbidden. Halbertal and Margalit define idolatry as an opposition to the use of images as forbidden depictions

² Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 237-244.

of deity, based on a specific theory of representation that uses this as a fault line for the self-definition of a specific and peculiar community.³ That said, it is a way of identifying and correcting improper understandings of god while also critiquing the culture in which idolatry was allowed to develop. Whether idolatry is defined as betrayal, error, falsehood, or strange, or alien, worship, “the ban is an attempt to dictate exclusivity, to map the unique territory of the one god.”⁴

The critique of idolatry is often linked to ideology critique. In this view, its aim is to correct false theologies, or to name improper concepts of God evinced in the context of worship. Halbertal and Margalit link them in precisely this way:

The critical and liberating role of philosophy is the uncovering of deep illusions. Philosophy, by its nature, or at its best, is iconoclastic, in the sense of removing ideological masks or breaking idols... The way against idolatry has the same role of liberation from error and the attempt to break the bonds of our imagination.⁵

Halbertal and Margalit, rather than assume some essence of idolatry, acknowledge that this ‘powerful category that aspires to establish a firm boundary between God and the strange gods’ is marked by ‘astonishing fluidity’⁶. Yet, it is clear that the practitioners of idolatry are defined negatively: they are the non-idolatrous, the non-alien, or the non-pagan. As Jay Geller notes, “this naming procedure reflects their recognition of the code-

³ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 236-237.

⁴ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 5.

⁵ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 6.

⁶ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 250.

pendence of any notion of idolatry on the corresponding one of the right and true religion”, a position that reflects the central point of this chapter, that idolatry negotiates the boundary between the other and the self.⁷ The ascription of idolatry is used to determine the boundaries between one community and another community, but is also an immanent critique; that it is, it determines boundaries within a presumably singular community, as is the case with its biblical form, as I will argue below.

Idolatry in the Hebrew Bible is represented by social, sexual, and filial metaphors that are employed by texts to describe the relations between a cultic community, its God, and the god/religion of its ‘enemy’. The work of these metaphors is to generate a politico-religious identity by operationalizing cultic difference and externalizing its internal non-conformity into that place that serves as the boundary where identity and difference are bound together: ‘the other within’. The point is here is that idolatry critique is not so much about naming the beliefs and practices of the other as idolatrous as it is about identifying the one’s own positions as ‘non-idolatrous’. Namely, idolatry is an essential mechanism through which communities will determine the borders of inclusion and exclusion, what and who counts as the other. And yet, Halbertal and Margalit contend that the significance of idolatry (and its critique) is not in its theological meaning, but rather the way that it negotiates the boundaries between self and other within and between communities. It is naturally a thoroughly political boundary, one that draws the lines of collective belonging and social attachment. This generic definition of how idolatry works helps specify its more particular rhetorical, polemical, and historical forms, particularly

⁷ Jay Geller, “Idols, Fetishes and Foreskins: The Other Of Religion,” *Religion* 27 (1997): 119.

given the challenging ambiguities of iconographic and polytheistic context that gave rise to biblical idolatry critique.

The Biblical Critique of Idolatry

It is difficult to speak of *the* biblical critique of idolatry, mostly because it is difficult to speak of a consistent biblical theology (as if there was only one). The multiple sources, forms, and agenda of the biblical material and the interwoven layers and threads of authorship, redaction, and editions present significant obstacles to any sort of harmonization or singularity. Without going into each of the sources and redactional schools, it is difficult to say much more with any clarity about the specific origin of idolatry critique, especially in relations to any specific politics therein. In what follows, I simply want to report on the consensus within Hebrew Bible scholarship on the nature and origins of Israelite aniconism, the role that ideology critique appears to have played in the development of this characteristic, and the political-theological implications of both the emergence of biblical monotheism and iconoclastic politics. The benefit of reviewing the biblical critique of idolatry thematically is that we are able to get a sense for how the biblical concept is used and received in later systematic and political theologies, rather than how it developed textually or historically. The point here is simply to hazard a provisional understanding of the biblical critique of idolatry that helps us identify the problems with modern treatments by much of recent theology that link it too tightly (and in the wrong way) to ideology critique.

Idolatry critique in the Hebrew bible is ambiguous, but a few generalizations are helpful. It has to do with the role of divine images in the biblical world, and so it shapes

understandings of the ‘orthodox’ representation of the divine life and continues to organize and regulate doctrines of creation, theological anthropology, the nature of God, and faithful theological language. Idolatry is the critical, negative concept that emerges from the aniconistic theology of Israelite religion. The biblical material is polyphonic on the subject, offering multiple and fluid accounts, but consistently presents idolatry in a critical fashion. In the most basic sense, idolatry is a critical and pejorative term, used by its opponents to describe a certain misuse of images as representations of the divine in religious practices, broadly defined as ‘false, or strange worship.’⁸ These images are described as ‘*eidōla*’, a term which conveys the conceit of things that appear to be something they are not. It expresses falsity, illusion, and deception, and this is given a more full, political meaning in iconoclasm. If idolatry (as the worship of strange or ‘foreign’ gods) is structurally distinct to iconolatry (as the use of images in worship), the emergence of idolatry critique in the monolatrous rhetoric of exilic and post-exilic biblical writings effectively links them together as expressed violations of the Sinaiic pact.⁹ The critique of idolatry certainly regulated Israelite worship to the one God, but rather than reflecting an inherent and self-conscious monotheism, it reinforced the unique covenantal (read: political/cultic) bond between Israel and their god, YHWH.¹⁰

⁸ Frederick Greenspahn, “Syncretism and Idolatry in the Bible,” *Vetus Testamentum* 54.4 (October 2004): 483-485; Charles A. Kennedy, “The Semantic Field of the Term ‘Idolatry,’” in *Uncovering Ancient Stones: Essays in Memory of H. Neil Richardson*, ed. Lewis M. Hopfe (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 194.

⁹ Dt. 31:16, 20; Jer. 11:10.

¹⁰ Johannes Tromp, “The Critique of Idolatry in the Context of Jewish Monotheism,” in *Aspects of Religious Contact and Conflict in the Ancient World*, ed. Pieter W. van der Horst (Utrecht : Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid Universiteit Utrecht, 1995), 106.

But what precisely was being critiqued in the biblical critique of idolatry - and why? The critique of idolatry originates in the prohibition of divine images in the Torah, most notably in the second commandment of the First and Second commandments in the Decalogue.¹¹ The second, “You shall not make for yourself an idol” is a form of observing the first, “You shall have no other gods before me.”¹² *Prima facie*, the problem of idolatry is ‘false worship’. When one commits idolatry, one is either worshipping a false god in an apostate fashion, or worshipping the true God incorrectly. It, broadly speaking, opposes the use of cultic images in the worship of Yahweh on the basis that such a practice undermines and misrepresents the uniqueness of Yahweh in relation to other rival, cultic gods and so fails to do justice to who God is.

The biblical critique of idolatry is frequently communicated through two primary metaphors: the marital metaphor in which the primary offense is sexual infidelity and betrayal¹³ and the political metaphor stepped in the monarchical systems of the day, in which the primary offense is shifting ones allegiance out of lack of trust, obedience, and loyalty.¹⁴ The practice of idolatry contradicted the religio-political identity of Israel, as it illustrated a fundamental rift in the covenant between Yahweh and the people of Israel. As

¹¹ Ex. 20:4, 23; 34:17; Dt. 5:8.

¹² Lev. 19:4, 26:1, Dt. 4:15–19, 5:8–10, 25:5–8, 27:15.

¹³ This model is introduced in the Pentateuch (Ex. 34:15–16) and shows up all over the Prophetic literature: Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and of course, Hosea. The idea here is that Israel as a people are married to God, who demands exclusivity and absolute fidelity, but has been unfaithful in their worship, both by worshipping other gods and worshipping God incorrectly, namely with these use of idols.

¹⁴ This model is more prevalent in the Historical books, where God is interpreted as “king,” and the people of Israel, “his” subjects. As “king,” God demands trust, loyalty, and obedience. Both by worshipping other gods or worshipping Yahweh incorrectly, the people of Israel demonstrate that they do not believe God’s power is capable of protecting and providing for them. The request for a king in 1 Samuel 8 is seen as an

such, the consequence of idolatry was severe and unrelenting punishment¹⁵ (including the fall of the temple, and subsequent exile, diaspora, and finally, displacement from Jerusalem) on account of divine anger and jealousy.¹⁶ In a phrase, idolatry hurt God's feelings and the response was often swift and severely violent retribution.¹⁷ Idolatry was critiqued for being both uselessness and counterproductive, in that it proved to be ineffective in terms of procuring divine favor, protection, provision of crops, military victory, and so on (Is. 41:23-24; 44:6-21; Jer. 10:15), and often brought with it divine retribution as a dire consequence. (Dt. 11:13-18; 18)

As such, a predominant characteristic of early Israel's ban on images is its link to the ban on the worship of foreign gods on ethical political grounds, a theme we repeated in Hosea, but most notably the post-exilic prophets, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.¹⁸ The general social critique of the prophets tries to show the links between idolatry and poverty, social injustice, and economic struggle.¹⁹ Social injustice and the plight of the poor is tied to, and is a consequence of, idolatry. The anti-image rhetoric in Hosea (8:4-8) has largely to do with the betrayal of God and God's ways that is signified in idol-worship,

affront to God's divine kingship. Treaties with Assyria and Egypt are seen by the prophetic texts (Isaiah 30, 31:57, Jeremiah 2, and Ezekiel 16) as examples of Israel's lack of trust and belief, and akin to the betrayal of loyalty enacted in idol worship.

¹⁵ Lev. 26:27-33; Nu. 33:51-56; Dt. 29:16-28.

¹⁶ Ex. 20:5, 34:14, Deut 5:8-10, Ezekiel 8:3, Nahum 1:2.

¹⁷ Dt. 6:14-15; Joshua 24:19-20; Psalms 78:58-64; Zeph. 1:18.

¹⁸ Hosea 2:15, 8: 4-6, 11:2, 13:1-2, 14:4, 9.; Ez. 16:15-24, 22:4.; Jer, 2: 5-8, 20-26. 5:26-31, 8:8-12.

¹⁹ J. David. Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 226-228, 288-289, 324-328, 333-336.

issuing a critique of the broken ethical culture that gave rise to idolatry, rather than a censure of the practices themselves. In Jeremiah (2:26-27), the prophet insists that poverty and other social ills have been caused by the ideology of the monarchical establishment. The actions of the ruling elite run contrary to the ethical way of life set forth by Yahweh, and as a result, injustice, inequality, and exploitation dominate the social landscape rather than that peace, abundance, and prosperity promised upon the completion of the rebuilding program. It was God's moral outrage against the ideology of elite that caused God to depart from their midst. Ezekiel (14:1-11; 14:5; 16:6-9, 15-29) echoes the ways that the betrayal of God through image worship violates the covenantal pact and so has led to an estrangement from God, which has resulted in decline, poverty, and infighting amongst the Israelites, further weakening them.

In the politico-theological context of early Judaism, anti-pagan and anti-idol rhetoric are closely linked.²⁰ Idolatry critique pejoratively aligns the accused (unfaithful Israelites) with the false worship of the non-Israelite, who are viewed as "alien" and "pagan," and as such, are subjects of divine wrath and violence. Idolatry was a vice of the "heathens," those who did not possess the truth about Yahweh and did not know the covenantal promises. Idols were unclean vices because they were used by pagans. For Ezekiel, the worship of idols is linked to alliances with foreign nations and their gods (11:22-33),

²⁰ Isa. 14:1, 21:9, 44:9-20; Jer. 10:1-16; Ezek. 20:32, 30:13, and Hosea 13:2. Also, see Dt 7: 5, 25, 12:2-5.; For additional commentary on these texts and the way they link anti-idol rhetoric and anti-pagan polemic, see Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2002), 19-65.

a point echoed in Ezra's critique of intermarriage (Ezra 7-10) as an idolatrous abandonment both of God and of their distinctiveness as a people.²¹ The rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of the holy land require the absolute commitment of the people of God. Marriages, treaties, and other forms of affective attachment outside the Israelite community sullies and dilutes its unique, exclusive link to God, and as such, are interpreted as idolatry.²² The anti-idol rhetoric plays a particular role in shaping the moral and political concerns of exilic and post-exilic Israel, in that it provides significant impetus for social cohesion and the maintenance of a distinctively Jewish community, in light of the collective social experience of occupation, forced migration, and resettlement. This is true, not only of Ezekiel and Ezra/Nehemiah, but also Jeremiah and Isaiah, as Walter Brueggemann has persuasively argued.²³

Idolatry critique and its origin was not solely ethical and political, but had a theological impetus as well. In the Hebrew-biblical perspective, idolatry is a theological issue because it rejects ideas about God that are essential to the particularity of Israelite worship. Usually associated with practices involving images, items, and statutes involving or evoking anthropomorphic representations of god/gods, the problem of idolatry is the mistake of an image for the real thing, or claiming to represent that which cannot be presented. The prohibition of the use of images in worship is meant to avoid this error. To

²¹ Andrew Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 101-137 and 174-178.

²² Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, 198, 256.

²³ Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1986); Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998)

attempt to represent god with items composed of everyday, ordinary materials and constructed by human hands is to completely misunderstand your place in relation to the god/gods - with dramatic consequences.

As the unnameable and ineffable god, 'YHWH' is radically mysterious and so beyond human comprehensibility and conventional speech. All images fail to tell the truth about divine invisibility and god's metaphysical otherness because they represent god as possessing a body, immanently present, and so accessible to human thought and speech. And so, to venerate an image thought to be represent God that was fabricated by the work of human hands is to elevate a product of human labor as equal and proper to the divine nature. The corporeal or material is simply not suitable to properly represent that which is always beyond the laws of bodies, motion, and force. In their use of images, idolaters demonstrate how little they know of the true nature of god/gods, and so their worship is considered to be illegitimate acts of infidelity and betrayal. The biblical argument against idolatry insist that true worship is about commitment, loyalty, and fidelity to one's god and the practice of idolatry misconstrues it, shifting its focus from that of commitment to representation. The politics of the image then rests on whether the truth about God can be accessed, represented, and so experienced, or if it is indeed beyond knowledge, and so demands something else, something unbearably demanding from the human being: faith.

One way of demarcating true worship (that is, of the god of the Israelites) from false worship was by forbidding image-veneration altogether. The prohibition seems to suggest that the use of images to represent God for worship (or the ascription of divinity

to images) is the practice of rival religions and so would be considered an affront to Yahweh's claims to uniqueness and particularity. Biblical narratives that critique sculptures or objects are very polemical and are intended to undermine the plausibility of the gods of Israel's political adversaries.²⁴ This theme, which bases the critique of idolatry on the basis of Yahweh's distinctive and unique particularity which calls for a special fidelity and loyalty in return, is dominant in the prophetic literature, most notably in Second Isaiah where Yahweh is consistently and repeatedly compared to other deities so as to highlight their useless, impotent, and empty character.²⁵ Yahweh's words and deeds are incomparable to other deities; they are *sui generis*, and so the practices and beliefs proper to worship of these other gods are simply not acceptable when it comes to Yahweh, specifically the veneration of images, objects, items, etc, made graven by ritualized consecration. How can the unnameable 'Yhwh' be properly represented in an image?²⁶ The critique of idolatry refuses to recognize any authentic divine presence in idols; it dismisses them as worthless and mundane objects with no power. The condemnation of images, ob-

²⁴ Ex. 32, Jg. 8:24-27, 17-18, 1 Kgs. 12.

²⁵ Second Isaiah 43:8-13, 44:6-8, 45: 18-21.

²⁶ Joel Marcus, "Idolatry in the New Testament," *Interpretation* 60.2 (April 2006): 156. Marcus notes that in the ancient Near East context, all those groups or communities who used icons, images, or objects in worship, objects made graven by practice and ritual, would have understood them as separate and different from the divinities they represented; image-veneration was a question of representation, not identification. While iconic cults may have considered images to be imparted with divine power, the images themselves were not thought to be divine. As such, the polemic against idol worship was a 'caricature' and a 'distortion', as if those outside the Israelites literally worshiped their images or icons. In fact, the 'crass identification of the image with the god' shows how the biblical critique of idolatry was "deliberately" used to define the 'essence of the pagan.'

jects, statues, etc. is based on the fact that they are constructed by human hands from natural, ordinary, and inanimate materials; this can hardly be considered suitable representation of the one, true and living God.²⁷

Biblical scholars have been typically assumed that such a prohibition was an extraordinary case in the ancient near east, a context of vapid polytheistic and iconographic belief and practice where the worship of gods other than the God of Israel involved veneration of the images, objects, and icons that represented these deities.²⁸ This claim to distinctiveness has been reconsidered as of late by scholars of Israelite aniconism who see a continuity in the belief and practice of early Israel with its ancient near eastern

²⁷ For example, see Jer. 10:10, 12-13. This critique of idolatry is summarized in a problem often cited in Mesopotamian literature on the rituals surrounding the veneration of images which emerges when one tries to explain how these objects can properly represent deities and their power, given that these normal, banal images used as objects of religious worship were very often crafted from normal, banal, everyday materials. What is it about the means or mode of their construction that transforms or converts them from mundane stone, mud, and wood to become appropriate 'stand-ins' for God? The biblical critique of idolatry argues that natural materials cannot be converted into an accurate representation of divine being, and so are impotent and false representations of the immaterial by the material. For detailed explanations of this problem in early Israelite religious belief and practices in the context of the ancient near east religious world, see Jacobsen, "The Graven Image," in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, eds. P.D. Hanson and S.D. McBride, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 23-28.; Tryggve Mettinger, *No Graven Images: Israelite Aniconism in its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1995), 21.; Karel van der Toorn, "Iconic Book," in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leuven: Peeters: 1997), 235-239.; Berlejung, "Washing the Mouth," in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leuven: Peeters: 1997), 45-72.

²⁸ Johannes Tromp, "The Critique of Idolatry in the Context of Jewish Monotheism," 105-120.;

David Morgan, "The Vicissitudes of Seeing: Iconoclasm and Idolatry," *Religion* 33 (2003): 170-180;

Robert Carroll, "The Aniconic God and the Cult of Images," *Studia Theologica* 31.1 (1977): 51-64;

J.M. Kennedy, "The Social Background of Early Israel's Rejection of Cultic Images," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 17 (1987): 138-144; C. D. Evans, "Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism." in *The Pitcher is Broken: Memorial Essays for Gosta W. Ahlstrom* JSOTSup 190, ed. S. W. Holloway and LK Handy (Sheffield: Sheffield, Academic Press, 1995), 192-212; B. B. Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts," in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judiasms*, ed. D. V. Edelman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), 75-105.

neighbors, with a notable difference in exilic and post-exilic periods that coincide with shifts in monarchical attitudes.²⁹ Aniconism, it turns out, is not a uniquely Israelite religious feature: it appears in neighboring near eastern cults and seems to have coexisted with iconic sensibilities, given the absence of any expressed veto or proscription of images, like what we see developing in early Israel, dating back roughly to redactions taking place around sixth century BCE³⁰, but perhaps starting in response to Hoseanic criticism of divine images.³¹ On the related questions whether or not Israelite cult was always aniconistic, and whether the prohibition of images was always programmatic or if it was preceded by a de facto form (an unreflective absence of images), Mettinger³², T.J. Lewis³³, Hendel³⁴, and others have argued that although Israelite ‘programmatic aniconism’ was rather late, there is consistent and sustained evidence of an absence of images in cultic

²⁹ Theodore J. Lewis, “Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 118.1 (January 1998): 37; Tryggve Mettinger, “The Veto on Images and the Aniconic God in Israel,” in *Religious Symbols and Their Functions*, SIDA 10, ed. H. Biezais (Stockholm, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1979), 15-29.

³⁰ Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 16, 136.; Also see Mettinger, “Israelite Aniconism: Developments and Origins,” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leuven: Peeters: 1997), 175-180, 183.

³¹ Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 65.

³² Mettinger, “Israelite Aniconism: Developments and Origins,” 173-204. and Mettinger, *No Graven Images*, 13-58, 135-197.

³³ Lewis, “Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel,” 36-53.

³⁴ Ronald S. Hendel, “The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Early Israel,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 365-381.; Ronald S. Hendel, “Aniconism and Anthropomorphism in Ancient Israel,” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leuven: Peeters: 1997), 206-228.

worship of Yahweh by the Israelites.³⁵ And yet, Mettinger carefully distinguishes between a late ‘programmatically aniconism’ (a consciously negative attitude that produces an expressed proscription and repudiation of images) and an early ‘de facto aniconism’ (which lacks a negative attitude, but still shows evidence of an absence of images without antagonism).³⁶ The latter form was a response to the anthropomorphic religions of Israel’s neighbors, a sensibility that intensified in exilic conditions, which put the people of Israel in much closer contact with iconic cults.³⁷ Hendel surmises that idolatry critique became a ‘subject of theological reflection’ whereas before it has simply been a ‘conventional observance’, and was part of a process of reconfiguring the relationship between God and humanity after a harrowing experience of radical displacement, collective alienation, and painful exile.³⁸ In its programmatic form, idolatry was defined as the violation of the expressed proscription of images; this is the form we find in Exodus and Deuteronomy. T. Mettinger argues that this programmatic aniconism, which is a “fairly late literary formulation”, points to its origins within the late-exilic or early post-exilic circumstances of the sixth century BCE.³⁹ What, then, is the reason for this development? What might motivate early Israelite religion to deepen and codify their prohibition on divine images?

³⁵ Hendel, “The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Early Israel,” 366-368.

³⁶ Mettinger, “Israelite Aniconism: Developments and Origins,” 178-184, 199-204.

³⁷ Mettinger, “Israelite Aniconism: Developments and Origins,” 201.

³⁸ Hendel, “Aniconism and Anthropomorphism in Ancient Israel,” 206ff.

³⁹ Mettinger, “Israelite Aniconism: Developments and Origins,” 180-183.

At this juncture, I want to close by make a few points: first, idolatry critique was not only a theological critique of false worship practices, but was also a political way of distinguishing between Israelite identity and that of other competitors. The use of images as a practice belongs to the worship of other gods, and so cannot be used in the worship or representation of Yahweh. The proscription on images issued from idolatry critique was used in order to distinguish the God of Israel (for whom images are not necessary and are inadequate) from those other foreign divinities who “constituted a clear and present danger and therefore were objects of abhorrence and calculated derision.”⁴⁰ As Israelite religion developed into early Judaism, this critique was increasingly applied, not only to the images used in worship, but also to the gods they were thought to represent and the ‘nations’ they patronize. Indeed, anti-image rhetoric and polemic against idolatry became a common-place marker of Israelite identity, namely “their imageless worship and stubborn refusal to revere or even acknowledge the existence of other gods.”⁴¹ Rebuking and disavowing the legitimacy of cultic images as idols became an effective strategy to attack the the foreign religious cults themselves for their theological failure. By this, the worshipping community of Yahweh demonstrates to itself, not only the superiority of their god (the One whose greatness cannot be adequately worshiped using material and human-made cultic images), but of the rightness of their own cultic-nationalist identity. I have suggested that aniconistic opposition to idolatry was “an exercise in redrawing

⁴⁰ Marcus, “Idolatry in the New Testament,” 108.

⁴¹ Marcus, “Idolatry in the New Testament,” 110.

group boundaries for the people of God”⁴², especially at significant points in their history: the years and periods proceeding or preceding military or political defeat.

Its aniconistic position is often identified as one of the distinctive and unique theological traits of the Israelite religion and served as an indication of its missional identity and agency in sharp contrast to its other cults in their immediate context. But any programmatic aniconism appears to be a rather late development in the history of Israelite religion, even if a ‘de facto aniconism’ preceded it. This means that prior to the sixth century BCE, Israelite worship may have looked much more like its neighbors, in both its polytheism and use of images in worship. The emergence of idolatry critique, then, signals a theological shift, but also a political one, grounded in the exilic and post-exilic circumstances that Israelite community found itself in during this period. In the next section, I want to explore the political origins of idolatry critique in the interest of clarifying what is meant within theology by idolatry. It is important to show that idolatry and ideology have different functions, both politically and theologically. For this, I want to ask a few questions: was the aniconism that materialized into idolatry critique a distinctive and unique feature of Israelite religion in contrast to its neighbors in the ancient near east? What were the key political implications of the development of idolatry as a critical concept in early Judaism?

The Political Origins of Idolatry Critique

It should be clear that idolatry is not only about a theological critique about false worship. In this section, I want to explore the origins and motivations of idolatry *critique*,

⁴² Marcus, “Idolatry in the New Testament,” 107.

not the practices themselves. In particular, I am interested in the connection between the politics of iconoclast theology and the rise of early Judaic monotheism. What was the character of Israelite aniconism - and how is it linked to its monotheism? In what ways did the iconoclasm of idolatry critique define the political-theological identity of ancient Israel, specifically in relation to its development as a monotheist religion? My hope is that we are able to clarify the relation between idolatry and ideology by exploring in more detail their respective political-theological significance.

It is important to carefully distinguish between idolatry as an actual religious practice and idolatry as a theological polemic in monotheist discourse. For me, this helps us discern in the origins of the critique of idolatry a theopolitical “discourse of othering.” For me, this would make the critique of idolatry suspect in itself and would question the presumed parallelism between ideology and idolatry that operates prevalently in modern political theology. Such a suspicion belongs to ideology critique, and so one must be careful not to wholly dispense with the *ad intra* critique of idolatry for this reason, as if the ethical way of life it promotes (an ethics of fidelity and faithfulness to the covenantal way of social life called for by those who claim to love and belong to God) loses its inherent value once it is shown to have been used ideologically. The iconoclastic tendency within Israelite religion is no doubt a *theological* politics enforced and enacted by its idolatry critique. To understand this, we must consider the social origins of these newly iconoclastic theologies, rather than looking to their theological assertions alone. There were distinct polemical formulations in which the development of idolatry critique as a biblical political theology were embedded; this departs in some important ways from the

idea that religions like Judaism are natively disposed to reject images, a “myth of aniconism” that art historian David Freedberg once called “wholly untenable.”⁴³ Instead, we find that idolatry critique emerges on the cultural and political scene in early Judaism at an exilic and post-exilic time when Israel is desperately in need of social cohesion and a politically distinct Jewish life. Idolatry critique is all about establishing and repairing the distinctiveness of Israel’s identity amidst the challenging politics of exile.

The biblical critique of idolatry has a complicated historical, rhetorical, and polemical context in ancient Near East religious practice. The ancient Near East was marked by near universal polytheism that was expressed commonly through many different iconographic cultic practices. Israelite religious critique of these practices as “idolatry” has long been identified as one of the essential unique features of its theology, a result of its remarkable commitment to monotheism. It is widely assumed that Judaism and its religious genealogical antecedents has always been aniconic, and that its monotheism left it theologically inclined to reject all use of images in reference to god/gods, making its uniquely aniconistic theology a religious and political outlier in the ancient near eastern context. Of course, the aforementioned multiplicity within the biblical material makes it difficult to make universal claims one way or the other: that the Israelite cult was fully aniconic or that it made full use of images, or that it was either universally monotheist or frequently worshiped many different gods. There is historical and archaeological evi-

⁴³ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 54.

dence that points to both the significant use of cultic images and the prevalence of polytheist belief in the history of Israelite religion, most prevalent in the pre-exilic period of the first temple. In fact, there might not have been much difference between Israel/Judah and its neighbors in the first temple period in terms of their aniconism or use of images.⁴⁴

The use of anthropomorphic cult-images in First Temple period Israelite religious practices appears to be much more widespread, making it clear that aniconism did not demarcate Israelite religious belief as much as previously thought. Instead it is shown to be something that developed and became prevalent in the years between the exilic and post-exilic period and the building of the Second Temple.⁴⁵ Scholars note that the significant rise of anti-image rhetoric during these periods suggest not that the cessation of image-use was widespread, but instead argues in favor of it continuing to some way and form, at least to the extent that it was considered necessary to continually oppose it.⁴⁶ The simultaneous presence of both the anti-image polemic of idolatry critique and the rather persistent, wide-spread use of these forbidden images within Israelite communities challenges us to better understand the motivations for the anti-image polemic, especially if a *de facto*

⁴⁴ Herbert Niehr, "In Search of YHWH's Cult Statue in the First Temple," in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 73–95.

⁴⁵ Naomi Janowitz, "Good Jews Don't: Historical and Philosophical Constructions of Idolatry," *History of Religions* Vol. 47. 2/3 (November 2007/February 2008): 237-243.

⁴⁶ Janowitz, "Good Jews Don't: Historical and Philosophical Constructions of Idolatry," 241. Also, see Brian Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts," 75-105.

aniconism and iconic cultic practices seemed to have co-existed without too much struggle in pre-exilic, First Temple period.⁴⁷

The specific context for the rise of anti-image rhetoric within Israelite political theology was decidedly “post-exilic”. This material appears to have linked the critique of cultic images with other rhetorical assertions so as to accomplish specific *political* goals related to the new situation that Israel found itself in after the Babylonian captivity that followed the fall of the first temple. And so, why the turn to aniconism and its iconoclastic theologies in Israelite religion during the exilic and post-exilic periods? What is clear is that Israel’s theological position(s) on images shift, following political patterns that coincide with their experiences of exile and diaspora, return and rebuilding. The condemnation of image-veneration as idolatry emerged from within a particular historical and polemical context which the people of Israel were forced to give an account both of their political and cultic failures and to rally their communities together after long periods of exile, displacement, and diaspora. The years leading up to the Second Temple period left Israel very vulnerable and exposed, and so the rise of anti-image rhetoric and iconoclastic theology seems connected to the need to reassert Israelite group boundaries as an political act of community formation after periods of displacement and disconnection from the ‘homeland.’ Idolatry critique did not produce anti-image rhetoric itself, but rather deployed it in a distinctly political way to justify specific acts of image-destruction and subsequent punishment for those who used images in worship of Yahweh and other gods,

⁴⁷ Christoph Uehlinger, “Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary in Iron Age Palestine and the Search for Yahweh’s Cult Images,” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 97–155.

practices that been actively a part of Israelite cultic and religious life in years and periods past.

Whereas R. Hendel and others proffer mostly theological reasons for Israel's aniconism - and there is little doubt such ideas played a major role,⁴⁸ I want to highlight the predominant place that politics had in the rise of the anti-image polemic of idolatry critique: specifically the use of idolatry critique for the sake of a particular kind of identity politics. Hendel makes a similar argument by noting that, "in my view, the prohibition of divine images was, in origin, a natural extension of the early Israelite bias against kingship in its social and religious dimensions."⁴⁹ Hendel elaborates, using the aforementioned Mettinger and Carroll, but quoting the work of O. Keel: "many Israelites under the influence of their nomadic heritage, rejected the excessive richness of the graphic images as strange or evil, in the same way that they rejected kingship and other institutions of the settled people. In this way, socio-cultural, political, and theological motives are mixed."⁵⁰ To see how and why it is that the aniconic tradition morphed in the exilic and post-exilic period, Hendel insists, we must pursue the "principle of patterning" whereby idolatry critique is seen "as an integral expression of religious and political principles on which the universe of early Israel was constructed."⁵¹ The primary principle at work was Israel's opposition to the institution of kingship, based largely on the early covenantal position

⁴⁸ Hendel, "The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Early Israel," 368.; Hendel, "Aniconism and Anthropomorphism in Ancient Israel," 228-224.

⁴⁹ Hendel, "The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Early Israel," 381, note 74.; Hendel, "Aniconism and Anthropomorphism in Ancient Israel," 226-228.

⁵⁰ O. Keel, 39-40, as quoted in Hendel, "The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Early Israel," 372.

⁵¹ Hendel, "The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Early Israel," 373.

that Yahweh alone was king, which left no need for early monarchy and posed an antagonism between monarchial orders and the early Israel's theological commitments. The theme is repeated frequently in prophets like Hosea (8:4-6) whose anti-kingship sentiments are located in close proximity to its critique of idolatry, which makes sense given the close link between royal and divine iconography in the ancient near east.⁵² But, of course, Israelite aniconism remains in effect long after the establishment of the monarchy and the effect that this aniconism had on the theology of early Israel was significant: the relation between Yahweh and the monarchy was covenantal, not iconographic, namely because the very unnamable name of 'Yhwh' itself had become iconoclastic, and a programmatic aniconism became the constitutive difference between Israel and its foreign 'others.'

The purposes of idolatry critique were undeniably political: it was a strategic way of solidifying Israelite politico-religious identity while identifying its neighbors as somehow foreign or alien threats to the vitality of the cultic covenant. It was the fault of these neighbors, their gods, and the iconic cults that surrounded them that were to be blamed for Israelite exile; intermarriage, military alliances, and image veneration were all types of idolatry that lead jeopardized divine protection and provision. As such, the demand for

⁵² Hendel, "The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Early Israel," 378-381. Hosea poses the most problems for scholars who date the idolatry critique redactions to the 6th century, namely because Hosea's anti-image and anti-foreign rhetoric have the mature elements of a conscious, polemical attempt to demonize a religious adversary, but does not seem to be acting on the basis of an existing prohibition or in light "of a programmatic theologically or philosophically ground rejection." See Wesley Toews, *Monarchy and Religious Institution in Israel under Jeroboam I* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993), 168 as cited in Mettinger, "Israelite Aniconism: Developments and Origins," 181, note 31. Also see Peter Machinist, "Literature as Politics: Tukulti-Ninurta Epic and the Bible," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38. 4 (1976): 455-482, especially 467ff, and Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 135ff.

iconoclastic reform that characterized Israelite programmatic aniconism was a way to explain the condition of defeat and exile, and thus to generate the relationships of difference that secured the cohesion and distinctiveness requisite for strong notions of identity. This gesture organized associations and alignments through systems of boundaries, and positions relationships within the semiotics of inside/outside, truth/falsehood, one/many: one's own identity and the identity of the other. The partition of politics in this way establishes (and seeks to normalize) a political logic that emphasizes politics as a matter of policing boundaries of identity. Idolatry critique is not primarily a theological critique of other religions and their practices or of the use of cultic images within the Israelite religion(s), but instead came into common use within early Judaism as rhetorical and polemic leverage that was intended to solidify the collective identity of the Israelite people in the aftermath of their defeat, occupation, and captivity.

I am arguing that Hebrew 'programmatic aniconism' is a political theology whereby exilic and post-exilic voices align themselves with an iconoclastic rhetoric that is a product of a historical period where the northern kingdom found itself under enormous political and economic pressure from its Assyrian neighbors, which resulted in the migration of Yahwehists into Judah.⁵³ In response, they enacted what Jan Assmann has called a 'theologization' of politics: the idea that the exclusive worship of one god would result in political victory and freedom for the people of Israel, and all those who worship

⁵³ For more on how idolatry critique is connected to rise of the 'Yahweh-alone' movement which gave birth both to the politics of prophetic consciousness as well as its theological monotheism of early Judaism, see Bernhard Lang, *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority. An Essay in Biblical History and Sociology* (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1983), 13-56 and Robert Gnuse, "The Emergence of Monotheism in Ancient Israel: A Survey of Recent Scholarship," *Religion* 29.4 (1999): 315-336.

other gods (and who worship and represent Yahweh through images, icons, idols, etc) risk igniting divine anger and retribution. For since Yahweh is indeed the only god with real, lasting power, Yahweh would indeed reward their exclusive fidelity with an large-scale intervention in Israel's favor. When the exilic prophets invoke Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh as a reason for their on-going oppressive and exilic state of affairs, they are calling upon the rhetorical power of idolatry critique to link conditions of social injustice and inequality to idol worship, thus blaming elements within Israel, defined as foreign or alien. for their downfall, defeat, and displacement. Israel as a people must worship only Yahweh if Israel expects to experience the kind of freedom and prosperity promised to them in the covenantal commitments of monolatry. One of the many purposes of and motives for idolatry critique was to establish a firm boundary between Israel (who does not use images in Yahweh-alone worship) and its foreign neighbors, who do use images in its polytheistic worship, much like Israel in previous periods prior to fall of the first Temple and the exilic Babylonian captivity.

For me, the critical point here is this: the critique of idolatry was as thoroughly political in motivation and consequence as it was theological in substance. To clarify these points is to demarcate its differences, then, with ideology, making it very difficult to presume that they are as concepts or terms interchangeable within theology. While idolatry critique can come from a genuine theological desire to properly represent God, it is also necessary to understand idolatry critique as a polemical tactic of the identitarian politics within Israel's developing monotheist theology. One effect of the Decalogue's disavowal of images is iconoclastic politics, produced by the link between monotheism

(‘you shall have no other gods before me’) and aniconism (‘you shall not make yourself a graven image or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven, or that is in the earth below, or that is in the water under the earth’). What idolatry critique tries to maintain as a first principle is that images fail to tell the truth when it comes to speaking of or representing god/gods - especially when it comes to Yahweh, but this claim was deployed with thoroughly political purposes of differencing the theological identity of the Israelite cult from that of its iconic and iconophilic neighbors. The critique of idolatry became an Israelite theopolitical strategy that used its iconoclasm to justify both the opposition to image- veneration and to generate acts of image-destruction. It presumes a recognizable distinction between truth and falsehood; that is, there are right and wrong ways of representing, believing, and worshipping god/gods, justifying the iconoclastic politics and the aniconistic theology that solidified exilic and post-exilic Israelite religion. This link provides the ‘othering’ logic necessary to establish a group community organized around exclusivity and singularity, a theo-logic and iconoclastic rhetoric not familiar to the ancient near east context prior to its development and usage by certain strands to re-establish early Jewish identity after defeat, diaspora, and exile. The iconoclastic purpose of idolatry critique employs iconoclasm is to *produce* the other against which it operates; without the strange, foreign, or alien ‘other’ over against which ‘true’ worship is established, a critical position on idolatry makes little sense.

With this understanding ready at hand, it become more difficult to use ideology and idolatry interchangeably, as it is clear that they have distinct theological meanings

and political functions. This aspect of the difference between idolatry and ideology critique goes largely unrecognized by theologians who often too quickly mediate the relation of theology to ideology through idolatry without recognizing the specific function of its theopolitical logic as distinct from each other.

Theologies of Idolatry Critique

This section looks at how theologians have treated the subject of ideology in relation to theology *as* idolatry. This is not an exhaustive, comprehensive or complete account, but merely a sampling to give us a sense of the trends on the issue. All too often, theologians take up the concept of ideology as if it was more or less interchangeable or cognate with idolatry, as if their theological meaning or political function were the same, or at least, of minimal difference. This attitude usually comes from a rather thin and superficial understanding of ideology critique, but also a over-theologized interpretation of idolatry. I question this relationship, arguing instead that idolatry and ideology are essentially different - and their critiques amount to very different political stances. Theologians cannot simply respond to a call for critique within political theology by pointing to internal traditions of idolatry critique within theology; they must first come to terms with the politics of idolatry critique as separate from and subject to the critique of ideology as an immanent manner. As will be clear in the next chapter, such a critique is necessary for political theology to address the dual negativity of its own immanent critique: a negativity directed towards the present dynamics of the social conditions and the ideological self-sufficiency of its own theological concepts for transformative praxis.

This analysis calls upon a major theme in modern political theology, namely the implications of the theology of sin and human action for ethics and politics, as proposed by political, liberation, and feminist theologians, many of whom take on the questions of sin, estrangement, and idolatry in the context of Marxist politics, religious symbols, and the ideologies of power undergird patriarchal and heteronormative theological attitudes about sexuality and gender identity. These theologians attempted to surface and highlight the theological category of sin, perhaps even to the extent of fashioning theology as a kind of critical hamartiology. They frequently deploy the critique of idolatry as a theological strategy to oppose instances of rebellion, distortion, and false representation, interpreting them as idolatry, and as such, as sin, as a way of offering an immanent critique of ideology in theological terms. This kind of use of idolatry critique risks overlooking important political dimensions in the negative reading of the relationship between idolatry and ideology critique; more specifically, we will find that these theologians do not attend to the tension within the biblical concept between the prophetic understanding and the critical understanding of the biblical theology of idolatry, nor do they do not turn to the problematic of identity politics. in large part due to the ongoing nature of the biblical scholarship on the relation of biblical aniconism and its iconoclastic politics

Paul Tillich: Religious Socialism and 'the Protestant Principle'

The American reception of Paul Tillich has centered on his tripartite *Systematic Theology*, where there are scant mentions of Marx, ideology, or other socialist ideas or themes. As such, it is typical to see him primarily as an existentialist theologian, making it difficult to fully appreciate his Marxist political and theoretical leanings. However, in

the years between 1912-1933, before his removal from Frankfurt by the National Socialists and his subsequent arrival in New York City, Paul Tillich was an active socialist committed to critically reinterpreting Marxist ideas with the help of religion, which affords socialism with “theonomous” reason. Following the failure of the 1918-19 Revolution in Munich, Germany, the reinterpretation of Marxist ideas became imperative, and Tillich was among those at the periphery at the Frankfurt School who were hard at work at this.⁵⁴ Tillich shared many of these commitments, but did so by arguing that if religion itself could be reinterpreted, it may provide the key to overcoming the limitations of Marxist philosophy and its socialist politics: the remnants of liberal, bourgeois positivity, its ‘vulgar’ materialism, its mechanized understandings of history, progress, and change, as well as its stubborn refusal of the Unconditional.

Paul Tillich understood religion, if and when interpreted through a theology of culture, to be a critique of idolatry within socialism and for the sake of what he called ‘the proletarian situation’. Rather than the abstract use of ideology either as an critical

⁵⁴ The relationship between Paul Tillich and the Frankfurt school theorists is at last receiving the attention it deserves. Tillich supervised Adorno’s *Habilitation* on Kierkegaard’s aesthetics and was instrumental on Max Horkheimer’s and Theodor Adorno’s placements at Frankfurt in the 1930s. Cf. Bryan Wagoner, *The Subject of Emancipation: Critique, Reason and Religion in the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Paul Tillich* (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2013).; James Champion, “Tillich and the Frankfurt School: Parallels and Differences in Prophetic Criticism,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 69.4 (1986): 512-530.; Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*. Vol. 10. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 24-30, 307 n.87.; Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 37, 91-93, 111, 116.; Terence O’Keeffe, “Tillich and the Frankfurt School” in *Theonomy and Autonomy: Studies in Paul Tillich’s Engagement with Modern Culture* ed. John Jesse Carey, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 67-87.; Robert P. Scharlemann, ”Totality: A Philosophical and Theological Problem Between Tillich and the Frankfurt School.” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 47.3 (1991): 329-341. Francis Ching-Wah Yip, *Capitalism as Religion? A Study of Paul Tillich’s Interpretation of Modernity*. Harvard Theological Studies. No. 59. (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 59-70.

category (Marx) or a general, sociological description of ‘knowledge’ (Mannheim), Tillich concretizes his concerns within a critical view of ‘religious socialism’ that functioned immanently within both religion and socialism to critique and correct what he saw as the failure to properly understand human nature: the constitutive essence that links ideology to idolatry together. Both religion and socialism sought to ground its critical rationalities autonomously. Attempts to do so overlooked the limitations placed on humanity by the irreducible and inescapable tension between freedom and finitude. The failure to acknowledge these limitations produced by the estrangement and dehumanization that marks the modern era.

Idolatry is Tillich’s way of speaking of the philosophical and political problem of ideology - but in specifically theological terms - and by using ‘theonomous’ reason.⁵⁵ This, however, requires a reinterpretation of religion itself as an expression of the Unconditioned, the Ultimate, the Holy as it appears amidst the human experience in culture, language, symbols, and so on.⁵⁶ As such, Tillich does not approach the question of ideology directly. Ideology is more a generic name Tillich gives for the demonic character of modern ‘barbarism’, whereby abuses of rationality are marshaled by social groups to wreck havoc on the human being, producing social conditions of alienation and dehumanization,

⁵⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 1 (Chicago, IL.: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 83-86.

⁵⁶ Paul Tillich, “Religion as a Dimension of Man’s Spiritual Life,” in *Theology of Culture*, trans. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 3-9. In his essay “Kairos,” in *The Protestant Era*, ed. James Luther Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 32 n.1., Tillich he notes that: “the unconditional is a quality, not a being, It characterizes that which is our ultimate, and consequently, unconditional, concern, whether we call it God, or ‘Being as such’, or ‘the Good as such’, the ‘True as such’, or whether we give it any other name.”

rather than the promised emancipation.⁵⁷ In his 1926 article “Kairos and Logos”, Tillich works through a reconstruction of ideology critique along the lines set forth in his religious socialism and his reinterpretation of ‘religion.’⁵⁸ If ideology is “a designation of thoughts that are used by a social group in order to justify its political and economic power”, then the critique of ideology is “meant to question the objective truth of concepts.”⁵⁹ This concerns Tillich, for without truth, there is no basis for critical reason other than its selfsame claims to its own autonomy. Ideology critique à la Marx has the unwelcome effect of deflating the otherwise dynamic character of truth and reality by identifying it first and foremost with social structure.⁶⁰ While recognizing that “the concept of ideology was a weapon for demonic power for the purpose of destroying all the hallowed truths of bourgeois and feudal culture”, Tillich found it too generic and overreaching for his purposes, arguing that “the assertion of the ideological character of thinking must allow at least one exception, namely this assertion itself.”⁶¹

Tillich believed that religion could provide the critical backbone for socialist politics insofar as it rightly identifies the limits that finite freedom places on the human actor. Religion, if reinterpreted, could provide the ‘depth of meaning’ and self-reflexive critique

⁵⁷ Paul Tillich, “The Demonic: A Contribution to the Interpretation of History,” in *The Interpretation of History*, trans. N. A. Rasetzki and Elsa L. Talmey (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1936), 77-122.

⁵⁸ Paul Tillich, “Kairos and Logos,” *The Interpretation of History*, trans. N. A. Rasetzki and Elsa L. Talmey (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1936), 123-175.

⁵⁹ Tillich, “Kairos and Logos,” 154.

⁶⁰ Tillich, “Kairos and Logos,” 152-155.

⁶¹ Tillich, “Kairos and Logos,” 155.

that socialism desperately needed for economic change and social reconstruction. Socialism also must be critically reinterpreted, however. It has retained the negative element within bourgeois thinking that makes it “exclude the unconditional from the spheres of thought and action.”⁶² This has led socialism to “deprive the spiritual and religious life of its intrinsic value, considering it mere ideology”⁶³, and so doing, had failed to recognize the practical, political link between ‘the proletarian situation’ and the critique of idolatry, or what Tillich called ‘the Protestant Principle.’⁶⁴

Here, religion is not a separate sphere of human activity, but is a vector, a dimension of all aspects and all spheres of human activity, and so can be interpreted and seen on display in ethics, aesthetics, social and political action, and indeed, in philosophy. Theology, insofar it is properly ‘God-talk’, is the self-reflexive “depth” within religion, the direction towards the Unconditional, the “ultimate concern” of human existence: “God is the presupposition of every question...the eternal substance of the conditional (which is not itself a thing) breaks through everything.” For Tillich, religion is “an aspect of the human spirit”, and so is located *within* human existence as the “dimension of depth in all of its functions”, “the aspect of depth in the totality of the human spirit.”⁶⁵ By depth, Tillich means “that which is ultimate, infinite, unconditional in man’s spiritual

⁶² Tillich, “Kairos,” 49.

⁶³ Tillich, “Kairos,” 50.

⁶⁴ Paul Tillich, “Protestantism as a Critical and Creative Principle,” in *Political Expectation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 10-39.; Also, see Tillich, “Christianity and Marxism,” in *Political Expectation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 89-96.

⁶⁵ Tillich, “Religion as a Dimension in Man’s Spiritual Life,” 5-8.

life.”⁶⁶ Interpreting religion through the metaphor of ‘depth’ makes it both political and existential by identifying it with “ultimate concern”, defined as “that which determines our being or not-being.”⁶⁷ Since “the object of theology is what concerns us ultimately”, this reconfiguration positions religion as “the all-determining ground and substance” of human life, and not as a privatized and individuated option or institutional apparatus.

The aim of religious socialism, then, to afford critical thinking with theonomy, a mediating position between individualistic isolation (autonomy) and unthinking collectivism (heteronomy). Tillich insists that “the spiritual situation in which this condition of separation is overcome, in which reality again becomes a symbol of the divine ground of meaning, where all spheres of life, even the economic, show this depth, where nothing is fundamentally unholy, where holy knowledge and holy acts are one, this we call ‘theonomy’.”⁶⁸ This theonomy is not the rigid assertion of the traditional onto-theology of religion, but rather the practical stance that follows the reinterpretation for theology in/as culture. Tillich argued that the reinterpretation of religion that religious socialism brings to social and political struggles will breakthrough the current socialist limitations and shortcomings, notably its dependence on ‘scientific materialism’, ‘the loss of wholeness and

⁶⁶ Tillich, “Religion as a Dimension in Man’s Spiritual Life”, 7-8.

⁶⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 12-15.

⁶⁸ Paul Tillich, “Die philosophische und religiöse Weiterbildung des Sozialismus,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2. (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1959), 130, as quoted and translated by Terence O’Keeffe, “Paul Tillich’s Marxism,” *Social Research* Vol. 48.3 (1981): 483.

meaning', rigid determination, empty and flat ontology which short sells human identity and destiny, and contributes to estrangement and dehumanization.⁶⁹

This 'theonomous' reason is a central aspect of ideology critique, for it allows the critical element of religion to see the political light of day. Here, Tillich insists that the only way to achieve social and political freedom is to apprehend the truly finite and contingent character of human existence. It is caught in the unbearable tension between radical finitude and creative freedom, which imbues human life with severe and tragic limitations that are the cause of social alienation and dehumanization: the denial of the natural right of the human person to actualize and achieve her natural creative freedom. These limitations also fuel the predominant human mistake: 'absolutization.' This is particularly true in theology, and so Tillich turns to idolatry as a way of interpreting ideology critique as the act of unveiling all attempts to identify or replace finite realities or sets of symbols with the Unconditional as false forms of consciousness that equate or replace being with the ground of being.

Central to this argument is 'the Protestant Principle', the call to protest and criticism as the objective criterion of authentic faith. The 'Protestant Principle' was Tillich's way of using idolatry critique to frame 'religion' itself in service to 'the proletarian situation', and puts his equivocation of ideology and idolatry on full display. For Tillich, the connections between ideology and idolatry are existential and symbolic in character. They primarily affect the human being's relation to itself, and are theologically important

⁶⁹ Paul Tillich, "Basic Principles of Religious Socialism," *Political Expectation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 58-88.; Tillich, *The Religious Situation*, ed. Richard R. Niebuhr (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 106-115.

insofar as they preclude the human person from “the dynamism of faith,” the conduit to the transcendence meaning of life itself as human being’s “ultimate concern.” Tillich starts from the basic theological axiom that “Mankind universally is in the bondage of self-estrangement. Man’s freedom is superseded by his servitude”.⁷⁰ This idea serves as “the guardian against the attempts of finite and conditioned to usurp the place of the unconditional in thinking and acting”, thereby brings to light the basic distortion of the human situation that materializes in ‘the perversion of the social order’ and ‘the demonic splitting up of humanity in general’ by capitalism.⁷¹

The ‘Protestant Principle’ is also practical idea insofar as it issues a prophetic protest against every form of self-absolutizing expression, be it creedal, dogmatic, or ethical.⁷² While not overlooking the ideologies promoted and supported by Protestantism and Protestant churches⁷³, Tillich considered Protestantism itself to be an immanent form of idolatry critique: “what makes Protestantism ‘Protestant’ is the fact that it transcends its own religious and confessional character, that it cannot be identified wholly with any of its particular historical forms.”⁷⁴ ‘Protestantism’ as a critical term originated within a

⁷⁰ Paul Tillich, “The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation”, in *The Protestant Era*, trans. James Luther Adams (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 168.

⁷¹ Tillich, “The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation,” 166.

⁷² Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1958), 33.; Terence M. O’Keeffe, “Ideology and the Protestant Principle,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51.2 (1983): 283-305.

⁷³ Tillich names several of political ideologies that Protestantism has supported and promoted (nationalism, neutrality in class struggle, dependence on political hierarchies as well as theological ones (biblicism, appeals to ‘pure doctrine’, pietism). At the core of these ideologies, argues Tillich are man-made idols that belong to Protestantism and their churches. Tillich, “The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation,” 176-181.

⁷⁴ Tillich, “The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation,” 162.

struggle against the ideologies of Catholicism ('sacramentalism') and humanism ('optimistic individualism'), which were both ideological, in Tillich's mind, because they tried to overcome or ignore the distortions and limitations of human nature by concealing the true situation of humanity.⁷⁵ It was the reformer Martin Luther who infamously identified idolatry criticism as the primary function of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith, and as such, Protestantism has been a protest of 'man-made gods', even against itself. It is its ready self-reflexivity - the ease of its self-referring character - that makes it effective at unveiling and exposing the non-ideological state of things that resides in the 'proletarian situation.'⁷⁶

The 'Protestant Principle' is specifically an ideology critique because it "contains the divine and human protest against any absolute claim made for a relative reality, even if this claim is made by a Protestant church", and so is able to act as "the judge of every religious and cultural reality" - even itself.⁷⁷ It is this critical element of 'the Protestant Principle' that "vindicates" its relationship with Protestantism itself, but also the 'proletarian situation': "the proletarian situation, in forcing Protestantism to bring to the fore the critical element of its own principle, creates the constant suspicion that Protestation

⁷⁵ Tillich, "The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation," 169.

⁷⁶ Tillich, "The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation," 170. Tillich describes the 'proletarian situation' as the social condition of class struggle within a capitalist system that uses social forms of oppression, dehumanization, and alienation, to keep members dependent upon the market and so, forced to sell their physical ability as wage labor. He considered the 'proletarian situation' to be "objectively an outstanding instance of an ideology-unveiling situation" insofar as it shows that "the needs of man... provide the criterion for distinguishing what is real from what is merely ideological."

⁷⁷ Tillich, "The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation," 163.

has itself become an ideology, the worship of a man-made God. For this reason, the proletarian situation provides a fundamental vindication of the Protestant principle and the most serious judgement of historical protestantism.”⁷⁸ Lest we think Tillich is satisfied with a correlation between Protestant Christianity and socialism, he clarifies what its relationship with the proletarian situation means for the critical character of Protestant theology: “The demand should not be made that Protestants subscribe unconditionally to socialism; rather the demand should be that Protestantism subject all its decisions and activities to the criterion of the Protestant principle in the face of the disturbing and transforming reality of the proletarian situation.”⁷⁹

Ultimately, the aim and function of ideology critique and idolatry critique is the same: “the individual Protestant should realize that, against his will, he transforms Protestantism, Christianity, and religion into an ideology; that he serves the man-made God of his social group, class or nation when he does not take seriously the reality of the proletarian situation as decisive for the future development of Protestantism.”⁸⁰ The interchangeableness of idolatry and ideology in Tillich can be seen clearly when he argues that “Protestant orthodoxy and Protestant idealism represent the sacramental and humanistic forms of the old ideologies. In both forms, a ‘man-made God’ has been substituted

⁷⁸ Tillich, “The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation,” 170.

⁷⁹ Tillich, “The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation,” 181.

⁸⁰ Tillich, “The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation,” 181.

for the true God, a God that is either inclosed in a set of doctrine or is believed to be accessible through morals and education.”⁸¹ This relationship is based on the identification of the joint of essence of ideology and idolatry as an unconscious mistake whereby the human person possesses false beliefs about the truth of reality that must be corrected by the critical power of reason. Tillich links idolatry to ideology even more clearly about in reference to religion’s critical character:

The creation of these ideologies, religiously speaking, idols, representing man’s will to power, occurs unconsciously. It is not a conscious falsification or a political life. If this were the case, ideologies would not be very dangerous. But they are dangerous precisely because they are unconscious and are therefore objects of belief and fanaticism. To reveal these concrete ideologies is one of the most important function of the Protestant Principle, just as it was one of the main points in the attacks of the prophets on the religious and social order of their time. Theology of course must provide general insight into human nature, into its distorted character and its proneness to create ideologies. But that is not enough. A religious analysis of the creation situation must unveil concrete ideologies, as Luther and the reformer did when they unveiled the all-powerful Lutheran ideology.⁸²

In sum, Tillich was interested in idolatry as a theological category with which to critique society for its immoral structures and practices. Defining idolatry as “nothing else than the absolutizing of symbols of the Holy, and making them identical with the Holy itself,”⁸³ he finds a theological appraisal of ideology to be necessary in order to confront modern confusion and distortion of religious faith. His approach to the relationship between ideology and idolatry is easily mapped onto his ‘method of correlation’ between

⁸¹ Tillich, “The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation,” 169.

⁸² Tillich, “The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation,” 169-170.

⁸³ Paul Tillich, “Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God,” *Christian Scholar* 37.3 (1955): 193.

theology and philosophy whereby theology answers cultural questions, expressed in primarily philosophical terms.⁸⁴ Theology and philosophy are united in their interest in ultimacy as the foundation of reason itself, and as such, the root of all criticism, be it theological or political. As such, ideology and idolatry are two sides of the same coin; they both express and problematize the absolutizing and technicalizing distortion of reason itself that objectifies human agency, precluding the collective participation and historical praxis that makes human existence properly *human*. The human person's authentic existence is lost in the depersonalizing forces of technical society, further alienating the human from its actuality, "the ultimate roots of human being."⁸⁵ A properly ontological theology resists this idolatry by explicating authentic faith as being of "ultimate concern" to human persons: "that which concerns our being or non-being."⁸⁶

In this way, Tillich distinguished between idolatry and authentic faith. Rather than identifying religion as ideology, Tillich considered authentic faith to be ideology *critique*: "it is a wrong generalization, derived from a metaphysical materialism, to dismiss religion itself as ideology. The transformation of philosophy into critical theory does not imply such a consequence at all."⁸⁷ Instead, he posits a structural analogy between the pro-

⁸⁴ Paul Tillich, "On ideology and utopia," in *Karl Mannheim*, eds. D. Kettler, V. Meja and N. Stehr (London and New York: Tavistock, 1984), 108-109.

⁸⁵ Paul Tillich, "The Person in a Technical Society," in *Christian Faith and Social Activism*, ed. J.A. Hutchison (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1953), 126-137.

⁸⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 12ff.

⁸⁷ Paul Tillich, review of *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, by Herbert Marcuse, *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9:3 (1941): 476.

phetic element of authentic faith and the critical nature of Marxism, meaning that the discussion of ideology is central to all assessments of theological claims, not in terms of their epistemological truth, but rather in terms of their self-assertions of being absolute, unconditional, and ultimate. They attempt to set themselves up as the representation of the unrepresentable. For Tillich, Marx is right to identify theology with ideology when and only when its symbols function idolatrously as “expressions of its will-to-power”⁸⁸: “idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy, conditioned taken as unconditioned, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, finite is given ultimate significance.”⁸⁹ The pitfall of idolatry is basically a matter of erroneous claims made in and for religious symbols: an identification of a symbol with the thing itself that effectively elevates a preliminary concern to ultimacy.⁹⁰ By being absolutized, symbols can become idolatrous formally, but this does not necessarily implicate their material referent. In fact, idolatry is best theologically defined as the confusion between the symbol and that to which it points, leading to the distortions of inauthentic faith that constrain the human being from the interface of value and meaning in the ultimate, “in which all criticism is necessarily rooted because reason itself is rooted therein.”⁹¹

Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism

⁸⁸ Tillich, “The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation,” 169.

⁸⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 13.

⁹⁰ Paul Tillich, “The Religious Symbol” in *Religious Experience and Truth*. ed. Sidney Hook (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 301-321. Cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 16.

⁹¹ Paul Tillich, review of *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, by Herbert Marcuse, *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9:3 (1941): 478.

Reinhold Niebuhr was not interested in Marxism - in large part because he considered it to have fallen prey to the very critical insights it marshaled against its supposed rivals. "A particularly significant aspect of intellectual pride is the inability of the agent to recognize the same or similar intentions of perspective in himself which he has detected in others."⁹² (196) The proud achievement of Marxism in discovering the intellectual pride and pretension of previous cultures therefore ends in a pitiful display of the same sin.⁹³ 'Christian Realism' attempts to respond with balance and approximation to the indelible tensions that exist in our social and world: tensions between finite and freedom, between choice and necessity, between justice and self-interest. Reinhold Niebuhr intended, by developing this position and securing its prominent place in Protestant political theology, to afford the social struggle and political thinking with a dialectical tool that would help subjects prevent the pitfalls of cynicism or utopianism, neither of which, in his mind, properly account for the theological reality that undergirds our world, that makes all our acts intelligible in history. This theological reality is not so much God and God's acts in history, but the nature of human being and acting. If we properly understand what the human is, and what it means for the human persons to act, this better positions us to make realist political choices.

What does Niebuhr mean by 'realist political choices' and what is the link to idolatry and its critique? Reinhold Niebuhr's interest in idolatry is characterized by an ethical

⁹² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*. Vol. 1: Human Nature. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 196.

⁹³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 1, 197.

concern for the renewed health of the social existence of human beings, brought solely by justice within history.⁹⁴ Social justice, which seeks the creative political action of liberation, requires a theological foundation, one that seeks to recognize the ambiguity of history and the limits of social achievement, both of which show the destructive, rather than redemptive, possibilities of human power. Niebuhr theorizes modern human society as structurally immoral⁹⁵, which means human agents and the social realities they construct are constitutively open to idolatry: the unholy substitution of God with that which is not God, a move replicated by immoral societies and so responsible for much of the injustice, chaos, and violence that befalls modern politics. Niebuhr takes a critical stance towards a ‘developed’ liberal culture that claims to be morally advanced while also incubating greed, inequality, oppressive power, viciousness, and cruelty, all of which are forms of idolatry, all of which are a consequence of “elevating relative aspects of life to absolute status.”⁹⁶

This moral interest in idolatry originates within Niebuhr’s theology of human sin and societal depravity, which Niebuhr called for as a return to theological discussions on social forms of divine judgment. For Niebuhr, for example, idolatry occurs when we “make some contingent and relative vitality into the unconditioned principle of meaning.”⁹⁷ This is interpreted theologically as the sin of pride, egoism, and pretension, all of

⁹⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Scribner, 1953), 88-91.

⁹⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society; A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner, 1960).

⁹⁶ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, ch. 5-6.

⁹⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 1., 178.

which assert human ways of knowing and acting as primary and absolute, rather than understanding them in relation to the infinite and absolute. The identification of ideology as idolatry rests in the way they are both essentially forms of dishonesty, self-deception, and ignorance, and wreck havoc on political subjects as they try to be and act in the world.

The political danger here comes from the actions that human subjects take in these conditions of egoism, pride, and self-certainty, it makes them unchastened, uncritical, and self-assured, a very dangerous state of affairs in a world increasingly marked by complexity that requires flexibility and nuance. Enthusiasm for change through political actions are tempered by his deeply Calvinist sympathies: Niebuhr believes it is critical to focus on the dark heart of humanity, her natural depravity, and capacity for self-delusion - all of which are the cause of ideology in our world - if we are to understand the dangers of human power. Human nature then imbues all human acting and knowing: "All human knowledge is tainted with an 'ideological' taint. It pretends to be more true than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge."⁹⁸

Niebuhr defines not just idolatry through this identification with ideology, but also sin itself as "the vain imagination by which man [sic] hides the conditioned, contingent and dependent character of his [sic] existence and seeks to give It the appearance of unconditioned reality."⁹⁹ He wants to interpret idolatry and sin so as to escape the limited

⁹⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1., 194-195.

⁹⁹ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 137-138.

classical applications of sin and judgment to moral behavior of single individuals in religious or spiritual wrongdoing, and so he can apply to the real political problem: collective egoism of group pride. And so he expresses idolatry in social terms as placing our ultimate faith in modern culture and its achievements to overcome the catastrophe of history and the corruption of society. The political effects of idolatry leave us complacent to the corruption of human power and blind to injustice. When prideful self-love and self-concern identifies itself as a political hierophany, it is idolatrous. Notably, he critiques Marxism for engendering this kind of idolatry and pride, faulting Marxists for their philosophy of history and for placing their apocalyptic hope in the revolutionary efforts of class struggle. The proletariat is just as prone to idolatry as the bourgeoisie.¹⁰⁰

If ideology is “an attempt to obscure the known conditioned character of human knowledge and the taint of self-interest in human truth”¹⁰¹, then idolatry is the theological form that the ‘ideological taint’ takes when it attempts to ignore or hide ‘the intellectual pride’ and ‘pretension’ from view - usually in the interest of aggrandizing one’s egoist interest or power.¹⁰² Idolatry is ‘the ideological taint’, the primary defect in human life, that presents itself “an occasion for man’s assertion of universal significance for his particular values”¹⁰³, and shows itself most readily in the idolatry of the church and of the

¹⁰⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Ideology and the Scientific Method” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*. ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 205-217.

¹⁰¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1., 195.

¹⁰² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 182.

¹⁰³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 35.

state, where the collective egoism ('the pride of nations') leverages the human tendency towards ideology ("the tendency to hide egoistic interests behind ideals of supposed general validity"¹⁰⁴) to "make unconditional claims for their conditional values."¹⁰⁵ In short, "the nation pretends to be God."¹⁰⁶ And this is precisely where theology, namely that which is expressed in and by prophetic religion, can and should be pressed into political service: "Prophetic religion had its very inception in a conflict with national self-deification" where it "challenged the simple identification between God and the nation, or the naive confidence of a nation in its exclusive relation to God." The theological realism of biblical Christianity affords contemporary political idolatry with a prophetic faith in which "a voice of God is heard from beyond all human majesties and a divine power is revealed in comparison with which the 'nations are as a drop of a bucket' (Is. 40:15)."¹⁰⁷ Theology is shown here to have evaded the 'false consciousness' of ideology insofar as Niebuhr is convinced that he has demonstrated its character as idolatry critique. "There is true consciousness beyond the false consciousness"¹⁰⁸, Niebuhr will argue, and that true consciousness is found in the human self-understanding provided by the critical perspective of prophetic religion, and validated by "the adequacy of its answer for human problems which others have ignored or confused."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 48.

¹⁰⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 213.

¹⁰⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 212.

¹⁰⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 215.

¹⁰⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 48.

¹⁰⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 150-151.

Both Tillich and Niebuhr articulate a structural analogy between ideology and idolatry that suggests that theological symbols function in relation to the human being in a way similar to how philosophical concepts function in relation to social realities. Ideology is to philosophy what idolatry is to theology. They are correlated methodologically, but the theological concept of idolatry is not brought to bear politically other than as a theological metaphor (sin, pride) for the material cause (the failure to understand human nature) of predominantly political problems (imperialism, exceptionalism, isolationism, and so on). The theology of idolatry critique functions as a conceptual resource for criticizing ideologies in society, but this assumes that ideologies are homologous to idols. IN this way, both idols and ideologies are thought to be failures of proper theological self-understanding about the human as a social actor and political decision-maker, errors that can only be rectified by developing better theologies that are closer to reality. Both Tillich and Niebuhr display the problematic inadequacies of the transcendental-existentialist paradigm that Metz's 'new political theology' is designed to confront in its turn to critical theory and to the Frankfurt School.

Johann Baptist Metz: Critique as Interruption

Perhaps more than any other late modern theologian, the Catholic Johann Baptist Metz's theological project is stylized as an ideology critique, in dialogue with critical theory of the Frankfurt School, that directly confronted the practical-political relationship of Christianity to modernity. Metz proposes a 'new political theology' whose primary objectives are two-fold: to offer a critical corrective of theologies whose systems left them

closed off to the contradictions of history and of social life¹¹⁰, and to formulate the eschatological message of Christian faith under the present conditions of social life.¹¹¹ This ‘new political theology’ was designed, in part, as a critique of modern bourgeois religion, which he faulted for its existential-transcendental character, its historical reticence regarding human suffering, and for furthering the privatization of Christian faith in modern society.¹¹² This political theology also features an eschatological turn, a central element in Metz’s ideology critique of the bourgeois Enlightenment subject, the product of instrumental reason and the cause of the theological crisis of modernity.¹¹³ All in all, the emergence (and assemblage) of this post-idealism theological paradigm is the most adequate way to speak of God faithfully in the church while facing the new crises of the modern era constructively.¹¹⁴

More specifically, his aim is to counter the ‘transcendental-idealist’ trends in the-ology with a praxis-oriented method that integrated the eschatological promise of biblical religion with the social-historical dimension of knowledge, for the sake of both church and society. One of the benefits of Metz’s approach here is that he takes up the question

¹¹⁰ Johann Baptist Metz, “The New Political Theology: The *Status Quaestionis*,” in *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1998), 23.; Johann Baptist Metz, “Religion and Society in the Light of a Political Theology,” *The Harvard Theological Review* Vol. 61.4 (Oct. 1968): 507-523.

¹¹¹ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 2007), 87-92.; Metz, “Religion and Society in the Light of a Political Theology,” 511-514.

¹¹² Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 25ff.

¹¹³ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 47, 58ff, 70-78.

¹¹⁴ Johann Baptist Metz, “On the Way to a Postidealist Theology,” in *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1998), 33.

of ideology directly, rather than relating them through the concept of idolatry or its cognates. This due, in large part, to his direct engagement with Frankfurt School theorists Adorno, Horkheimer, and their associates Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch.¹¹⁵ His understanding of critique is modeled from their engagement with the practical reasoning of the Marxian critique of religion and bourgeoisie modernity, rather than that of the biblical critique of idolatry - although the 'messianic religion of discipleship' plays a substantial formal role in the critical position of theology in society.¹¹⁶ And yet, his critique of the Enlightenment is dialectical: influenced by Horkheimer and Adorno, Metz emphasizes the dominative and exploitative aspects of its technical rationality, while also reminding us that there is a radically emancipatory drive for human freedom in modernity which cannot be realized if left to address its immanent crises: of authority, of reason, of religion, and most importantly, of tradition.

For theology to respond liberatively to these crises, that is, if the critical advances of the Enlightenment are to be saved from themselves, it will require "the primacy of a

¹¹⁵ For more on the relationship between Metz and the Frankfurt School, see Gasper Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery of God: Political, Liberation, and Public Theologies* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 55-62. Martinez argues that the associated theorists of the Frankfurt School certainly played a major role in the development of Metz's theology away from the transcendental-existential characteristics he received from Karl Rahner to the much more critical and negative position of 'new political theology' in the 1970s. The Frankfurt School lent him three important resources that became systematic features of the 'new political theology': the 'dialectic of the enlightenment' (which in turn generated the corollary notions of critique and praxis that Metz continually utilizes), an attention to Jewish sources and categories, and a focus on the ambiguous 'under-side' of history: the memory of the suffering and the dead.

¹¹⁶ Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery of God*, 61.

reason endowed with memory, that is, an anamnestic reason.”¹¹⁷ The interlocking categories of memory, linked with narrative and solidarity, act as critical elements that have an inaugural and ruptural effect on theology, creating space for what Metz refers to “its critical position” of dangerous memory. How does theology account for the burden of responsibility that necessarily follows ‘dangerous memory’?¹¹⁸

The formal notion of critique in Metz can best be discerned in his assessment of how theology has responded to and engaged with the Enlightenment. Theology has largely forgotten how to be critical due to its long history of either outright defensive isolation or unqualified accommodation and adaptation. Modernity in the west learned the character of critique from the Enlightenment, but under the pressure of its demands, Christianity lost itself, thinking it either had to either oppose modern values (antimodernism, neo-scholasticism) or espouse them as the realization and fulfillment of its own positions (liberal Protestant, or post-conciliar theologies). This “triumph of the Enlightenment over the Christianity of the church”¹¹⁹ is a theological ‘identity crisis’, and a casualty of theology’s attempt to respond to what it discerns as the challenge of the Marxian critique

¹¹⁷ Metz, “The New Political Theology: The *Status Quaestionis*,” 25.

¹¹⁸ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 87-92, 105-106.; Metz, “Communicating a Dangerous Memory,” in *Love’s Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, ed. John K. Downey (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999). 135-149. For Metz, the concept of “dangerous memory” links the realities of history and the challenges for society in the central declaration of Christian faith: it is in the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ’s “cry of dereliction” that we can clearly see divine solidarity and participation with and for victims of suffering and death. For an interesting account of the political implications of dangerous memory, see Bruce T. Morrill, *Anamnesis As Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2000).

¹¹⁹ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 144-150.

of ideology. Metz is deeply concerned that, in the malaise of the technicalized and dominant 'process-systems' of modernity, Christianity and its churches have abandoned the critical power that derives from their distinctive identity: who they are ought to be a shock, an interruption, of the normal flow of a world structured by accumulation, individual interest, and technical reason. Modern theology has shown itself ineffective at properly countering with its apocalyptic message of universal Christian hope the ideology of emancipation opined by 'enlightenment' due in large part to the dearth of anamnestic reasoning that highlights the facticity of victims in history and the normalization of suffering and oppression.

This eclipse of critical reason in theology generated a predominant privatizing tendency in the twentieth-century, a consequence of its *de facto* embrace of bourgeois subjectivity. The Enlightenment critique of religion, in an effort to liberate human persons from the authoritative dictates and strictures of 'metaphysical reason', only instated a different ideology. Metz, speaking of Enlightenment critics of religion, writes: "what is going on with the critique of metaphysical reason and the robust talk of 'maturity' and the 'subject' is the self-assertion of a new elite. This was a new aristocracy: the mirror image of precisely that against which they were struggling." Metz's diagnosis of the dissolution of the subject has to do with the inability to have genuine critical regard for the suffering of the other, inaugurating a catastrophic potential for deep ethical crisis. The consciousness of this 'liberated majority' is very self-oriented and very privatized.

Metz is concerned to root out this 'privatization' within theology, described in various ways as a privileging of 'individuation' (personalist, intimate, private, personal,

apolitical sphere) over the collective (social, public, political order). This ‘problematic situation’ is the result of the loss that occurs between the rise of the enlightened, liberal subject in modern philosophy and the fragmented, disparate self of postmodern thought. Like its pre-critical engagement with ‘enlightenment’, modern theology has tried to resolve this by trying to eliminate the problem through accommodation, adaption, or simply “jumped over it and through thus to be down with it.”¹²⁰

Instead of addressing this problem through the dissemination of meaning via deconstruction (Derrida), genealogy/archeologies of the self (Foucault), pragmatic cynicism (Rorty), or weak thought (Vattimo), Metz opts for something untimely: ideology critique. Instead of the more common antimodernist or integralist approaches, Metz prefers ‘critique’ as a modality understood under the rubric of practical reason), inspired in part by his direct engagement with the Marxist legacy represented by the Frankfurt school.¹²¹ Metz defines ideology as the conceptualization of reason as abstract, natural, or universal, a political problem that detracts from the modern culture of freedom and threatens the ‘eschatological proviso’ of theology as the critical force against ideologies in society.¹²²

¹²⁰ Metz, “Religion and Society in the Light of a Political Theology,” 509.

¹²¹ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 57. For more on this relationship, see Joseph A. Colombo, *An Essay on Theology and History: Studies in Pannenberg, Metz, and the Frankfurt School* (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1990).; Marsha A. Hewitt, “Critical Theory” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* ed. Peter Scott and W. T. Cavanaugh (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 455-470.

¹²² Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 141.

The critique of ideology affords the ‘new political theology’ with the “critique of critique” that it needs in order ‘think modernity against modernity.’ Metz aligns Frankfurt-style critical reason and his own ‘apologetic-practical’ theology in this way:

A critical Enlightenment also actualizes itself by resisting the tendency to denounce as superstition everything in consciousness that is determined by memory and tradition, together with whatever does not obey the calculus of scientific-technical reason, or alternatively by resisting the tendency to abandon all of this to the realm of private whim, devoid of any binding character; or the tendency to expose it to the suspicion of atheoretical subjectivity.¹²³

Metz argued that the Enlightenment produced a new subject, the bourgeois person, as its formal principle. What is the bourgeois subject and what is its significance for Metz’s theological form of ideology critique? More to Metz’s point, why is a ‘new political theology’ needed in order to critique the ideologies inherent in the identification of this bourgeoisie subject with the religious subject of Christianity? The bourgeois subject is considered ideologically problematic for a number of reasons. First, it effectively marginalized theology as a ‘private’ moral option, subsequent to the formation of the concrete identity of the person, rather than as “an expression of a *primary* need” which is constitutive for how persons think and act in history or society.¹²⁴ Second, it perpetuates an assault on tradition (which Metz eventually recalibrates as memory) that trivializes history to the impoverishment of society. Tradition is relativized by the exchange society of the bourgeois subject because it does not submit itself to the values of the market; it cannot be profitably instrumentalized. He aligns himself with the Frankfurt School on

¹²³ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 177.

¹²⁴ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 49.

this point: “Just as the bourgeois individual turns religion into a service-providing religion to which he [sic] can turn in privacy, so does he [sic] make tradition into a value which he [sic] makes use of privately. The culture industry is the subsequent expression of this process.”¹²⁵ Finally, it establishes a ‘new consensus community’ wherein the bourgeois subject is defined by its maturity and its willingness to abandon metaphysical reason as the legitimating force for ecclesial, religious, and political authorities, and to replace it with the natural and so universal, power of reason.

One can clearly see the influence of the Frankfurt school and its ideology critique of modern society, which Metz translated into theologico-political terms here as the practical foundations of a fundamental theology of critique. His engagement with the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (including a chief associate of the School, Walter Benjamin) was instrumental in his turn to eschatology and suffering in his ‘new political theology.’¹²⁶ He understands “critical theory” as a critique of ‘enlightenment thinking’ that stands in critical-constructive relation to the advances of modernity, the same relation that he envisions for the relation between practical reasoning of messianic Christianity, and the political engagement of the church in the occasionings of history.¹²⁷ As such, in

¹²⁵ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 51.

¹²⁶ See Metz, “Productive Noncontemporaneity,” in *Observations on "the Spiritual Situation of the Age": Contemporary German Perspectives*, ed. Jürgen Habermas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 167-177., and Metz, “Anamnestic Reason: A Theologian’s Remarks on the Crisis of the *Geisteswissenschaften*” in *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, ed. Axel Honneth (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 189-196.

¹²⁷ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 52-63 174-178, 195-196. Metz remarks, “Thus, theology does not at all become “critical” simply by taking over “critical theory”, integrating it itself or (supposedly) making itself superior to it... Theology must try to get a view of this history as a whole, with its presuppositions and aspiration, in its dialectical or its evolutionary version.” Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 117.

Metz's view, at the center of the Enlightenment is a critique of theology, which is "already an ideology critique."¹²⁸ This must be preserved, absorbed into the practical-fundamental stance that political theology takes in the world, in both its negative and positive aspects, a critical position that turns the practical reasoning of the church and modern society towards 'God's preferred ones': the oppressed, the suffering, and the dead, whose collective memories and cries make ongoing and incessant demands for justice, solidarity and reparations.¹²⁹

Metz believes that the Marxian critique of religion is homological with its critique of bourgeois modernity; their joint core is a Kantian 'post-metaphysical' concern with idealism that, when leveled against an elitist and ahistorical religion, generates the awareness of the social and historical conditions of knowledge requisite for any and all real political action. To counter this, Metz emphasized historical praxis as the apologetic-practical foundation for Christian theology, orienting it towards history and society through the tripartite recovery of memory, narrative, and solidarity, all in service to what Lieven

¹²⁸ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 57.

¹²⁹ Metz, "Theology As Theodicy?," in *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1998), 54-71. The 'postidealist ideology critique' takes its most political-theological shape by taking up the question of theodicy. Christianity must be able, after the catastrophe of history that was "Auschwitz", to give an account of what the question of God means in light of the dark side of history. What does theology do when confronted with the reality of history? It calls, at first, for the abandonment of 'strong' categories, and so Metz opts instead for 'weak' ones, most notably the *memoria passionis*: the remembrance of the suffering of others as the basis of all theological thinking and acting. As "a social category of Christian discourse about God", this directs the line of questioning that theology takes, especially when it concerns Christianity's reassessment of its own identity amidst historical failure and social crisis. See also Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 110-124.

Boeve has called, “a theology of interruption.”¹³⁰ The effect of this material emphases is a thorough *interruption* of theology and how and why it is done.¹³¹ This interruption is at one, both a critique of ideology and a critique of religion, explicitly acknowledging that the ideologies that most threaten to jeopardize the emancipatory potential of Christianity come from within.¹³² These ideologies, many of which originate with the uneven and non-dialectical reception of the Enlightenment critique, can only be properly overcome, says Metz, by a theology that “describes and advocates a way of being a subject in solidarity that is for everyone, something that is possible only if religion does not come to the scene subsequent to the social constitution of the subject.”¹³³ It is by offering an alternative to the bourgeois subject of rational religion that theology becomes critical of (its own) ideology and is able to contribute in a constructive way to the critical political discourse in society. In this way, attention to idolatry recedes as theology is recognizes its “forgetfulness of God”, enacted in its avoidance or amnesia concerning the cries from the innumerable victims of history, the living and the dead.

Juan Luis Segundo and Liberation Theology

¹³⁰ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 60-70; Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

¹³¹ Metz, “The New Political Theology: The *Status Quaestionis*,” 24-29.

¹³² Matthew Ashley, *Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics, and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz*. (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998); Lieven Boeve, “The Interruption of Political Theology,” in *The Future of Political Theology: Religious and Theological Perspectives*, eds. Peter Losonczi, Mika Luoma-aho, and Aakash Singh (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011), 53-65.

¹³³ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 58-59.

In its original and classic variation as a contextually Latin American discourse, liberation theology took its point of departure largely from Marxian social analysis, a matter that, although it is of historical and theological contention, continues to mark its sociopolitical and economic trajectory today.¹³⁴ This led early liberation thought to articulate a theo-political partiality towards oppressed and marginalized communities of poor, developed in relation to several grassroots social movements. This interpretation of the meaning of praxis within the immediate material conditions of Latin American life was theologically legitimated in various ways, most commonly through a political hermeneutic that relied heavily on Marxist principles.¹³⁵ The reception of Marxism, however, was uneven from the start, and became a major sticking point as Vatican leaders and other critics began their efforts to resist the growth of liberation theology in Latin American communities.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ The relation of Liberation theology to Marxism has been characterized in various ways: ‘conceptual borrowing’ (which may or may not include political alliance), appropriation, using common ground (i.e., critique of international economic development as the cause of exploitation and alienation, the economic basis of social conditions, dialectical notions of history, and so on). There is not a strict adherence to Marxist categories, as liberation theologians took liberties to apply principles with a loose, almost ad hoc, flexibility. For some Vatican theologians (such as Benedict XVI then Cardinal Ratzinger), even this goes too far, while for others (Alister Kee), liberation theology is not Marxist enough. It must incorporate Marxism in radically self-reflexive way, rather than simply “baptizing” its theory so as to fit its peculiar theological concerns and political aims. See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of Liberation Theology* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1984), and Alister Kee, *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).

¹³⁵ Michael Löwy, “Liberation-Theology Marxism” in *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, eds. Jacquet Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 225. Löwy details ‘the status of the question’ in reference to the Marxism of Liberation theology in Latin America, characterizing the type of usage as that of the “‘neo-Marxists’ - that is to say, as innovators who offer Marxism a new inflection or novel perspectives, or make original contributions to it.” (228) Examples include the concept of the poor, the critique of capitalism, and the affinity between idolatry critique and commodity fetishism. Unsurprisingly, it is notable that absent here is the concept of ideology.

¹³⁶ Defending Liberation theology from the Vatican critique that it was too aligned with Marxism, the Boff brothers argue that Marxism is only helpful for Liberation theology when “submitted to the judgment of the

A primary example of this uneven reception and usage of Marxism by Liberation theology is the concept of ideology critique. Even casual observers may note that ideology critique ought to be front and center of all liberation theological work, but seems to be used in a generic, ad hoc, and unsystematic manner. This is odd, considering the importance role ideology critique has in the Marxist critique of capitalism, specifically the bourgeois control over social relations and productive relation. Ideology critique gives weight to liberation theology's landmark characteristics: its prioritization of praxis, its suspicion of institutional and structural elements in contemporary society and politics, and finally, its desire to realize material conditions of freedom and responsibility for political subjects, notably the Latin American poor. And yet, the attention to ideology critique in the first generation of Liberation theologians is cursory at best.

One exception is the Uruguayan Jesuit Juan Luis Segundo. A major theme in Segundo's *The Liberation of Theology* is a radical "reideologization" that seeks to properly link faith to ideology for liberative purposes.¹³⁷ But this strategy is not meant to liberate authentic Christian faith from the clutches of ideology, but rather to argue for its necessity. The only way for a *liberative* Christian faith to realize itself effectively in history is through ideology. It is through ideological means that human social actors gather under a

poor and their cause." Its relationship is one of a "decidedly critical stance." Since Marx can be a "companion, but not a guide", it is treated as an 'instrument' and so liberation theologians "feel no obligation to social sciences for any use it may make, correct or otherwise, of Marxist terminology and ideas." Liberation theology "freely borrows from Marxism certain 'methodological pointers', one of which is "the mystifying power of ideologies, including religious ones." Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 28.

¹³⁷ Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 116. See also Marsha Hewitt, *From Theology to Social Theory: Juan Luis Segundo and the Theology of Liberation* (New York: P. Lang, 1990).

common rubric to achieve collective goals. The realization of these goals ('Christianity') is based on specific values ('faith'), accomplish a set of effective means ('ideology'). Segundo contends that the goal of liberation theology vis-à-vis Christian faith is not to divest itself of ideology, but rather to clarify how best to leverage its ideology against others, and to deploy its theological resources of its faith to create and sustain new ideologies that is capable of competing against the ones that are tantamount to domination and exploitation. He defines ideology as "all systems of means...that are used to attain some end or goal."¹³⁸ Ideology is neither false consciousness or illusion, nor an oppressive or conspiratorial tool of class struggle. Ideology is the concrete means to achieve and actualize the basic system of goals and values, held by individuals and social groups alike.¹³⁹ Without ideology, any real action in history would be impossible. For Segundo, in contradistinction to Marx (and Gutierrez for that matter¹⁴⁰), the goal of ideology critique is not to demolish or destruct ideology, but rather to understand it, to become more self-reflective about it in order to effectively challenge competing ideologies by creating alternatives. Within liberation theology, the aim of ideology critique is to think ideologically better. Put differently, it is to think ideologically in more self-informed way, so as to use ideology as a more generative and creative means of efficacy, of actualizing one's values.

¹³⁸ Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 16, 27-28, and 121-122.

¹³⁹ Segundo, *Liberation of Theology*, 154.

¹⁴⁰ Although Gutiérrez does not offer a robust account of ideology critique, he clearly operates with a negative and critical - so Marxist - theory of ideology. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1973), 12, 234-235.

If liberation theology seeks to generate radical and transformative social change, it must become more ideological, rather than less.

Segundo connects his work to the Marxist legacy by building this theology of liberation on a general philosophical anthropology that emphasizes the natural, creative freedoms of the human actor.¹⁴¹ When Segundo agrees with the Marxist axiom that religion is ideology, he does not mean this pejoratively (but, of course, as we learned from chapter 1, neither does Marx necessarily).¹⁴² It is not a normative-based critique of religion, but a description of how faith partners with ideological means to achieve its goals. A faith without ideology is dead. It cannot be actualized in history, and so cannot become a force for change. It is impractical and in this sense, rendered impotent. This, says Segundo, is part of the problem with western theology that liberation theology rectifies, and tries to do so by linking faith to ideology. The ultimate aim of Segundo's thinking on faith and ideology is to reconfigure their relationship in support of a Christianity that is socially and politically mediated, the goal of which is historically immanent: the concrete transformation of people's lives through economic liberation. By uniting the values of the biblical gospels (faith) with its action-oriented dimensions (ideology), Segundo seeks to refashion theology as a critical social theory, with the theological commandment of

¹⁴¹ For more on Segundo's understanding of Marxism within his liberation theology, see Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies*, 200ff. In *Faith and Ideologies*, 117, Segundo describes Marxism alone as "an efficacy—structure which forgets the values it is serving and gets carried away by its presumed autonomy and so will lose the achievement—ordered efficacy it exhibited at the start."

¹⁴² Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies*, 39.

neighborly love as its normative, ethical undercurrent. To do this, Segundo says, Christian faith must align itself with an ideology that is up to the task of efficaciously delivering this neighborly love into the Real.

Marcella Althaus-Reid and Queer Feminist Theology

Marcella Althaus-Reid is increasingly recognized as paradigmatic for the latest generation of contextual theologies that bring queer, postcolonial, and postmodern theory into conversation with Marxist liberation theologies. Her theology, designed as an ideologico-critical strategy, is queer, not only due to its interest in sexuality, but also because of her presuppositional conviction that feminist and liberation theology must actively take up the issues and questions of poverty and sexuality, not as add-ons to gender analysis, class interests, and the interrogation of race, but as central components of its search for God in/as queer life. Althaus-Reid contends that the central weakness of Liberation and Feminist theology is that they do not depart far enough from the orthodox consensus of the Christian tradition.¹⁴³ They remain primarily reformist movements that try to reconstruct the tradition, its language, and symbolic systems through its idolatry critique rather than more radical dismantling called for by the queer critique of ideology. In doing so, they are actively “repeating the Law of the Father in their theological reflection, even if using political or postcolonial or even gender analysis, by not disarticulating the relation between the construction of sexuality and systematic theology in depth.”¹⁴⁴ This

¹⁴³ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 6-11.

¹⁴⁴ Marcella Althaus-Red, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 172.

“disarticulation” is the job of queer theology, which acts as an immanent critique of ideology that is at the same time, political while also being self-reflexively theological. Althaus-Reid is of interest here because she introduces queer theory as a critical model that takes negativity of immanent critique seriously, even if this might mean that theology must put some distance between itself and normative claims that are aimed at promoting specific plans or programs for social change.

She approaches theology with a Marxist class-consciousness and a Foucaultian concern with knowledge as power, but is mostly concerned using invisible histories and narratives of queer folks as a critical hermeneutics. Althaus-Reid is eager to dismantle the social, ecclesial, and political hegemonies that are installed and justified by theological means and enforced by theological boundaries. We must go beyond a theology for social transformation and enact the disarticulation of the sexual ideology prevalent in the history of Christian theology, a task that calls for a theological queering, that highlights indecency, perversion, and deviance at the heart of a libertine theological rationality.¹⁴⁵ This queer theo-logic rebels against the regulative strictures of heteronormativity and dissents from the classical formulations for the sake of the Other, claiming to bring good news to the marginalized: the queer, the displaced, the colonized, the poor. Althaus-Reid names “the Other side” as divine, as a political hierophant that appears and enacts itself in a resistant, insurrectionary, and so, non-ideological form:

The Other side is in reality a pervasive space made up of innumerable Queer religious and political diasporas, and a space to be considered when doing contextual

¹⁴⁵ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity and God* (London: SCM Press, 2004).

Queer Theology. The Good News is that at that edge, still talking about the thousands of symbolic Nicaraguans present in every anti-capitalist demonstration, or the voices of people who stand up to claim the right to live in an alternative economic and spiritual system to the totalitarian globalization which has pervaded our lives, there is God...the God who has come out, tired perhaps of being pushed to the edge by hegemonic sexual systems in theology, has made God's sanctuary on the Other side.¹⁴⁶

Althaus-Reid finds both liberation and feminist theologies to be inadequately severe and insidiously self-aggrandizing, allowing theology to remain complicit while championing its already privileged position as the object of the 'preferential option'. Surely, Liberation theology should not be abandoned, for it was among the first to teach theology the political virtues of self-reflexivity:

Liberation theology has helped us unmask political interests masquerading as 'God's will' in theology. This is called 'ideological suspicion' in theology. To this political suspicion we are adding now a combination of suspicions in the making of theology: political, economical, racial, colonial, and also sexual.¹⁴⁷

This characterization of critique as 'suspicion' comes from Marcella Althaus-Reid's tutelage under Paul Ricoeur, for whom the 'hermeneutic of suspicion' affords Althaus-Reid the background upon which to build her case for queering theology as a form of ideology critique. The primary ideology facing theology today is its sexual ideology, not only patriarchy but also heterosexuality. She insists that "queering the Scriptures will always be a project related to re-reading the patriarchs, for patriarchy is not a transcendental presence but has agents responsible for its order. To deconstruct the patriarchs means to deconstruct their law, for justice requires the vigilant revision (new visions) of

¹⁴⁶ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 4.

¹⁴⁷ Althaus-Reid, "What is Indecent Theology? Why Indecent?" on <http://www.althaus-reid.com/IT.html>, accessed January 31, 2013.

the ideological construction of the divine and the social...In this way deconstructing the patriarchs becomes part of what we can call a non-essential project of the hermeneutical circle of suspicion.”¹⁴⁸

To counter the economic and political effects of this patriarchy, she calls upon liberative paths discerned within the margins of churchly traditions of the sexually dissident. She calls this ‘Indecent theology’, and its primary goal is to instigate immanent processes of sexual ideological disruption within theology, or a ‘theological queering.’ This project requires a certain *critical* ‘style’, one that “outs” the theologian from positions and postures of power and legitimacy, and so guides them and the church to the tender, though impolite, demands of the periphery. The aim of this refusal of ecclesial authority and traditional legitimacy is not to re-establish the marginal at the center, but questions the idea of a normative center of theology at all. The problem with normativity is its idolatrous claims: it is “the praxis of specific heterosexual understandings elevated to a sacred level.” This idolatry cannot be remedied by simply incorporating under-privileged perspectives or marginalized sources into the normal flow of theological talk and acts. She likens his strategy (associated most closely with first-generation Liberation and second-wave feminist theologies) to the development strategy of capitalism:

To try to espouse development according to the logic of capital expansion creates the same confusion and contradictions as when theology tries to ‘incorporate’ a gender (not even sexual) balance in its discourse. What is urgently required is not the improvement of a current theology through some agenda such as gender and sexual equality, but a theology with a serious Queer materialist revision of its methods and doctrines...The aim of theological and economic reflection should not be a new system of distribution, but a different system of production...This

¹⁴⁸ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 107.

includes also consideration of the cost that such a theology must pay for the radical vision of its production.¹⁴⁹

Althaus-Reid's understands ideology critique to be a form of queer thought.

Queer thought subverts, 'unshapes', disrupts, and unveils Christianity's sexual ideology, which is the idea that theology supports and reflects the sacralization of heterosexual relations, which is then mapped and redistributed as a 'whole political project.' For this to work, queer hermeneutics issue "the challenge of a theology where sexuality and loving relationships are not only important theological issues but experiences which un-shape Totalitarian Theology (T-Theology) while re-shaping the theologians."¹⁵⁰ 'T-Theology' is her shorthand for "theology as ideology, that is, a totalitarian construction of what is considered as 'The One and Only Theology' which does not admit discussion or challenges from different perspectives, especially in the area of sexual identity and its close relationship with political and racial issues."¹⁵¹ Theological queering displaces 'T-Theology' from its tropic, corporate sites of economic exchange (the university, the church, academic marketplace, heavily policed peer-reviewed journals, et cetera) to the more vulgar, dirty, and non-civilized places of public, sexual life: bedrooms, bars, and alleyways. Such a dislocation shows that the God of 'T-Theology' is "the non-relational God which does not survive well outside its ideological sites...Impurity may work here as an unveiling of sexual ideology in the construction of God."

¹⁴⁹ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 148.

¹⁵⁰ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 8.

¹⁵¹ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 172n4.

Ultimately, the political goal of her theological hermeneutics is critical: to forget the forgetting (this is Althaus-Reid's preferred way to speak of memory, in order to emphasize how it negates amnesia) of the political acts of the theological symbols of Christianity which work so as to forget and ignore the sexual dissidents whose love and freedom have been actively undermined by the ideological fences of the totalizing heteronormativity of the theological tradition. In order to break through into the policed boundaries of T-Theological discourse, it requires a sort of *guerrillera* strategy, one that she terms the "libertine hermeneutical circle", whereby she interprets the queer meaning of theological symbols, not by "adding queers and stir", but rather by practicing intertextual readings that bring queer texts, narratives, spaces, and histories to the theological foreground for the sake of dialogical displacement, to transport readers to perverse spaces of love, freedom, and hope: dungeons, bedrooms, and other sexually unusual locations.

The point is not to merely revel in the sexual fun of it all, to fetishize experimentation, play, and transgression, but instead to unravel the edges of a christian god who 'comes out' from underneath the shadowy restrictions of the heterosexual parental imagery, and shows itself to be not only queer, but also libertine. In this way, the intertextual strategy of queering hermeneutics through dialogical displacement moves theology into diasporic and exilic spaces, those marginal theological locales where "the libertine is amongst us and is buried in us. The theological subjects cross all the sexual constraints of ideal heterosexuality."¹⁵² Althaus-Reid invites theological subjects to do what they are already doing: doing theology with rosaries in one hand and a condom in the other, telling

¹⁵² Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 26.

the stories and biographies of sexual migrants, whose ‘walking’ brings them to the very borders of love, pleasure, and struggle. To do theology indecently is to do theology critically and this is not limited to expressions of sexual identity, but rather is a particularly queer way of understanding, a practice of interpretation, that repositions the queer and indecent Subject in theology (not by retaking the center, but by reclaiming the periphery) through acts of deviance, dissidence, perversity, and promiscuity.

Althaus-Reid believes the criticality of theology against itself requires a certain indecent style, both formally and otherwise: “that is the scandalous position of what I have previously called Indecent Theology: a theology of liberation which, while exceeding the ideas of colonial liberation, surpasses the discourse of the correct God while searching for a more equivocal theological reflection.”¹⁵³ She disparages a shift in contemporary theology that celebrates the emancipatory impulse and contextual particularity of liberation theology, but shows more interest in establishing differing norms than the negativity of critique, a position incompatible with the queer ways of knowing she privileges.¹⁵⁴ The goal of indecent theology is not constructive, but critical:

after all, even the God at the margins of many radical theologies has become only a lateral shadow or God-mirror. But the aim of the corruption of the ideology of normativity by sexual contamination, which informs our Queer theological path, is to move objects and subjects of theology around, turning points of reference and re-positioning bodies of knowledge and revelation in sometimes unsuitable ways....The point is that we cannot think a Queer God without understanding different sexual ways of knowing.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 44.

¹⁵⁴ Elizabeth Phillips, *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 54.

¹⁵⁵ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 52.

Indecent theology is a critical theology, whose political mode is informed by fugitivity and peripherality, rather than re-centering or acting. Critique is an interpretative activity, not a directly actionist one. To queer theology is not to propose new theological forms that ought to replace the dominant ones presently at hand, but to question whether or not ‘correct’, ‘normative’, or ‘centered’ are properly theological qualities. We must resist the temptation to replace or supplanting the heteronormative ideology by instituting the queer as a norming, centering, legitimating discursive regime, which only reinscribes the theo-logic of the normal. We do not want to center or norm the queer, says Althaus-Reid. The only way we get to a truly indecent Christology is if we take up the displacement of marginality, in the “not-normal”. To be centered, to be legitimate, is to accept the central authority of heterosexual patriarchy: this marks the difference between a feminist strategy and a postcolonial one. Althaus-Reid seeks a theology of that is truly marginal that eschews authority, legitimacy, centeredness, and refuses to be co-opted by central discourses of theological power; “Normality... disenfranchises the real life experience of people by forcing them to adapt to an idealized discourse... theology becomes a distorted praxis, which far from liberating, itself enslaves even more.”¹⁵⁶

But what assures that queer theological thinking is exempt from being ideological, in Althaus-Reid’s view? What is inherently non-ideological about the concepts of hybridity, diaspora, or the fetish, or the queer tactics of disruption, hyphenation, or the use of autobiographical narratives? How can we be sure that the queer proclivity for deviance,

¹⁵⁶ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 64.

subversion, and aberrancy does not slide into an ideological work of its own? What methodological provisions are put into place that restrict Althaus-Reid's critical categories from simply replacing or substituting themselves as ideologies within a queer theology of God, of humanity, and of sexuality? Part of the problem with Althaus-Reid's critique of traditional or classical formations of theology is an unspecific, generic reference to ideology as if it was simply equivalent to "heteronormative", "straight", or "traditional." This kind of vague description given to theological form of ideology plagues most liberation theologies, and is a significant matter of interest in this dissertation. Hopefully, by attending more specifically to philosophical treatments of ideology that give a thicker description, we can become more theologically precise about what it is that political theologies claim to be doing in ideology critique – and whether they can do it legitimately at all, specifically in reference to the identification and justification of social norms such as justice, recognition, or equality. These questions will be taken up in the final section where I take a constructive position that identifies ideology critique in the Frankfurt School as a useful method for thinking political theology in critical-theoretical perspective, even if it raises some questions as to whether or not such a political theology can be normative at all.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to clarify the relation of ideology to idolatry in theology. It started from the perspective that theology has its own version of ideology critique, originating from the prophetic traditions in the Hebrew Bible. It recast these traditions as political discourses, rather than theological exhortations, aimed at redrawing and shoring up

group boundaries in a way akin to contemporary identitarian politics. Upon closer examination, the critique of idolatry appears to be more different from ideology than initially thought, both in terms of their political functions and theological meanings. We must be careful when drawing too close a parallel between ideology critique and idolatry critique, for it turns out that we need the former to fully understand the problems with the latter. I have argued throughout this chapter that the parallel between idolatry and ideology does not hold up well for political theology. In many ways, one can look at the way I have laid out the theology and politics of idolatry critique (both in the Hebrew Bible and elsewhere) and say that idolatry critique is most certainly a supreme example of ‘political theology’, a way of speaking of God that is, at the same time, a particular way of organizing and structuring the associations of human social life.

And so what do we gain with this short review through theological approaches to ideology as idolatry? First, in terms of the biblical material, we consistently find what Jan Assmann calls the ‘theologization’ of political into critiques of idolatry. Here political differences are identified and analyzed through the categories of pride, individualization, bourgeoisie privatization, heteronormativity, and so on. As such, these are ‘false representations’ of the human, her affective attachments, and her social world that misconstrue reality and so forestall the proleptic arrival of God’s good future into the present. Second, it is clear that late modern theology continues to depend rather strongly on the associative link between ideology and ‘false consciousness’ and so theologially interpreted it as idolatry, defined biblically as ‘false or strange worship.’ This homological arrangement of ideology and idolatry, in my judgement, has led to a number of missed opportunities to

make sense of the politics of idolatry critique. This leaves 'cognitive' relationship between ideology and idolatry relatively unchallenged, but always presumed. Theology is presented as being critical of idolatry rather than representing it or generating it, as if theology itself (interpreted and understood differently, of course, by each of the discourses or figures outlined) is distinctly unique in its ruptural and critical qualities. The critique of ideology as idolatry is at times deployed as an immanent manner (most explicitly by Metz and Althaus-Reid), but of course what is under review here are theological ideas that act as modes of 'false representation', a conception of ideology that has been thoroughly undermined. I have argued so far that the problem with ideology is not that of false representation; it is not an illusion that leads the subject to mistake appearance for reality. Theological views of idolatry define it as 'strange worship' because it mistakes an image, an object, for God, and so worships it "as if" it is God; these views miss the point about what the social origins of the biblical critique of idolatry critique teach us about the relation of theology and politics concerning proscription of images in the cultic practices of Israel. From a strictly theological point of view, idolatry might be a problem of 'false representation,' but to define ideology this way (through its relationship with idolatry) as many late modern theologians have done, is to miss the whole political point, naming that the problem with ideology and the impetus for its critique is its social impact and political function on social conditions, and not due to a failure of representation.

The problem without how idolatry critique is treated by theologians as more or less analogous to ideology critique overlooks its political roots as identity politics. Unless

theology is able to provide additional critical analysis of the political dimension of idolatry critique as ideology, it risks becoming ideological itself, namely because it neither adequately responds to social conditions nor is it directly self-reflexive in its critique of its own theological concepts, in this case the theology of idolatry. The prophetic understanding of critique becomes very important here as the one biblical candidate for the theological version of ideology critique because it sustains the dual negativity of immanent critique. However, both in the biblical account and in the work of modern and late modern theologians, at least the ones analyzed here, idolatry critique is predominant, which leaves the identity politics uninterrogated.

As such, the politics of idolatry critique are relatively unaddressed by theology. As I argued in section 1, idolatry critique has a political history to it that gives us pause about its presumed associative relationship with ideology critique. Idolatry critique generates a 'theologization' of politics that turns out to be rather different from what happens in and with ideology itself. What then must theology do in order to properly take up the practices of ideology critique? Are there any internal resources within political theology with which to sketch a way forward? How might political theology integrate ideology critique and what is the relation of this enterprise with other attempts outlined briefly in this chapter?

In this chapter, I examined the critique of idolatry as an argument for identity politics in order to argue that ideology and idolatry were not coterminous but that the immanence of ideology critique within theology turns against idolatry critique in a way, dis-

tancing itself from its identitarian politics, which its immanent critique names as ideology. Indeed, from the perspective of critical theology, it must be considered ideological as one example of immanent critique. To address these and other questions, in the next chapter, I turn my attention to the concept of critique itself. I need to clarify what is meant by 'critique,' and what difference such a notion makes, given the current political and ethical challenges we face in our time.

The call for enhanced attention to the negativity of critique as directed to theology's own ideological presumptions recommends Metz and Althaus-Reid for further consideration, namely because they are both the closest to the underutilized prophetic understanding of the theology of idolatry. For his part, Metz takes up the prophetic understanding of idolatry critique and directs it both towards a critique of social conditions and an immanent critique of bourgeois religion; theology is interruptive of the normal flow of the economic and political apparatus held in place by injustice and that includes its own concepts. Althaus-Reid's queering of theology is fully immanent. She is so concerned with the immanent critique of sexual ideologies in theology that her theology almost lacks the sufficient attention to social conditions abstracted from their support in and by the theological powers of the patriarchal magisterial authority.

The politics of the image have regained considerable attention as of late, in both theoretical and political circles, due in large part to the vital role that religious objections to media images and artistic depictions have played in the rise of the so-called 'image

wars.¹⁵⁷ In this way, theology has taken center stage as a critique of idolatry in contemporary politics. For many, the ferocious regulation and disciplining of images on theological grounds is a perfect example of theology as ideology, and so, claiming to be the defenders of western liberal values, they are pushing back against the post-secular attempt to reframe the role of religion in the global civil society. For them, theology as idolatry critique is ideological. As the argument goes, theology is iconoclastic to its core, and so poses a threat to the freedom of expression and creativity that drives the critical process and open dissent essential to democracy, not to mention the way that ‘things’, objects themselves, are excluded from public discussion.¹⁵⁸ Many have begun to question critique itself, including Bruno Latour who has recently taken up both idolatry critique and secular critique in order to point out their shared problems.¹⁵⁹ Perhaps it is theology’s idolatry critique that discredits its political voice, as it apparently leads us into an iconoclastic violence, but secular critique has also been domesticated into a rote participant in the political mainstream, degenerating into a liberal routine. It is not unreasonable to suggest that claims of unveiling veils, destroying idols, discrediting myths, and exposing fetishes generates an unwelcome rhetoric that indeed ought to make all those invested in the notion of critique nervous.

¹⁵⁷ Sven Lutticken, “Idolatry and Its Discontents,” *New Left Review* 44 (2007): 107-110.

¹⁵⁸ Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel. *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005). See Adam S. Miller, *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2013) for a theological treatment of Latour’s overall project.

¹⁵⁹ Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (2004): 225-248.; Bruno Latour, “What is Iconoclasm? Or Is There a World Beyond the Image Wars?” in *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*. eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2002): 14–37.

This critique of critique, with its double movement of negativity, sustains theological attention on both social conditions and its own theological concepts. Theology must become self-reflective; that is, it must turn to its own ideological dimensions as a *theological* project, much in the same way that the prophetic consciousness does in reference to the theology of idolatry. The features of this critical theology, as well as the character of its general and particular agenda, need to be filled out, but the next chapter rather tries to think constructively about what happens to both theology and the political when their relation is configured *critically*, that is, in a modality of critique. Critique in this way is configured to address the immanent relation of theory and praxis in political theology, which interfaces in an important way with the function that major themes like justice, solidarity, and freedom have in securing for political theology a place alongside other discourses advocating for social transformation through emancipatory praxis.

For me, critical theology is indeed a way of being political in all the ways requisite for large scale, collective political struggle: it is negative, dialectical, exilic, immanent, interruptive, and prophetic. If the goal of political theology is action, critical theology opts instead for a restrictive pause, a provisional and discriminate suspension of immediate political activity, as to avoid the presumption that action and politics, even when geared towards principles of justice, freedom, solidarity and the like, is exempt from being co-opted into a form of ‘acting out’ of the politics of urgency, fear, crisis, and catastrophe. Critical theology interrupts action by installing itself as a self-rupturing critique, even if it means halting and problematizing its own political activity.

If theology is to offer anything like 'the New,' the alternative Event that promises to generate and reproduce the resources from which to imagine, think, and act in the world otherwise, it cannot do this if it takes the form of political theology that tries to shape the world as a positive or constructive enterprise. The real political strength of theology is found in its immanently critical dynamic, the negative dialectical 'Spirit' at the core of its double movement, at the same to social conditions as towards its own theological concepts. It proffers a critique of critique and through this, political theology can indeed contribute to "creative advance" towards an emancipatory global politics, not as a political theology, but instead, as a critical one.¹⁶⁰

To anticipate the argument of the next chapter, critical theology helps moderate the relation of theory and praxis within political theology, making it clear to theology that it may know less about justice, solidarity, reconciliation, and human happiness than it appears to believe it does. This is what I believe is important about immanent critique that political theology learns from ideology critique; that it is the means of coming to terms with the contradictions deficiencies within the object of critique, from the perspective of object itself; that is, its standard of immanent critique belongs to and exists in the object of its critique. For critical theology, the demand of praxis are the basis for the *theological* critique of the use of justice, freedom, liberation, solidarity as the basis for political theol-

¹⁶⁰ I am not interested so much in contrasting this (potential) form with other options: 'secular theology,' 'radical political theology,' 'postmodern theology,' and so on. In my mind, something like a 'critical theology' is cooperative, not competitive. With these other forms, though it has a significant impact on how theologians understand their immanent relation to theory and praxis.

ogy. At this point, it is not clear what a 'critical theology' does or what its exact relationship is to political theology. Attending to the question of ideology critique raises essential questions about the character of critique itself, leading us to examine the nature of immanent critique. To insert immanent critique into political theology is to reinterpret it as critical theology. In taking up political theology as its object, it modifies the posture it takes as it prescribes actions and values, whether on the basis of specific theological commitments, or political convictions, even so-called emancipatory ones.

CHAPTER FIVE

CRITIQUE AND THEOLOGY

Introduction

Allow me to recap the direction of the dissertation so far: it investigates the curious turn to theology from some unlikely corners of philosophy through the lens of ideology critique. This, of course, was puzzling, given the dominant narrative about religion and theology as ideology, not as ideology critique. The preceding chapters have shown, however, that key representatives of this turn only offer rather oblique and selective engagements with theology that prove to be insufficient from a philosophical point of view. It is clear that theology can engage in this debate about the task of ideology critique - and its political implications - only when it takes up itself - 'theology' - as self-reflexive work of critique, the goal of which is the (self)alteration of its own values and norms, expressed in its varying and complex traditions. In order to do so, it needs to be informed by its own object, a task that can only be performed by itself. Philosophy paves the way and sets the parameters for ideology critique, but how to practice it within theology can only be discerned and spelled out immanently. What should theology do with the 'issue' of ideology critique, specially given the problems and limitations of its own idolatry critique? For this, we need more thorough *theorization* of critique within theology. That is the subject of this final chapter.

Up to now, the dissertation has concerned itself primarily with the relation between theology and ideology in modern and contemporary philosophy and theology. This inquiry has foregrounded ideology's character as an "essentially contested concept", prompting us to look closer at the character of critique itself, rather than to thick descriptions of ideology. The impetus for this study is the dearth of attention that ideology critique has received in political theology as of late, and the apparent ease with which it has taken up themes of liberation, emancipation, utopia, and revolution as if they are 'at home' with them. The eager positivity of political theology's embrace of eschatological themes of hope, utopia, and the inevitability of change has turned theology into a direct and immediate form of practical activity, risking the eclipse of critique in theological thought and study as well as in how relation of theology to politics is theorized within political theology itself. I take as axiomatic the emphasis of political theology on orthopraxis over orthodoxy, and indeed welcome the turn to the political within theology itself, which in many ways has been more productive than the turn to theology with philosophy. And yet this chapter goes farther to argue for a critical theology that questions political theology in an immanent critique about the relation of theory and praxis. The effect that critique has on political theology is admittedly equivocal, but in the very least, I argue for the rupture of praxis for the sake of critique in order to provide an immanent ideology critique.

If the critical attitude originates from the critique of religion promulgated by Marx's 'ruthless critique of everything existing', it is important to reexamine Marx's ac-

tual critique of religion as paradigm of ideology. Marx was not as concerned about theology as he was about theology's social effects and its social function on the material conditions of repressed classes in bourgeois social life, and so left open the possibility of a theology that undertook the task of the "criticism of religion as the premise of all criticism." Eagleton takes this up in service to critical socialism, defending theology against its liberal detractors who oppose religion in order to affirm capitalism. He argues that religion, especially Christianity, offers an alternative way of life that challenges the status quo and opens up critical space to imagine the world otherwise. The theology Eagleton proffers is rather straight-forward and selective, and while he is effective at exposing the impoverished and imprecise interpretation of Christianity as offered by its so-called progressive, new atheist, and liberal critics, theology is presented as a critique of the social world, rather than possessing a self-reflexive critical position towards itself. While Žižek and Eagleton's political goals may, at least in word, be similar, Žižek's theology is quite different - not only in style and substance, but also effect. He reverses Eagleton's political defense of theology as an emancipatory resource, and argues that theology's greatest trait is its willingness to admit to its own impotence: to not only announce the death of God, but to instigate its social forms and promulgate the implications of its practical stance of aggressive passivity: the "I prefer not to" in terms of social change or political activity. Theology is not revolutionary or emancipatory, but rather anarchic in a "last resort" resistance against the ideologies of state-sponsored violence, liberal democracy, capitalism, racism, or religious fundamentalism.

It is not quite right to say that critique is theological (any more than it is not theological), nor is it sufficient to remind political theology to be critically aware of its own ideologies. What I am after, it turns out, is 'critical theology' that theorizes and interprets the critical position as a heuristic for theology's self-understanding. What are the best available candidates? At first glance, there seems to be a solid connection between the critique of ideology and the critique of idolatry in the Hebrew Bible, a point made repeatedly by political theologians. However, it is clear that something more politically complicated is at stake in the invocation of idolatry critique, which in its appeals for social cohesion and collective belonging legitimate and justify a identity politics that generates exclusionary relations that at times result in violence. As such, the theological approach that most approximates the idea of critique I seek, as it turns out, is not the critique of idolatry that comes out of the Hebrew Bible, but rather the queer critique of the ideologies within idolatry critique that legitimate themselves under the guise of critique. As I have explored in the context of biblical concept of idolatry critique, it is an identitarian style of politics that motivates the critique of idols, and so is a politics that results from a particular theology rather than how it is commonly referred to in theology itself: as a theology that results in a particular iconoclastic politics. In response to this pattern as ire creates itself within political liberation and feminist theologies, the queer critique of theology turns itself 'inwards' and exposes the political dynamics within the theological.

The remedy for such a thing is a self-reflexive, immanent critique that interrogates theology on the basis of its own normative standards, while also critiquing these very same standards. Where do we go to learn about such a notion of critique, especially

when any discussion of critique is very hard to find in political theology at the moment? Is critique even a properly theological attitude? What idea or concept of critique is able to form theology in this way? We learn the answers not only by thinking theologically through ideology critique (as we have done here), but also by paying closer attention to the work of critique itself and its role in ethics and politics, in decision and action. The point of all this is to determine whether or not we can speak of political theology as critical, to clarify what critique means in theological perspective, and to discern what significance these matters have for 'political theology' as a primary scene of address between theology and critical theory today.¹

As such, this chapter is about envisaging theology as a critical process. Much of political theology (indeed, not only philosophy and sociology of religion, but also religious studies) today is based on the idea that religion has an emancipatory impulse immanent to itself that possesses radical potential for transforming political life - *if* properly interpreted and put into practice. In this dissertation, I have sought to problematize this thesis by turning to ideology critique as a resource to resist this trend and return to critique as a practice of political theology.

¹ Certainly this raises many questions about whether or not secular presumptions are necessary or essential to the critical task after enlightenment, as least when Kant heads its genealogy.. The critique of ideology has been more or less homologous with the critique of (divine) transcendence, which seems to aligns critique with a particularly *secular* form of materialism, politics, and society. In some ways, to call upon models of critique for the sake of a political theology calls into question the oft-assumed secular alignment with critique, a project undertaken by Talal Asad, Judith Butler, and Stathis Gourgouris in ways that overlap with my view here. See Talal Asad, ed, et al., *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013) and Stathis Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

Referring to the negativity of critique, I do not claim here that, in following the concept of critique in early critical theory, critical theology leads theology to abandon ethical commitments or political activity. Neither do I suggest that critical theology eschew, in light of critique, the concrete demands that human suffering amidst the structural and institutional dynamics of evil and power make on us. I make the much more modest and restricted point that critical theology is immanent critique of the political within theology, not operating as a distinct discipline or method in relation to political, systematic, or practical theologies that acts upon them, but rather is an impulse within and inherent to theology whose negativity sheds light, not what should be, but rather what should *not* be. While this does chasten or restrict theology in relation to the *posture* it holds in relation to the actionable solutions it offers as consequences of its various theological positions, it does not oppose practical solutions or social and political action; it is, instead, minimalistic in that it provides the practical reasoning for the negation of the bad, rather than for ideals, standard, actionable solutions towards the good.

Problems With the Ideology Concept

I have been making the general argument that political theology needs to return to the ideology concept in order to revitalize its own forms of immanent critique. This is necessary because there are elements within theology (and its relation to both ethics and politics) that still require a critique of ideology. But also, as shown in the previous chapter, understandings of ideology and idolatry critique in theology have proven insufficient.

And so, after exploring the relation of ideology to theology in both theology and philosophy, it is clear that ideology remains a critical-political problem within theology, rather than a problem of theology within politics.

The question of ideology critique will often lead to current debates about the nature of ideologies themselves, offering various lists of their essential elements. It is common to mistake ideology for false beliefs or rather beliefs that are based on appearance not reality, or beliefs that may or may not be true but nevertheless conceal their class-based or power-based interests. This list becomes the standard against which we practice social criticism since ideologies are not merely errors, mistakes, illusions, or fantasies - they have practical effects and so are thoroughly political. Ideologies constitute how political subjects relate to the world and also circumscribe and determine how these self-same subjects interpret and so operate within their social conditions. They are the means by which the social conditions are instilled and so absorb political subjects into the predominant situation, and so it is critique of ideology that is responsible for uncovering, laying out for viewing the conditions that facilitate this domination. For an idea or belief to become ideology, it must deceive (actively or by consequence) agents of their real and true interests, thus limiting or harming their otherwise full capabilities as political subjects. It must functionally support and protect institutions that practice and legitimate repression, oppression, domination, and other dehumanizing forces, the same forces that give rise to ideology's power to persuade, deceive, and neutralize the political energy of the potentially dissident.

And yet, there are numerous difficulties with the critique of ideology itself, enumerated at greater length in previous chapters. For example, how does one know what counts as “real and true” interests? On what basis might a critique of ideology indict an institution for permitting oppression? How is one able to pinpoint the genetic origin of ideology, especially when political subjects themselves are unable, by definition, to identify ideologies *as* ideologies? In the end, the theory of ideology comes down to an understanding of immanent critique, its normative basis, and its role in shaping praxis. And so, for the sake of simplicity (though at the risk of oversimplification), we can identify three prevailing difficulties with the ideology concept. First, ‘the truth problem’: truth is such an essentially contested concept that it cannot provide the basis for any claims to unmasked reality that can serve as the point of reference against which to critique ideology. Second, the ‘normative standards problem’: what supplies the standards of the critique of ideology? Are they internal, *sui generis*, or must they be established ‘externally’? Third, these two problems are synthesized into the over-arching ‘the practical problem’: what is gained practically by the *critique* of ideology? In what way does critique have transformative, rather than hermeneutic or reconstructive intentions? What is critique and what happens to the social conditions of the subject - and the subject itself - *after* critique? What is ethically and/or politically gained and lost?

First, ‘the truth problem.’ The critique of ideology is not a matter of establishing factual truths about reality, nor it is about discerning the difference between appearance and reality. The negative, functionalist account of ideology maintains that ideologies are

not merely errors in practice or mistakes in thought, but are always grounded in conditions of reality. In this way, the older Marxist position is updated so that ideologies are seen not only as socially embedded but also “socially induced.”² Critique is not a wholly dismantling gesture, but rather is concerned with identifying the deficient realization of the truth that devolves into ideology, but nevertheless remains hidden with it. This deficiency involves a false *understanding* of a social state or its situation *and* the condition of this state or situation *itself*. Critique lays bare how and why the political subject has been led to misunderstand something related to this social state or situation and also makes the case why this social state or situation is wrong and so needs to be changed. It stops here, however. Critique itself does not supply the norms and values that govern human acts or beliefs, but rather tries to set into motion a practical process of transformation that is open-ended and undecided - and as such, is consistently unpredictable and unstable. The critique of ideology does not provide the political subject with a set guide for actions or a positive list of what should be done now, but does supply minimal, negativistic guidance as to how *not* to live, what should not be the case, As Ted Smith writes recently, in reference to Adorno’s idea of critique: “real hope comes not in our dreams of better worlds, but through our shudders at the horrors of this one. It comes through determinate negation of concrete moments of damaged life.”³

² Rahel Jaeggi, “Rethinking Ideology,” *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, ed. Boudewijn de Bruin and Christopher F. Zurn (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 68.

³ Ted Smith, *Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 160. While Smith goes on to insist that Adorno’s pessimism is “too complete”, and that he “overstates the completeness of human depravity”, he does recognize what I think is a key element of the critical theology I am proposing here: “the best responses to ‘wrong life’ involve not moral imperatives

This leads us to the question of norms and values. It is unclear whether ideology critique is able to name or justify its own standards by appealing to some non-ideological norm. There are no external place, no site above and beyond ideology from which to declare certain states, ideas, structures, or conditions as ideological. Therefore any normative position that ideology critique must be immanent - it must proceed from the norms provided by the object of critique. Jaeggi describes this problem through the paradox that ideology critique claims to be ‘non-normative’ in character, while being ‘normatively significant’ in consequence.⁴ It does not say how something should be, but also does not limit itself to asserting how things are. It considers the latter to have a negative bearing on how the former is to be formulated, but at the same time, does not allow for a division of labor, as if ideology critique does the descriptive analysis of the properties and conditions of social life and something else (pragmatic theory, foreign affairs, ethnography) provides the norms. It cannot be critical otherwise.

This bleeds into the third point: the ‘practical problem.’ In what way can critique be practically oriented through emancipatory practice? The work of critique is not prescriptive and is independent from an external set of standards, but this distinction does not necessitate its separation from praxis. If, as a critical-theoretical formulation, ideology critique aims to contribute to transformative action, not by prescribing specific guides for said action, but by surfacing and specifying the potentialities and obstructions

but philosophical histories of how things went wrong” so as to show us all how to avoid reiterating damaged life as theology has often done, even those forms committed to justice, liberation, and happiness. This is the *negative* function of critical theology in relation to political theology.

⁴ Jaeggi, “Rethinking Ideology,” 70-71.

present in social reality, thought, and even theory, it is at its most practical when it articulates itself, not so much as in direct competition with other lines of thought and study, but in negative confrontation of reality so that it may be transformed by practice. It is in this way both normatively significant and non-prescriptive.

One of the enduring legacies of the Frankfurt School is their insistence that critical theory remain immanent; that is, rather than starting from an ideal set of practices or principles, an idealized situation decided on ahead of time, immanent critique retrieves its norms from social practices of its object(s) and then proceeds to critique the shortcomings, problems and contradictions of the present on the basis of the ideals contained there. This is certainly a dominant feature of critical theory. For example, when Jaeggi maintains that “a critique cannot merely consist of stating what something *is* like; it must also involve a position on how it should be or should not be. It is at the very least unclear what can actually normatively follow from its analyses/decodings/exposures.”⁵, she is expressing why this lack of clarity is what makes critique helpful: as social critique, ideology critique wants to transform the way things are, but does so without relying on any external standard or positive alternative. Instead, it proceeds *immanently*, that is by developing standards based on the very situation it critiques. As an immanent critique, it generates the standards it needs to in order to critique a given reality from the norms that issue from that said reality.

While the immanent critique of ideology stands in a negative relation to ethical imperatives or actionable political proposals for how to fully realize its object’s values or

⁵ Jaeggi, “Rethinking Ideology,” 70-71.

norms, it also calls for and undertakes a critique of the given situation and does so from within the historical situation, culture, or context that has failed to live up to its standards. The negativity of critique does not mean, however, that the norms and values immanent to the given are not important, or that actions (or theologies) which are meant to realize these values are not desirable; it only means that critique of ideology cannot generate these values or norms itself, only the thick, concrete accounts of the ideologies that prevent their realization. It identifies ideologies as distortions, failures, or deficiencies through ‘determinate negation’ of the concrete moments and historical situations of damaged life. If the task of ideology critique is to evaluate systems of social domination, it does so, not in light of particular universal or objectified standards of, say, freedom, but with the function of unmasking wrong rationalizations or justifications of domination, both in history and of the present. In this way, the critique of ideology functions negatively by proposing normative ways for constructing a society of freedom and happiness by clarifying what *not* to do, what should *not* be the case, how *not* to act, and so on. In this way, the critique of ideology, for all its negativity, participates in praxis by its refusal to reiterate damaged life and contributes to a transformed social world by elucidating the horrors of factual reality, especially for those who are victims of historical catastrophe. By creating an index of the horrors of false life, critique hopes to help theory and praxis avoid reiterating and reflecting said horrors.

This rendering of the problems moves the argument forward by foregrounding how critique is not a closed, procedural process with a clear endgame, namely because the concept of ideology is itself a moving target. The whole point of ideology critique can

easily be eclipsed or overlooked if the focus remains on ideology rather than critique, as has been done most often in theology and philosophical treatments of the topic. It also helps us understand why theology needs ideology critique: we do not need to rely on social theory, philosophy (of religion), critical sociology, or ethnography alone to provide the concepts, norms, or frameworks which clarify the problems and contradictions that political theology needs to address self-reflexively. A critical theology, informed by ideology critique, does not stand outside of theology, pointing out instances of delusion, distortion, or deficiency, but rather is part of its own self-reflexive interrogation that confronts its internal inconsistencies and contradictions.

What impact then might critique have on the use of theology for praxis and political action? So far the relationship between theology and ideology critique has been considered a boon for emancipatory political action. Both Eagleton and Žižek found something ‘radical’ or ‘perverse’ in Christianity that can serve as a resource for thinking politically amidst our present malaise precisely because theology in one way or another has a critical attitude about it that can be applied towards ideology - with liberating effects on political subjects. Take for instance, when Eagleton says that one of the effects of late modern capitalism on thought itself is that even thinking must have a point; it must produce something of value to be exchanged. But this, Eagleton insists, is one of the many things that is so radical and disruptive about the idea of God: “God” is utterly pointless and so theology (as ‘God-talk’) issues a “perpetual critique of the instrumental reason”⁶ where everything has to have a point, it has to make or do something, accomplish something

⁶ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 10.

actual, tangible, or measurable to have any meaning. The political appeal of Christianity in this context is that its god is literally “good for nothing.” It does not serve any actual purpose; it is only good-in-itself.⁷ This extends to divine creation, namely humanity: “to say of the world that it is ‘created’ is for classical theology to say that it is pointless. Like God, and like humanity, it exists purely for its own delight...Creation is a scandal to the sharp-faced stockbrokers from whom everything must have a point.”⁸ Like jazz or literature, Eagleton says, God “needs no justification beyond its own existence” because “God, too, is his (sic) own end, ground, origin, reason, and self-delight, and only by living this way can human beings be said to share in this life.”⁹

Žižek also speaks about the value of ‘useless’ theory in a context of austerity, cuts to public funding of social welfare programs, and academia’s affair with vocational and STEM subjects; theory that makes no claims to do anything is a significant moment of dissent in an highly instrumental social world in which thought and activity are both turned into practicalities that have to do something, that have to make points.¹⁰ For Eagleton, and perhaps even more for Žižek, theology has great political promise as critique be-

⁷ This is spelled out in classical theological terms as divine aseity.

⁸ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 182; Eagleton, *After Theory*, 128.

⁹ Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life*, 174-175.

¹⁰ Žižek stylizes this as a ‘Leninist’ plea to betray Marx’s “transformative” impulse towards praxis, in order to clear the way for interventionist ways of acting that do not require an revolutionary subject (since ideological conditions make this impossible). Slavoj Žižek, ed. *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917* (London: Verso, 2002); Slavoj Žižek, “A Plea for Leninist Intolerance,” *Critical Inquiry*. 28.2 (2002): 542-566.; Slavoj Žižek, “What can Lenin tell us about freedom?,” *Rethinking Marxism* 13.2 (2001): 1-9.

cause, within a capitalist matrix that privileges success, it is an embarrassment, an aberration, for its apparent instrumental pointlessness. In this way too, the kinds of acts, the style of praxis, that critique directs political theology towards are the types that share in, make visible, and enunciate this same gratuity that promises to break open the instrumental system: acts that may or may not end up changing something but nevertheless take up “the risk of elaborating a positive livable project.”¹¹ Arguably, the particularity of Christian ethics is far more striking and has a much higher bar. The demands are greater, the costs higher, and the rewards fewer. Christian identity is predicated on taking upon oneself a vocation of compassion, solidarity, and accompaniment with and for suffering, one modeled on Jesus Christ’s own way of being the suffering and dying one who charts a path of resistance and justice. If critique is to play a role in Christian political theology, it must contribute to the missional identity of Christianity which is justified on the basis of its own immanent critique which, in turn, authorizes its norms and values. What practical effect does critique have, then, on theology and why is such effect desirable, from a critique of ideology perspective? In what way does critique make way for political action and ethical judgement and decision: the absolute necessity of praxis?

On Critique

In what follows, I will try to answer two important questions: (1) what does it mean to be critical? and (2) why is it helpful for thinking through to critical theology and its relation to political theology? To bring critique and political theology together here

¹¹ For an example, see Paul Anthony Taylor, “The Just Do It riots: A critical interpretation of the media’s violence,” *Capital & Class* 36.3 (2012): 393-399.

immediately foregrounds the relationship of theory to praxis, and the specific way that critique mediates this relationship in early critical theory, and so, to critical theology. By taking up the question of critique's relationship to praxis with respect to theology, we are able to foreground the nature of critique itself, giving us a better sense of what is politically gained - and lost - by envisaging and recasting political theology as critical theology.

I turn here to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who as early members of the Frankfurt School, formulated theory in a way that sharpened its diagnostic and descriptive power of critique while refusing to allow theory to fall into the trap of what Adorno called "pseudo-activity": praxis disguised as liberalism, democracy, or protest, or perhaps for our own time, morality, humanitarianism, philanthropy, liberation. and so on. I cannot properly account all of the complexities of Adorno's or Horkheimer's thought (much less their differences or the differences between them and other Frankfurt School figures), but simply want to argue that there are aspects of their work on critique that I find both insightful and instructive for thinking about critical theology, namely the concept of negative critique.

Max Horkheimer and the 'Immanent Method' of Critique

Up to this point, I have assumed, but not argued directly for, one of the original theses of early generation of the Frankfurt School: what distinguishes *critical* theory from other forms of theory is the primacy of the task of ideology critique. This 'critical theory' integrates a materialist social analysis, robust scientific inquiry (checked against a negative concept of truth *pace* 'the sociology of knowledge'), and a profound moral interest.

Marx Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, as the theorists of the Frankfurt School, along with their Western Marxist associates, sought a new interdisciplinary form of social research capable of re-examining historical materialism and utilizing social psychology so that the rational concept of society and its empirical reality could be studied, analyzed, and duly critiqued.¹² They developed a critical theory of society, designed so as to avoid the positivist pitfalls of “traditional theories” and the perils of Marxist dogmatism, which reduced itself to ‘scientific socialism’, opting instead for a negative and immanent method with which to critique social practices for instrumentalizing and mechanizing reason itself as ideology.

In his 1937 essay “Traditional and Critical Theory”, Horkheimer argued that the problem with traditional theory was its non-reflexive assumptions about the role of the subject in understandings of social knowledge and scientific explanation.¹³ As a result, its conclusions uncritically mirror social reality, confirming the particulars whilst endorsing knowledge as the neutral product of passive records and detached observations of objective and general reality.¹⁴ It is ideology insofar as it both naturalizes and legitimates the conditions of things - what Žižek would have called ‘the normal flow’ - while also aiding the powerful elite with technical information that helps it control and manipulate social relations and productive forces. The knowledge generated by traditional theory is not

¹² Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press, 2007).

¹³ Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory”, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. Matthew J. O’Connell, trans. New York, NY: Continuum, 1972, 188-243.

¹⁴ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 191-198.

neutral as it claims, but ideological in its affirmation of the status quo and its assistance to the elite, ruling powers.¹⁵ The specific methods of critical theory emerged in contradistinction to what Max Horkheimer called ‘traditional scientific theories’ which substantialized the link between the wretched, dehumanizing reality of social life and “industrial productive techniques” such as classification, calculation, and enforcement, the predominant categories of which were “better, useful, appropriate, productive, and valuable.”¹⁶ By contrast, the attitude of critical theology was thoroughly negative, designed to counter the apologetic and pragmatic sensibilities of instrumentalized rationality.

For Horkheimer, traditional theory unquestioningly mobilizes and deploys reason as a *technique*, divesting it of its critical character, pushing its ideologies beneath the surface of actuality, making them invisible and so unquestioned. The effect is that its dominating and classifying impulses are seen then as justified, legitimated as natural, scientific, neutral and so useful, turning reason and the knowledge it produces into “a reified, ideological category.”¹⁷ Their primary objective is to flatten reality out in generic categories that can be studied, classified, and compartmentalized according to their usefulness and their amenability to mechanization.

In contrast, “critical theory”, then, is interested in exposing both knowledge and history as social, historical, and ‘interested’, rather than objective, blind, and universal. The political effect of this is that subjects encounter their world and their conditions as

¹⁵ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 203ff.

¹⁶ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 207, 208.

¹⁷ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 194.

something that can change, that can be otherwise. Once the subject sees that their activity need not be reduced to “a possible object of planful decision and rational determination of goals”¹⁸ and so locked into the determination of history or fate, it restores the ‘possibility’ into a social order whose irrationality, and dehumanization effectively has immobilizes any politically meaningful agency.

Whereas traditional theory effectively confirms and justifies the dominative system, in contrast, Horkheimer describes ‘critical theory’ as ideology critique; that is, it discerns within the ideas of social life the specific ways they function in relation to their social context to conceal their own social origins and underlying antagonisms. By disposing and liquifying the false sense of inevitability and necessity of what is - the false sense that what is cannot be otherwise - it then opens up genuinely new coordinates for how the political subject can think, act, and relate to the given conditions of her life.

Critical theory has no material accomplishments to show for itself. The change which it seeks to bring about is not effected gradually, so that success even if slow might be steady.... The first consequence of the theory which urges a transformation of society as a whole is only an intensification of the struggle with which the theory is connected.¹⁹

Critical theory, then works to instigate this ‘intensification.’ It accomplishes this, not by observation, descriptive analysis, or by gathering and explaining data, but by exposing the inherent contradictions within cultural ideas that bourgeois society uses ideology to suture and conceal. This method of critique is not just directed *to* social and historical re-

¹⁸ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 207.

¹⁹ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 218-219.

ality, but also *by* this reality and its ‘thought-forms’. Critical theory is an ‘immanent’ critique, meaning that it proceeds not from external standards - rational or otherwise - but from “an image of the future which springs indeed from a deep understanding of the present.”²⁰ It does not make judgements about particular ideas based on their deviation from universal, general ideals as if these particular albeit ideological ideas have no true content themselves. Critical theory is *critical* insofar as it is instinctively self-reflexive; it is *immanently* critical in its eschewal of appeals to knowledge derived from necessary, universal, or invariant positions or orientations. Horkheimer acknowledges this, admitting that

there is no general criteria for judging the critical theory as a whole, for it is always based on the recurrence of events and thus on a self-reproducing totality. Nor is there a social class by whose acceptance of the theory one could be guided. It is possible for the consciousness of every social stratum today to be limited and corrupted by ideology, however much, for its circumstances, it may be bent on truth.... the critical theory has no specific influence on its side, except concern for the abolition of social injustice. This negative formulation, if we wish to express it abstractly is the materialist content of the idealist concept of reason.²¹

Lacking external criteria, critique takes shape as an ‘immanentizing’ process that can only be discerned through a self-reflexive method that challenges both the reifying and totalizing gestures of reason. Horkheimer knew this would limit critical theory’s political appeal, admitting that “the concepts which emerge under its influence are critical of the present...Consequently, although critical theory at no point proceeds arbitrarily and in

²⁰ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 220.

²¹ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 242.

chance fashion, it appears, to prevailing modes of thought, to be subjective and speculative, one-sided and useless...it appears to be biased and unjust.”²² The consolation of critique when faced with this “hostility to theory”²³ is that it seeks the “transformation of society as a whole” through “a changing of history and the establishment of justice among men (sic)”²⁴, and so cannot be satisfied with the small “successes [which] may even prove, later on, to have been only apparent victories and really blunders.”²⁵

Adorno and Horkheimer: Critique of 'Enlightenment'

Adorno and Horkheimer took the critique of ideology very seriously because, unlike other more orthodox Marxists of the time, they were not at all confident of the collapse of capitalism or the rise of an emancipated, and so revolutionary, class. They strongly insisted that the hold of ideology in society, on reason, on thought itself, was more strong, entrenched, and resilient than previously suspected.²⁶ As such, critical theory must be developed in order to expose the inherent contradictions at the heart of the current social order, enacted by instrumental reason through domination and mystification. It suppresses difference and heterogeneity and promotes productivity and efficiency as the highest of values. ‘Mass culture’ kept any subversion, resistance, or protest of capi-

²² Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 218.

²³ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 232.

²⁴ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 243.

²⁵ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 219.

²⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 6, 42-43, 89-93.

talism, of racism, of cultural propaganda, at bay by distracting political subjects with bureaucracy, routine, and amusement, lulling them into indifference and passivity.²⁷ With this in mind, the goal of ideology critique was not to fully dismantle ideas, practices, or institutions deemed to be ideological, but rather to find the truth, the emancipatory potential latent and hidden within them, and to preserve and protect it, so that it might be used to drive a wedge between a repressive and dominative system or thought and the social agents attached and determined by it.

This is both a historical argument and a moral one: the effect of the modern ideology in history has produced the real suffering of “damaged human life.” Critical theory keeps open the possibility that the increasingly ‘barbaric’ world can become otherwise, refusing to acquiesce to the inevitability of the present or the failure to recognize that it should be otherwise. Given the conditions of ideology, the point was not to inaugurate something revolutionary, but something much more radical and elementary at the same time: a realistic and materialist assessment of ‘what is going on’, a task that could only be accomplished by the interdisciplinary synthesis of empirical research, historical analysis, and social scientific studies that came to characterize the methods of the Frankfurt School’s style of critique.

Horkheimer and Adorno set out to clarify the dialectical meaning of enlightenment so as to demystify its function within modern social life. They argued that human happiness, which is possible only when justice and freedom are in play, is dependent on

²⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, 94-104.

emancipation from social reality as it currently stands, a reality which itself claims ‘enlightenment’. Emancipation itself depends on enlightenment, a state of social maturity that calls for and enacts a discontinuity, a radical break with a present diagnosed as ‘wrong’, ‘damaged’ by the catastrophic tendencies of Western societies. For Adorno and Horkheimer, this ‘enlightenment’ however is thoroughly dialectical; it has within it domi-native tendencies that contribute to, rather than combat, the cultural values, social practices, and political institutions responsible for ‘damaged human life.’²⁸ This assortment is ideological in the sense that they do not represent human person’s best interests and so are not to be trusted, but neither are the standards of rationality upon which the critique of ideology is often grounded. It is the responsibility of ideology to maintain the conditions, relations and forces that keep reification of social relations, the instrumentalization of reason, and the industrialization of culture unchecked; but perhaps more important than this, it is the function of ideology to implicate reason itself in this task.

There were many reasons for this pessimism, but paramount was the stern belief that even reason itself had become implicated in ‘the total integration’, what Horkheimer

²⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), 30; Theodor Adorno, *Problems in Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schröder (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000), 158. The facticity of ‘damaged human life’ limits human ability and capacity to discern the good life, to figure out how best to act in a social world that is thoroughly permuted by the reifying effects of capitalist economy on social and political systems. This is discerned in Adorno’s thesis that “wronged life cannot be lived rightly.” This is related to the oft-repeated idea that “there is no good life in false life” or put differently, “there is no way of living a false life correctly.” In a false world, there is no way of doing (or even recognizing or knowing) the morally or politically right thing; it also means that there is no real *living* in a false life. There is just survival and persistence, and this is horrifically inhumane because it does violence to the natural freedom and happiness of the human being.

called the ‘eclipse of reason’ itself. As Horkheimer and Adorno insist in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “reason serves as a universal tool for the fabrication of all other tools, rigidly purpose-directed and as calamitous as the precisely calculated operations of material production, the results of which for human beings escape all calculation.”²⁹ With the spread of administrative systems and commodifying processes, the social world has been stripped of ends that are intrinsically valuable, in and of themselves worthwhile or beneficial for human freedom and happiness. Everything within the social world (cultural, intellectual, religious) exists for the sake of something else; it is instrumentalized into a ‘use’, a ‘point’ - packaged and reified for the sake of controlling nature and self-preservation.³⁰ Adorno calls this ‘universal fungibility’³¹ and argues that it extends all the way to reason itself. If even reason could become co-opted and so be made uncritical, what hope might there be to extend and expand the small glimpses of freedom and happiness seen at the extreme edges of the modern social order?

This social emphasis on the dialectical self-betrayal of ‘enlightenment’ sharpened the edge of critical theory, for its objectives became more negativistic and less overtly political. One cannot hope to simply explain ‘what’s going on’ and then proceed from there to articulate normative prescriptions of what ought to be, namely because social facts themselves are ideologies: products of manipulation, propaganda, and social control, aimed at producing uniform and reliable political subjects programmed to desire

²⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, 23.

³⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, 9-48.

³¹ Adorno, *Problems in Moral Philosophy*, 228.

and value according to the dictates of 'mass culture.' The 'technicalization' of reason, Adorno and Horkheimer maintained, can be shown to be responsible for the emergence and success of not only late advanced capitalism, namely its emergent technological forms, but also facism and state socialism. Reason can produce irrationality when reductively practiced, an inverted dynamic that played a major role in maintaining dominative and totalitarian patterns of thought and action and so can not be trusted or called upon to provide emancipatory agendas. Rationality cannot be trusted to provide the standards against which ideology are critiqued, and so on what basis can critique hope to declare the best interests of the political subject when even the self-actualization of 'enlightenment' in modernity is actually its self-betrayal?

This deeply pessimistic appraisal of the prospects of critique in modern society, grounded in Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis about the totalitarian nature of instrumentalized reason - led to a negativistic and immanent theory of critique itself. But where is critique to be found? Even as the late Adorno - and a lesser extent, the late Horkheimer (who became more directly interested in religious themes) - eventually turned to the aesthetic imaginary as the incubator of critical remnants of reason, the expectations were modest, timid even. Any conception of the good (that the critique might be thought to serve) cannot be trusted in the context of a social world that is radically evil, the cause of which resides in the form of rationality itself. There can be no right life within it, namely because all the available options are caught up within the furtive and nefarious tactics of internal and external domination and control. Whether by the good, Adorno means 'redemption', 'freedom' 'happiness', or 'utopia', it cannot be thought without 'the concept',

the tool of identity-thinkings that constitution the object in the interests of controlling external nature. When read through Marx's theory of value, to form a concept of the good is to transform its intrinsic 'use-value' (what is good in and of itself, which has no point outside itself) into that which is only good for something, which has a point for which it labors, namely self preservation.

The work of critique in this instance is to expose the inhumanity and irrationality of the social relations that produce and sustain these exploitative class interests, to bring to light the aggregate negativity - the injustice, the exploitation, the domination, the mechanization - of human life. In doing so, critique hopes to indirectly reveal the 'mirror-image' of its opposite.³² This negative rendering of reality is practically significant, though not directly actionable, in that by presenting the contradictions and antagonisms at work against the vitality of human life, it both expressed the concrete historical state of affairs, but also functioned as an immanent force that kept open the possibility of change, even if it self-consciously refuses to offer idealist alternatives for what this may look like. James Gordon Finlayson is right to argue that what "Adorno calls variously 'emancipation', 'redemption', 'utopia' and 'reconciliation' is a hidden good and so resides in what is ineffable, i.e. in whatever cannot be thought by concepts."³³ Critique, in shielding the ineffable 'non-identity' from the clutches of identity-thinking, aims ultimately at this hid-

³² Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

³³ James Gordon Finlayson, "Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable," *European Journal of Philosophy* 10.1 (2002): 11.

den, but inaccessible good. As such, the negativity of critique is the means by which philosophy shows how the non-identity of the object is made invisible by the concept in identity-thinking. So, instead of bringing non-identity into clear view, critique actively preserves its unnamed character, shielding it, in a way, from the violence of thought itself.

For instance, Patrice Haynes identifies two key ways that Adorno practices negative critique: ‘constellations’ and ‘naming’, both of which are negative and non-identifying in that they focus on identifying contradictions and fissures between what thought claims to do and what it actually has done, affording the critic with an index, a cartographic rendering of “an ontology of the wrong state of things”; it is, as Haynes poignantly describes, “a testament to its own ruin and disenchantment by instrumental reason: the terrible history sedimented with it...it manifests only darkness, namely, the object as a text to its own suffering.”³⁴ Critique, then, presents itself as negative image of the social world that is as perpetually self-interrogative as it is self-indicting; that is, it affords an incessant and interminable picture what has gone wrong with the world, and in doing so, brings to light this negative state of affairs so that it can be apprehended by conscience and inquiry. This is what I envision ‘critique’ doing for political theology: allowing it to think with alongside itself, against itself for its own sake. This self-altering critique is radically self-reflexive, and so immanent. But if theology itself also suffers ‘total integration’, the reifying effects of instrumental reason that identifies the object with the concept

³⁴ Patrice Haynes, *Immanent Transcendence: Reconfiguring Materialism in Continental Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 135.

(identity-thinking), how could immanent critique be thought to be helpful and productive, much less emancipatory? How can it hope to get outside itself enough to be able to offer any substantive alterations without reinscribing the very problems that critique sets itself against to begin with?

Adorno's ethical and political vision endures, however, albeit in critical form. By this, Adorno follows Horkheimer's insistence that critical theory be "grounded on the mystery of the present", which stops short of telling what "the right conditions" of social justice or economic freedom might look like, but offers us, through determine negation, directions as to how to come to terms with the current state of affairs. By critiquing social reality on the basis of the evils it produces, the dark effects it has human life, Adorno hopes to contribute to a radical transformation that is as discontinuous with the values and norms we currently subscribe to as it is with present, historical catastrophe. Modern society inscribes political subjects to act in ways that only promise to repeat and deepen the grave dangers of human life, and so critique labors to surface these forces and powers, clarifying what must be avoided and why. This critical, negative orientation is still a practical and political one, in that Adorno tells us why one ought not to live in a certain way. Speaking in strictly historical terms, Adorno suggests that the negativity of critique is necessary if political subjects are to understand how: "to order their thought and actions such that Auschwitz never reoccur, nothing similar ever happen."³⁵ The negativity of critique develops into an ethical and political perspective that wants to prevent the

³⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 358.

worst, where the worst is the repetition of Auschwitz.³⁶ The practical criterium for critique is that it must help guide political acts in such a way that subjects are able to to avoid, or minimize, reproducing ‘the wrong.’

Of interest to me at this juncture is the complex place that theology, inverted by the immanence of critique, plays in Adorno’s negative critique. If critique clears the social space of ‘the bad’, so the way forward appears only in its absence, the negation of the wrong or ‘the false thing’, theology seems related to this self-reflexivity, insofar as “it refuses to align itself with what exists, always seeking transcendence” through rigorous critique of itself. Of course, the traditional forms of theology - positive, apologetic, dogmatic, orthodox, doctrinally focused - are not capable of this, any more than any other fungible cultural good that more or less ‘embellishes’ and confirms what is of this world, even if it, in word, protests and opposes it. But as Brittain says well: “In the similar way that Adorno’s injunction against writing becomes an imperative for the importance of such poetry, one might add - albeit in a highly qualified sense - his injunction against employing theological language sublates into a recognition of the need for such language.”³⁷

In summary, Horkheimer and Adorno’s work is important of framing the methods of the Frankfurt school as a critical project, one designed to identify the distinction between genuinely transformative praxis (which Adorno strongly believed in) and ‘pseudo-activity’: the capitulated and resigned sloganeering of policies, procedures, and practice

³⁶ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 53-56; Also, see Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, trans. E. Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 116.; Theodor Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” in *Critical Models*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), 191-204, especially 199; Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” in *Critical Models*, 259-278, especially 268.

³⁷ Brittain, *Adorno and Theology*, 189-190.

(that Adorno argued is often mistaken for really existing praxis). As such, the stated goal of critical theory was thoroughly *critical*: to identify the social causes of evil, attested to in the past and present cries of suffering persons who indict history and society: “damaged human life.” This is reflected in Horkheimer’s early statement of the object of critical theory in the 1937 essay, which captures the real benefit of critique for political theology as whole. Speaking of ‘the critical activity’ that is “an essential aspect of the dialectical theory of society”, Horkheimer insists that:

The aim of this activity is not simply to eliminate one or other abuse, for it regards such abuses as necessary connected with the way in which the usual structure is organized. Although it itself emerges from the social structure, its purpose is not either in its conscious intention or in its objective significance. On the contrary, it is suspicious of the very categories of better, useful, appropriate, productive, and valuable as these are understood in the present order and refuses to take them as non-scientific presuppositions about which one can do nothing.³⁸

It may appear that their own analysis of the totality of social reality makes it difficult to see how such a critical perspective on the whole modern social structure can be gained. And yet, this negativity and minimalism (how *not* to act, what *not* to do, what should *not* be) must be understood in light of their broader utopian commitment, their hope that the present conditions harbor the seeds of a transformed world, and that critique can be leveraged as a way to think against the current realities shaping human life.

In closing, why turn to early critical theory here? Why be concerned at all with Horkheimer’s contrast of critical theory with traditional theory or with Adorno’s negative theory of critique or his analysis of actionism and resignation? What does this method of immanent critique mean for political theology? Alessandro Ferrara. (among others) has

³⁸ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 206-207.

recently argued that immanent critique is unique in its ability to bring its object out beyond itself by attending to what lies within, or as Ferrara says, it brings the object “beyond its present state or predicate, turning it into something that projects a significance that can be appraised by others who were not in the original circle of habits and critique. Immanent critique offers its object a chance to become an embodiment of justice, of freedom, of human dignity or of some other similar value.”³⁹ It is clear that immanent critique goes beyond demanding theology to be aware of its own faults, contradiction, and inconsistencies. This relegation of critique to judgments of internal coherence make it seem rather conventional and obvious, a common tactic of modern reason’s internal contradictions, and as such necessitates the full updating and reception of immanent ideology critique into political theology in the form of a critical theology. It is, after all, critical theory that foregrounds ideology critique as the central task of philosophy under the particular conditions of modernity. This objective can only be realized with the advent of ‘critical thinking’ and its immanent method, since both the thinking individual and her society are predisposed to conformism in thought that is regulatively enclosed and so, structurally self-affirming.

Praxis versus Actionism

In what follows, I will outline the impact of critique on political theology, so as to mark out a distinct critical approach within political theology. I want to argue here that

³⁹ Alessandro Ferrara, “Rethinking Critical Theory Once Again: Immanent Critique and Immanent Normativity,” in *Critical Theory and the Challenge of Praxis: Beyond Reification*, ed., Stefano Giacchetti Ludovisi (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 134.

the effect of the turn to ideology critique is the taking up of the critical attitude in political theory, or if you will, the development and practice of a critical theology. The original use of the term “ideology” to critique various critiques of religion was meant to help clarify the relation that Marx thought was a necessary condition of possibility for revolutionary praxis: namely the dissolution of the false dualism between theory and practice, between understanding and interpretation and change and action. The critique of religion as ideology was designed in part to combat this, to bind thought and action together in a materialist reflection of history and of human activity.

The original political goal of ideology critique was to shift how political subjects understand their relation to reality, not objectively, but as human activity, subjectively, as praxis. Ideology critique then served the major critical thesis of materialism: that reality is a subjective product of human labor (praxis) and sensory activity, not of pure thinking. The materialist thesis (that material reality, and as such, history is neither fixed or stable, but always in becoming) is politicized when it is joined to the principle of practical activity: that human beings are responsible for our conditions, that we imagine, create, and destroy the conditions of our own unhappiness and domination, and so much act collectively in efforts to shift the coordinates of possibility. Praxis is the means by which the political subject actively imagines and creates the world, not merely through idealist categories but through actual material activity that transforms the world.

But what directs praxis? How do we avoid, given our alienated and reified status in advanced modern societies, becoming ‘a plaything of alien forces’ that, in a sick twist in the inner logic of capital, are themselves the product of human labor? Not all practical

activity is authentic praxis, for human action is always under threat of being circumscribed and unwillfully conscripted by the limits established by the institutions of capitalism that come back to structure even our most subversive impulses and desires. The urge to transcend this condition, to dismantle the irrationalities and contradictions that make it possible, is one of the motivating and defining elements of praxis in the ideology critique tradition, but it is important for the argument of this chapter to see that this notion of critique is both negative and immanent, and that adopting critique in this way has significant implications for what it means for political theology to be practical.

A critical theology does not compete, replace, or oppose political theology, but rather attempts to point out and correct what I will call ‘actionist’ tendencies within it. I do not take this to mean that critique forestalls or occludes action or politics, but only that it introduces a negative perspective on its own ideological self-sufficiency, both its theological and its political presumptions. Critique is critical of action in order to create the space to think otherwise than in the ideological system that we, as political subjects, are conscripted into. Being politically oriented - claims made by theology to be for justice and against oppression, for freedom and against oppression, for equality and against heteronormativity, racism, and patriarchy, for planetary health and against practices of ecological denigration - does not secure for one’s self the vaunted security of an anti-ideological position. To raise these questions, a critical theology introduces an immanent critique of “dual negativity” that points to both the negativity of the predominant social order in which we live in and the negativity of theology’s own claims of presumptive self-suffi-

ciency. To be clear: the immanent negativity of the relation of critical theology to political theology does not result in a dismissal of action or politics, but only insists that the negative critique that political theology directs towards social and political problems also be directed towards itself immanently, which will indeed impact how political theology comports itself politically and theologically. What good is critique if everything stays the same afterwards?

In the late 1960's, Adorno explained his infamous refusal to endorse the student protest movements in a defense of critique as that which stands between 'actionism' and praxis. Historically speaking, Adorno's critical statements about actionism was occasioned by his disagreement with and refusal to endorse the student and antiwar movements of the late 1960s, which he faulted for displaying what he thought as an unreflective "collective compulsion for positivity that allows its immediate translation into practice"⁴⁰ despite the fact that so many of them were acting in response to his own work! The critique of actionism also occurs along a long-standing fault line between Adorno and other early critical theorists, most notably Herbert Marcuse, specially in terms of their differing philosophies of history and how those differences play out in their political expectations of liberation - and indeed, for revolution.⁴¹ I cannot lay out the complex historical and factual details that led up to this dispute or to the way it deeply divided early critical theorists in regards to the late 1960's student and antiwar movement in Germany,

⁴⁰ Adorno, "Critique," 289.

⁴¹ Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School* (London: Verso, 2014).

which has much to do with the struggles and shifts within the democratic state of Germany after the great war.⁴² All I intend to do here is lay out Adorno's critical analysis of actionism as example of critical impulse of 'dual negativity' that informs critical theology, and then to describe the impact that the critique of actionism has on the immanent relation of theory and praxis in political theology.

. Adorno faulted the protestors, demonstrators, and organizers for taking actions for 'the sake of doing something', an urgency that has more to do with sublimating their frustration and anxiety about the condition of their social world and overcoming their experience of helplessness, weakness, and alienation in the face of anti-democratic technocratic and economic power taking control of both the university and the state. Too quickly, Adorno said, theory was being mobilized for what was thought to be the revolution, without regard for the constraints of the historical situation or without consideration of whether the activities were in fact discontinuous with the present system. This certainly makes the line between praxis and 'actionism': authentic praxis institutes and brings into being a material reality discontinuous with the predominant system, something that Adorno did not see happening as a result of the student movement's presumptions to have inaugurated such a break.

⁴² Fabian Freyenhagen, "Adorno's Politics: Theory and Praxis in Germany's 1960s," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 40, no. 9 (2014): 867-893; James Gordon Finlayson, "The Question of Praxis in Adorno's Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory and the Challenge of Praxis: Beyond Reification*, ed., Stefano Giacchetti. Ludovisi (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 51-69.

Taking up Adorno's distinction between mere actionism and revolutionary praxis gives us an opportunity to clarify Adorno's prospects for political action. Adorno's reputation, outlined most famously by Perry Anderson, is that his the negative charger of his theory is resigned to defeat and political isolation and despair. The idea there there is no way to live rightly in the conditions of false life leaves no other option than the renunciation of politics and a retreat into abstraction and pessimism. Adorno's theory of critique then leads to nothing more than complicit dormancy.⁴³ Andrew Feenberg makes a similar argument about the role of critique Adorno's grim views on prospects for social change, determined in large part by his negative philosophy of history, leading him to eschew the possibility of emancipation, progress, or revolution, the conditions of modernity being as reified as they are. Instead, the goal of critique is thoroughly immanent *to* modernity, and so abstains from formulating positive alternative or constructive responses to reification of reason and relations in the capitalist social order.⁴⁴ But neither Adorno nor the early critical theorists were quietist, but rather utopian thinkers who are starkly committed to remaking the world through materialist practices: that unity of theory and praxis. Admittedly this has as much to do with his philosophy of history, articulated in distinction to both Marx and Hegel, as it does with critique, but it is nevertheless important to better understand Adorno's views on how critique restricted the prospects for political action.⁴⁵

⁴³ Perry Anderson, *Considerations of Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1976), 60-61, 72.

⁴⁴ Feenberg, *Philosophy of Praxis*, 150-180.

⁴⁵ For more on this, see Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy Living Less Wrongly*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013., and Fabian Freyenhagen, "Adorno's Critique of Late Capitalism: Negative, Explanatory, and Practical," in *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Ruth Sonderegger, and Karin de Boer (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 175-192.

Given Adorno's views about the total integration of consciousness and rationality into the dominative system, it is easy to see why he thought the conditions were not right for genuine praxis, which required a dramatic, radical shift in the social order, not just changes in the form of government or social values. In this context, authentic political action can morph into 'pseudo-activities' that actually help and perpetuate the existing system that is explicitly being opposed by protest, demonstration, and organization. Actionism distracts political subjects with the cathartic effects of struggle, helps feeling as if they are doing something important and alleviates their own sense of complicity or powerlessness.

To flesh this out a bit more, I turn here to the essays 'Critique' and 'Resignation', both of which were radio addresses that take up directly the question of theory's relation to praxis with a situation of actionism. Adorno counters what he saw as "pseudo-activities" of student protest and demonstrations against the university system in Germany and what they saw as the anti-democratic, authoritarian, and technocratic government. Far from being the vestiges of revolution or conduits of serious, radical social change necessary for praxis to take hold in social order, Adorno considered actionist protest and resistance to be themselves byproducts of reified consciousness that only sustained and protected structures of domination rather than introduce the possibility of genuine human relations necessary for collective attachments and political arrangements that give rise to freedom, happiness, and well-being. In some ways, this was not surprising to Adorno. False life limits and restricts our political options and our struggle for praxis. The lack of correct forms of life, of consciousness, circumscribes our political choices, leading to an

existential anxiety, an urgency about our present uncertainty, that itself leads to a privileging of practical life and so to a resentment towards thinking in response to the demand for a false clarity.

This is expanded by Adorno in his seminal essay, "Critique" where he distances critical theory from the jargon of social change or abstract revolutionary rhetoric.⁴⁶ While he falls far short of offering anything like political perspective based on critique, he does offer a minimalistic praxis that is guided by the negative image of the world provided by immanent critique. Critique is political in the sense that it directs us towards from particular social forms, only for the sake of their negation: it gives us guidance about how not to live, how not to think or act. Despite its negativity, this immanent critique of praxis as actionism is indeed social criticism; its method lays out how we can best start to specify the relations and patterns of oppression in institutions, structures, and policies, by analyzing the situation and identifying the fundamental antagonisms at its base. This critical work far precedes that of practical activity, and is itself a form of praxis. If political theology aims to take up and apply to itself the Marxian thesis that the point of philosophy is to change the world, not only to interpret it, then it must come to terms with the way that critique relates immanently to praxis by trying to make sense of the world. This is the task of critique, and it is as far as we can go at this point in history.

⁴⁶ Adorno, "Critique," 281-288. The specific context for this radio address was the German student demonstrations in the 1960s, which was populated by students whose protest and demonstrations were explicitly motivated by Adorno, a point made repeatedly to Adorno by the student's vocal supporter, Herbert Marcuse. Adorno did not deny the role that his work played in the movement, but rather disagreed that it was being properly understood and applied by the students.

This position is further justified in the essay “Resignation”, in which he rebuffs detractors who dismiss his critical perspective on the grounds that it is negative, pessimistic, and non-normative. He admits that the refusal to directly link critical theory to a specific program for political action has often led to him being charged with political passivity or resignation, as if “by leaving the conditions untouched, he condones them without admitting it.”⁴⁷ Adorno’s concern is that this obsession with activity is actionistic and so precludes the full commitment to thought that authentic praxis requires: “the much invoked unity of theory and praxis has the tendency of slipping into the predominance of praxis.”⁴⁸ Adorno further defines actionism as “the repressive intolerance to the thought that is not immediately accomplished by instructions for action”⁴⁹ in contrast to praxis to which theory is not merely a counterpart that was once helpful, but is now no longer needed now that the revolution is in place.

For Adorno, the near immediate demand for practical activity was the most apathetic, the most resigned to the current configuration of political possibilities. Actionism, despite its rowdy insistence otherwise, ended up merely endorsing “the pseudo-reality within which actionism moves.”⁵⁰ It displayed the inherent belief that the options before us are the best or only ones that we could think of and that any suspension of action was

⁴⁷ Adorno, “Resignation,” 289.

⁴⁸ Adorno, “Resignation,” 290.

⁴⁹ Adorno, “Resignation,” 291.

⁵⁰ Adorno, “Resignation,” 291.

not worth it; nothing really could ever change. The immediacy, the urgency, the unmediated rush to act - the 'do it yourself' slogan ('be the change you want to see in the world!') stifles creativity and spontaneity, and its disregard for the art of political patience, becomes moralized, sentimental theater with the positive in a starring role. For Adorno, the problem with this is that "the craving for the positive is a screen-image of the destructive instinct working under a thin veil. Those talking the most about the positive are in agreement with destructive power. The collective compulsion for a positivity that allows its immediate translation into practice... fits so smoothly into society's prevailing trend."⁵¹

By concluding that "actionism is regressive [because] it refuses to reflect on its own impotence", Adorno notes his concern that political subjects who see themselves as radical agitators of the dominating system actually end up living out the pragmatic empiricism of the dominant culture; in this way, "actionism fits so smoothly into society's prevailing trend."⁵² The corrective antidote for this false and complicit positivity was the negativity of immanent critique, not an critical abandonment of praxis. It is the responsibility of critique "not to accept the situation as final."⁵³ Just because Adorno's sense was that any serious prospects for political action were far off, a sensibility driven by his negative, immanent concept of critique, did not mean that his critique left his practical philosophy naturally opposed to any concrete, historical struggles.

⁵¹ Adorno, "Critique," 288.

⁵² Adorno, "Critique," 289.

⁵³ Adorno, "Resignation," 291.

According to Adorno, ‘actionism’ is ideology because it discourages negative discussion of positive ideas or beliefs (justice, equality, reconciliation, solidarity), and so stymies both thought and praxis with its preference for activities and tactics. It is averse to any kind of thinking that may or may not necessarily produce something (which it deems to ‘deconstructive’, ‘critical’, ‘negative’, or ‘abstract’), even if its direct practical impact may still be far off. Their preference is, as Adorno notes, for thought that conveniently produces “ideologies for their own accommodation, like lucidity, objectivity and precision.”⁵⁴ “One clings to action for the sake of action”, quipped Adorno, and this only produces a “forced primary of praxis” that devolves into a ‘pseudo-activity’: “action that overdoes and aggravates itself for the sake of its own publicity.”⁵⁵

The characteristics of actionism include a temperamental, defensive reflex, a hyper-pragmatism that favors gradualist, short-term change, rather than the dramatic systemic shifts favored by Adorno and the early Frankfurters, and hostility towards theory, all of which justifies their activism through the moralization of orthopraxy. whereas the one who acts is the most virtuous, the one most committed to the cause of justice, solidarity, emancipation and so on.’ It is precisely this kind of self-assurance and unreflexive modesty that leads Adorno to resist the idea that immediate activity as a necessary, universal condition of praxis. Adorno insists that the critical work of understanding and changing deep structures usually will not be resolved through reactionary policy changes, public demonstrations, or protest movements, whose proclivities for were most likely to

⁵⁴ Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1., 95.

⁵⁵ Adorno, “Resignation,” 291.

simply reinscribe the same irrational, dominative logics at heart of the dehumanizing and authoritarian system they want to resist.

Given its immanent and negative character, does critique seal theory (and so, as it concerns us here, theology) off from practical, ethical, social transformative praxis? Does its negativity, its minimalist strategy of denunciation, preclude the judgement and decision requisite for ethics and politics? Adorno (and again, to a lesser extent, Horkheimer) is often faulted for producing a social theory so critical that it was resigned to the givens of modern social formulations, content to offer a negative image of the social world without proffering positive solutions or practical programs. As the charge goes, this interminable critique of domination, suffering, damage, and injustice does not deliver any real transformation of the material conditions that produce them. The immanent context of thinking prevents even discursive, practical reason from proffering anything trustworthy other than inverted images of reality: ‘that which ought to be but is.’ Critique does not proffer alternative visions of the world, ways that lead political subjects out of damaged life, towards some ideal future, leaving us with no recourse but to interminably negate the actual, or as Horkheimer would later complain, “All we can do is say ‘no’ to everything!”⁵⁶

This does not mean that critique fully dispenses or divests itself from interest in the direct activity of praxis. Adorno does not dismiss praxis in favor of critique, but ra-

⁵⁶ Horkheimer, as cited in Jarvis, “The Coastline of Experience,” 15.

ther raises the threshold for praxis beyond that of the student protestors and demonstrators. When Adorno insisted that “critique is essential for all democracy”⁵⁷, he was pointing to how its work is to resist the established positions, existing institutions, predominant frameworks of thought (unity, identity, harmony, authority), all of which that posits itself as self-justified, natural, or university: in a word, it is to counter ideology. This is the resistance, not of judgement, but of final decision that keeps open the possibility of being wrong, of being misguided, of not quite having it all right. Adorno critiqued the 1960s student movements for being ‘actionists’ because their efforts at protest and resistance lacked this self-reflexivity of critique; they considered themselves inoculated and exempt on account of their vocal and active opposition to an exploitative, unjust and inhuman social system, and their commitments to democracy, equality, and liberation, as of those concepts and ideals themselves are free from the same dialectical demons that possess ‘enlightenment.’

Adorno further insists that the most serious threat to critique is “the appeal to the positive.”⁵⁸ Adorno bemoans this fact, concerned about a sublation of critique by praxis of ‘positivity’: “One continually finds the word critique, if it is tolerated at all, accompanied by the word constructive. The insinuation is that only someone can practice critique who can propose something better than what is being criticized... By making the positive a condition for it, critique is tamed from the very beginning and loses its vehemence.”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Adorno, “Critique,” 287.

⁵⁸ Adorno, “Critique,” 287.

⁵⁹ Adorno, “Critique,” 287.

Adorno goes on to say that “it is by no means always possible to add to critique the immediate practical recommendation of something better, although in many cases critique can proceed by way of confronting realities with the norms to which these realities appeal following the norms would already by better.”⁶⁰

It is clear that Adorno’s theory of the total integration of the social world with radical evil overstated the completeness of damaged life. Ted Smith says it well, speaking about the early Frankfurt School: “Their own arguments are the best arguments against their understandings of the world, for they both do much more than trace the outlines of the fractures of our lives, and they do so in ways that are not only intelligible but even beautiful. The fact that they can think such thoughts at all is the best argument against the totality of their despair.”⁶¹ To be sure, critique is necessary in order to get access to ‘the damaged life’ that makes the way towards correct forms of life hard to discern; only after disrupting these conditions will we be able to conceive ideas of truth, justice, and the good, and so be able to articulate and put into practice what it would look like to live an ethically and morally right form of life.

How is critique able to disclose the negative image of the existing order as an immanent method? What is revealed in the negative light of critique is not only greed, alienation, unchecked selfishness, injustice, and systemic dehumanization for the sake of profit and pleasure, but all the resultant pain, fear, suffering, and terror that the ideology of mass-produced culture tries to hide and anesthetize, leaving political subjects with just

⁶⁰ Adorno, “Critique,” 288.

⁶¹ Smith, *Weird John Brown*, 160.

enough amnesia and exhaustion to ensure that they do not pose a serious threat to the normal flow of things. This is how critical theology may contribute to political theology's privilege of praxis while its negativity always hedges against its actionism. Rather than all too quick dismissal of action and politics, critical theology proceeds negativity in relation to political theology with the conviction that "the false, once determinately known and precisely expressed, is already an index of what is right and better."⁶²

Praxis guided by critique is always motivated by what the Frankfurt School, and political theology, and eventually feminist and liberationist theologies, called "negative contrast experiences."⁶³ The experience of history as history of suffering, nonsense, and misery is not enough to generate the kind of praxis necessary to overcome and counter it. Critique insists that any and all outrage at what is and should not be, provided by these selfsame negative contrast experiences, is not enough to give us knowledge of what should be; it is not enough to convince us all to look beyond what it is and towards something new. Encountering really existing conditions of poverty, experiencing authentic compassion and grief, and coming to terms one's complicity in the capitalist system of success, profit, and consumption that requires poverty is not enough to generate the kind

⁶² Adorno, "Critique," 288.

⁶³ The term "negative contrast experiences" often refers to those dehumanizing experiences of injustice, suffering, and oppression that result in protest and activate the ethical imperative toward active transformation of the conditions that made these experiences possible. Take for example, Edward Schillebeeckx, who writes, "Ideas and expectations of salvation and human happiness are invariably projected from within concrete experience and the pondered fact of calamity, pain, misery and alienation from within negative experiences accumulated through centuries of affliction." Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 19. Negative contrast experiences are, in this way, decisively critical in 'the double movement' I am suggesting here in that they always problematize any and all claims to realized praxis, any declaration to have arrived with the concepts of justice, solidarity, love and forgiveness, to name a few, already in hand.

of praxis that will dismantle its real social causes. And yet, the goal of much of liberationist and political theologies is precisely this: consciousness-raising, often times interpreted as co-terminus with ideology critique.

The double movement of immanent critique insists that any attempt to indicate something determine as a result of critique is problematized by the false character of the reality it is opposing. Elizabeth Pritchard explains it this way: “To elevate negativity into an existing positive is to pretend that the longed-for reconciliation is an extension of the status quo; alternately stated, it is to mistake critical insight for the achievement of lived reconciliation.” Critical theology reminds political, in its second, self-reflective direction, that being able to see that things should not be as they are does not thereby allow one to produce a picture of the way things should be or will be. This would amount to a elevation of negativity into positivity, and this is precisely that which critical theology finds problematic and troublesome. Critical theology is uncertain whether the better future is in fact indicated in negative experiences of the world and surfaced by its ideology critique, and so taking up political theology as its object, it modifies the posture it takes as it prescribes actions and values, whether on the basis of specific theological commitments, or political convictions, even so-called emancipatory ones. In this way, a critical theology is tasked with moderating the relation of theory and praxis within political theology.

Critical theology’s most urgent or pressuring goal is not to put theology to work, but to practice theology with a critical spirit of immanent, negative self-reflexivity, submitting itself and all the practices, policies, solutions, and proposals it suggests as a result

of its own discourse to incessant immanent ideology critique, both towards social conditions and towards its own positivity. It does this not in order to forestall praxis, but tries to ensure that political activities, with all their claims to subversive protest, revolutionary resistance, and practical change, only play right into the hands of an oppressive and domineering system well skilled at converting opposition into fuel.⁶⁴ It starts from the concrete, historical situation of our lifeworld, and from there analyzes theology's entanglement within this world, especially the ways it circumscribes theology, determining the ethical, social, and political choices available to it, the ways we think and consider these choices, and how we configure our political subjectivity in relation to theological commitment. When Raymond Geuss warned that, speaking about Adorno's view of the total integration of the world with radical evil, all "demands that philosophy be connected with any kind of injunction to perform specific actions are themselves both forms of repression and an incitement to evil"⁶⁵, he is referring to what I think should be political theology's critical relation to praxis.

The value of Adorno's critique of actionism is that it articulates the difference between a *critical* position and an *actionist* position on the relation of theory to praxis. The kind of theology sought for by a critical theology is not theory void of action, divorced from any sort of transformative or ethical consideration, but rather the kind of thought

⁶⁴ Adorno, "Resignation," 290.

⁶⁵ Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 56.

that, again to quote Adorno, “remains loyal to itself by negating itself from these moments. That is the critical form of thought. Critical thought alone, not thought’s complacent agreement with itself, may help bring about change.”⁶⁶ A critical theology, in relation to political theology, attempts to mark the trap laid by the politics of urgency and immediacy that does not take seriously the constraints of its own thought, that gets too caught up in the frenzy of activity that it fails to account for its immanent contradictions and antagonisms, its ideological presumptions that hide under its claims to being transformative, subversive, and the like. A critical theology based upon a critique of actionism is not a critique of the practical solutions provided by political theology tout court, nor is it an unequivocally strict restriction of how practical critical theology can be. The purpose for doing political theology through the prism of critique is to self-consciously practice an immanent critique of dual negativity both of its own false clarity and sham resistance, for fear of actually playing into the hands of a dominative system that has proved itself to be adept at inoculating subversion and opposition, and of the social world.

My point is *not* that there should be less activism, less practical action, less concrete struggle taken up by political theology. Nor am I suggesting that theology ought to abandon the hard political work of struggling for and with those who suffer and die at the hands of social injustice, economic inequality, authoritarian power, and the contradictions of capital. The practical, transformative force of political theology is nothing without visible, disruptive, interruptive displays of protest, resistance, and indeed, praxis; political

⁶⁶ Adorno, “Opinion Delusion Society,” in *Critical Models*, 122.

theology would cease to be either theological or political in this case, for it is clear to me, at least from the Christian perspective, any theology that does not account for the demands placed upon it by God's own prescribed solidarity with the unheard and unredeemed memories of the suffering and the dead is not indeed a theo-logos, but has become something else entirely. In closing, why turn to early critical theory here? Why be concerned at all with Horkheimer's contrast of critical theory with traditional theory or with Adorno's negative theory of critique or his analysis of actionism and resignation? What does this method of immanent critique mean for political theology? Alessandro Ferrara. (among others) has recently argued that immanent critique is unique in its ability to bring its object out beyond itself by attending to what lies within, or as Ferrara says, it brings the object "beyond its present state or predicate, turning it into something that projects a significance that can be appraised by others who were not in the original circle of habits and critique. Immanent critique offers its object a chance to become an embodiment of justice, of freedom, of human dignity or of some other similar value."⁶⁷ It is clear that immanent critique goes beyond demanding theology to be aware of its own faults, contradiction, and inconsistencies. This relegation of critique to judgments of internal coherence make it seem rather conventional and obvious, a common tactic of modern reason's internal contradictions, and as such necessitates the full updating and reception of ideology critique. It is, after all, critical theory that foregrounds ideology critique as the central task of philosophy under the particular conditions of modernity. This objective

⁶⁷ Alessandro Ferrara, "Rethinking Critical Theory Once Again: Immanent Critique and Immanent Normativity," in *Critical Theory and the Challenge of Praxis: Beyond Reification*, ed. Stefano Giacchetti Ludovisi (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 134.

can only be realized with the advent of ‘critical thinking’ and its immanent method, since both the thinking individual and her society are predisposed to conformism in thought that is regulatively enclosed and so, structurally self-affirming.

Political Theology?

What I hope to avoid here is merely suggesting that what theology stands to learn from ideology critique is that it needs to be more critically self-aware, conscientious, of its own errors, mistakes, and short-sightedness. Nor do I want to integrate ideology critique into theology for the purpose of better positioning theology (and/or religious thought) as “a conceptual resource for theoretical innovation.” This amounts to an instrumentalization of theology for the purpose of politics, whether they be critical, as in Žižek’s case, or radical, as in Eagleton’s. I find these approaches to be insufficient responses to ideology critique within critical theory because neither of them take on ‘critique’ as their primary modality, but maintain an allegiance to a higher goal: the creative appropriation and use of religious and theological ideas in the practical tropes of judgment, decision, and action. Instead of rushing to put religious and theological notions, themes, and ideas to new uses, critique sobers the immanent relation between theology and politics, but not because all use of theology for political reason is ideological. Indeed this must happen, and yet what is needed is a dual negative perspective that applies critique to both the political and to the theological.

The main point of theorizing political theology *as* critique is not to develop a methodology from which to derive what our social and/or political order ought to be like, but rather to establish that there is always a potential for improvement immanent to, and

contained within, our thoughts and practices. But the need for critique is not just a political demand made against theology so as to clear away the ever-present 'ideological taint', but is instead what Adorno called 'an immanent method' that theology itself must learn to practice, not something that is practiced against theology by philosophy, sociology, or science. *Critical* theology is justified theologically - even though it is carried out for ethical grounds or political reasons. For political theology, critique is the political means to its properly theological end.

What concerns me, however, about political theology is not so much that we lack a comprehensive, rigorous definition for it (a troublesome situation that admittedly allows for it to be used indiscriminately, leaving it wide open to confusion and abuse). Too often, the idea that "as there is no theology without political implications, there is no political theory without theological presuppositions" leads to a dangerous presumption that the proper task of theology is to lead the world out of its damaged state, that theology paves the way to the good through liberation and freedom. As a result, political theology all too often sublimates political philosophy into itself on account of the immense practical force it enjoys when it puts its theological ideas into political practice. By stylizing itself as praxis, political theology awards itself all too quickly with a self-satisfaction about practical importance, relevance, and usefulness. This practical emphasis on the part of some political theologies is often used to seal itself off against critique on the basis that it is the position most committed to the social causes of justice, reconciliation, human rights, or

liberation; the fact that action is being taken inoculates it from critique, and so it considers itself immunized from an immanent critique of its own presumptive self-sufficiency that betrays its interruptive and emancipatory reason.

In the absence of this dual perspective, political theology responds to the negativity of a present social conditions and so sublimates the critical, self-reflexive, and negative demands of praxis into 'activities', meaning that political theology is meaningful, useful, and worthwhile only insofar as it has a point. And so, what critical theology challenges in political theology is not the practical impulse that drives the concern for social change via transformative praxis, but the way that this impulse enforces a decidedly anti-critical spirit that seemingly inoculates political theology's stated commitment to opposing oppressive, dominating, and authoritarian orders from any need for self-reflexive examination, allowing itself to be applied straightaway.

The need for critical theology comes from a lack of confidence that Christian theology is quite as reliable or trustworthy as political theology seems to think it is - or that our theologies are so unqualifiedly good for the world. These misgivings are supplied by the negativity of immanent critique and should be folded into its own theological and political commitments. Critical theology helps political theology avoid becoming merely a practiced rehearsal of well-worn scripts, a pattern, perhaps unconsciously, that is always protected so as to avoid any kind of rupture and negativity.

Constructively, what critique offers to political theology is a shift in perspective in terms of how it envisions how and why it is political; that is, that critical theory takes

political theology as its own object, as an immanent critique. In doing so, political theology becomes a *critical* discourse about how to undertake concrete practices in the context of a broken, damaged, social world in which political activity and practical programs can often be inverted by dominative and alienating forces within the social order; when this happens, truly political concerns, understood simply as the struggle to ascertain how best to arrange ourselves in collective associations for human well-being and freedom, becomes sublated into ‘policy’ or the activities of ‘policing’, reduced to the struggle to possess and distribute power. Jacques Rancière articulates upon the difference this way:

What is proper to politics is thus lost at the outset if politics is thought of as a specific way of living. Politics is specifically opposed to the police. The police is a 'partition of the sensible' [le partage du sensible] whose principle is the absence of a void and of a supplement. The police is not a social function but a symbolic constitution of the social. The essence of the police is neither repression nor even control over the living. Its essence is a certain manner of partitioning the sensible. We will call 'partition of the sensible' a general law that defines the forms of part-taking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed. The partition of the sensible is the cutting-up of the world and of ‘world...’⁶⁸

The essence of politics, then, is radically disturbing in its insistence to bring to the field of constitution that which the field itself has little room for. It introduces into this ‘partition’ precisely what it was designed to keep out: “a part of the no-part.” In a milieu saturated by sloganeering and calls to action, all of which appear to make very little impact on the normal flow of things, the work of critique is to interrupt this, to call forth the possibility of the otherwise. It is to remind us that things should not be as they are, but stops short of prescribing how things ought to be. It does this *because* of its eminently

⁶⁸ Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 26.

political interests and commitments, not because of an abandonment of social transformation, political activity, or concrete concerns. Any allergy critique may have to judgment and activity is a question of division of labor, rather than a principled objection. Again, Ranciere echoes how it is that politics attempts to overcome the partitioning of policy and the police from politics:

Political litigiousness/struggle is that which brings politics into being by separating it from the police that is, in turn, always attempting its disappearance either by crudely denying it, or by subsuming that logic to its own. Politics is first and foremost an intervention upon the visible and the sayable.⁶⁹

My interest in a critical theology stems from a desire to clarify exactly how and why the theory of the political modifies the theological; it does this by seeing a homology between the “intervention upon the visible and the sayable” and the negativity of the immanently critical position in relation to the normativity of praxis. A critical theology explicates how it is that political theology itself leads *directly* neither to a specific ethics nor to a politics, but is at its immanent best when it is ‘en-framed’, limited, by its own criticality; that is, when it disavows the dual temptations of technical (whereby it attempts to find the best means to a given end) and/or practical reason (which determines whether a prospective course of action is worth pursuing) even if the *telos* itself is desirable (non-statist, anti-racist, feminist, anti-capitalist, and so on).

Political theology, then, is not against praxis, but rather approaches it critically, that is, negatively with a minimalist attitude towards ethical and political action; in this

⁶⁹ Ranciere, “Ten Theses on Politics,” 37.

way, it sides with praxis against what Adorno called ‘pseudo-activities’, which, when applied to political theology, can be discerned in the frequent appeals to ethical and political categories of justice, liberation, reconciliation, resistance, consensus and so on, appeals that show themselves to be as innocuous to the established order as they are commonplace in the culture of the literature of political theology. The appeals themselves are not problematic; it is that these appeals and the commitments they necessitate are not held critically; that is, they act as exemptions for further critical consideration. In this way, critique reshapes the immanent relation within political theology of theory to praxis through a dual movement of negativity, directed at once at both a thorough critique of social conditions (ad extra) immanent critique of theological concepts (intra).

This double movement is something more in line with Metz and Althaus-Reid than with Tillich, Niebuhr, liberation theology, or even the biblical theology of idolatry, namely because both Metz and Althaus-Reid clearly saw the need to establish theology in a critical position both towards social conditions (e.g., heteronormativity, sexual violence) and in relation to theological concepts (e.g., theologies that authorize and justify patriarchal ecclesial forces, privatization of theology, the bourgeois religious subject). And yet even if this critical perspective do not reflexively turn, in an immanent way, to itself, either to the new political theology or the indecent theologies they developed, respectively.

This dual negativity critical theology further specifies what it means for theology to be both critical and political; that is, committed to supporting and fostering transformative praxis, while also fostering an immanent critique of dual negativity, both of the present social order and its own self-sufficiency. In this way, critical theology is, as Mendieta suggests, “a cipher of negativity”: a deliberate attempt to think theologically *with* theology and also against it, to rescue praxis from theology for the sake of each other. The goal of critical theology, in relation to political theology, is to produce theologies that act as critical, negative elements with which to criticize a broken world replete with damage life, and its own ideological presumptions to be on emancipatory praxis.

In this way, the longing inherent to critical theology is a yearning for the just society that is the condition of possibility for truth and reason. Critical theology is at the service of political theology as its immanent critique of ideology, and such converts itself into a source of social and political critique that self-reflexively considers itself to both a source of alienation and negation in the world, but also potentially of freedom, redemption and happiness that may, from within itself, instigate new forms of political possibilities. This dual perspective wants to make explicit the ways that theology and the political are not at odds, and cannot become what they both need to be (according to the norms of justice, equality, recognition, freedom and the like), and so explicitly takes up lines of argument that position theology critically in relation to itself and its social world.

That critical theology may only take an inverse or negative form is something we learn from Adorno. By this, Adorno meant a theology that begins from, and does not ex-

ceed beyond, the absence of God. “Negative theology” is not apophatic strategy of theological naming, but rather is a philosophy of history, one that understands progress, fulfillment and expectation not as triumphant, but rather as that ridden with calamity, and so flashes back analeptically to the beginning, so as to bring the misery and the suffering of the world into view. This negativity of critical theology, however, does not forestall redemption or hope but rather conditions the context in which Christianity, its theologies, and its communities turn still to the impossibility of love, forgiveness, reparations, memory, and perhaps, even utopia, but now sobered by the selfsame gesture of its immanent critique that uncovers its delusions, blind spots, and perhaps its errors.

In this way, the longing inherent to critical theology is a yearning for the just society that is the condition of possibility for truth and reason. Critical theology is at the service of political theology as its immanent critique of ideology, and such converts itself into a source of social and political critique that self-reflexively considers itself to both a source of alienation and negation in the world, but also potentially of freedom, redemption and happiness that may, from within itself, instigate new forms of political possibilities. This dual perspective wants to make explicit the ways that theology and the political are not at odds, and cannot become what they both need to be (according to the norms of justice, equality, recognition, freedom and the like), and so explicitly takes up lines of argument that position theology critically in relation to itself and its social world.

Critical Theology?

I cannot be exhaustive or comprehensive in what follows, but I do hope to provide some clarifying examples of the use of critique in theology that understands itself in differing ways as political theology. I do this in order to clarify where I think these perspectives fall short and how their shortcomings may be ameliorated by a return of sorts to the conception of critique articulated by the early critical theory of the Frankfurt School. It is fairly common in late modern discussions of theological method for theologians to propose multiple tasks for theology, criticism primary among them. Since the rise of modern theology, criticism is seen as the negative or deconstructive element of a broader, more comprehensive picture of theological labor, something that theologians do on the way to something else, something more desirable. Criticism was often the posture that theology is to take to its own history, its tradition, its own religious practices, institutions or beliefs; many theological reasons are given for this reflexivity, namely that insofar as the most direct theological question is that of God, it is clear that divine love and grace points us back to the human condition, calling us to consider human purposes and needs paramount to the vocation of theology as it performs specific functions in the course of human life. In this material, criticism was often paired with other more affirmative tasks, such as constructive, contextualizing, or application. This task is often directed to the various forms of human experience, whether it be individual, social, political, scientific, aesthetic, linguistic, or moral, whereby theologians are to connect the traditions's understanding of God to the various segments or aspects of contemporary human life. This secures for theology a claim to relevance, to public significance, to being meaningful beyond the specific confines of its particular community.

This general pattern varies significantly from tradition to tradition not only between Protestant and Catholic traditions but within them. Liberal, narrative, public, radical, and practical theological approaches (along with some variants of Catholic modernists) will all stray at some point from this general structure, but it stands as a working rubric for how criticism has been woven into theological method but its critical impact was not sustained but was taken over by instrumentalizing impulses to put theology to work. My sense that critique, which is always self-reflexively interrogative, does in fact place some significant limits on how and why theology can be used for praxis. Whether critique has ever been allowed to have this effect on theology, especially theologies that understand themselves to be directly political in nature, remains to be seen. To get a sense of major trends, we will quickly look at a few examples as starting points for how critique ought to function in political theology moving forward.

We saw in the preceding chapters that the turn to theology for ideology critique was politically motivated, in that they saw in Christianity a critical wedge to hold against the powers of liberal democracy and the contradictions of capital. The politicalization of theology for ideology critique, evinced in the work of Terry Eagleton and Slavoj Žižek, seemed to counter or reverse a long-held suspicion associated with the Marxist tradition that theology, although it arose from the material struggles of human beings, precluded transformative praxis because of its ideological status; that is, its social impact universalized and naturalized explanations of the world and of history and so shielded political subjects from the reality of their oppression, making it harder for the processes of prole-

tarianization to take effect. I have noted throughout the dissertation that one way to understand and identify ideology is to explore its social impact, the way it interfaces with the collective lives of political subjects. Both Eagleton and Žižek mostly considered theology to be ‘false’ but happily employed it for political purposes so as to counter the ideologies of liberalism, capital, postmodernity, and so on. In the end, they instrumentalized theology for their own purposes, turning Christianity into mere political site. It was the politics of theology that attracted them; they found theology in this way to be useful, even if in the end of the day, none of it was true. Žižek’s Christianity is a self-consciously atheistic one, after all.

By and large, political theology has celebrated this turn to theology for ideology critique, for it too considers itself an emancipatory resource for ethics and politics. It looks to its traditions and sources and finds there enormous material upon which to think about debt, labor, poverty, human dignity, divine solidarity with the poor, law, sacrifice, theologies of suffering, challenges to authoritarianism, imperialism and nationalism, embodiment, critiques of violence, alternative theories of power and sovereignty, as well as social issues such as racism and gender justice. As the recent interest in theological genealogies has shown, much of that has always trickled down into the most basic of democratic principles and liberal values: human rights, consensus, toleration, the sacred/secular distinction, and representational governance. In contrast to this, how does critical theology flesh out what theology should actually be about and how it should understand and theorize its immanent relation to praxis?

‘Critical theology’ is not a theological appropriation of critical theory that attempts to integrate or correlate its methods or analysis in order to ‘modernize’, update, or otherwise correct problems within theology on ethical or political grounds.⁷⁰ Marsha Hewitt attempts this by correlating critical theory’s utopian ideals for human emancipation from dehumanizing and reifying structures of domination with feminist critiques of patriarchy and gender injustice, as they appear in both the contemporary social world and religious traditions. Her overall argument is that critical theory and feminist criticism work in tandem in relation to society and religion to offer a holistic critique that also sustains utopic expectations for transformative praxis.⁷¹ Hewitt suggests this is prefigured in how Horkheimer and Adorno (to a letter extent, admittedly) preserve a “kind of non-theistic religious longing” through a sustained negative confrontation with the world as it is, without prescribing how the world ought to be, or how best to live as individuals in the world.⁷² And yet, elsewhere Hewitt is dismissive of political theology (as well as liberation and public theology), and argues against the application of critical theory to political theology, deeming them incompatible. She accuses political theologians of being “unable to sustain or develop their critical impact”, evinced in their near universal commitment to “the universal validity of Christian values and truth claims in their efforts to privilege

⁷⁰ Marsha A. Hewitt, *Critical Theory of Religion: A Feminist Analysis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

⁷¹ Hewitt, *Critical Theory of Religion*, 3-20.

⁷² Hewitt, *Critical Theory of Religion*, 5.

Christian sensibility and political values in public, political life.”⁷³ This makes them unable to interface with complex modern societies in global, pluralistic, and multicultural contexts. Though I share Hewitt’s concern that political theology can, at times, be too uncritical and unreflective about the applications of its theological values to public life, it is not at all obvious that political theology cannot account for and respond to an ambiguous and pluralist global context, or that all political theologies make these claims about the universality of Christian truth claims. In fact, part of the benefit of political theology’s diffusive character is its ability to engage various contexts and social worlds in meaningful and impactful ways; its undecidability leaves it flexible, malleable, and open to an increasingly pluralistic and global social order.

Hewitt also sets aside attempts to use notions of critique in critical theory rethink the meaning and use of religion by critically relating to theological claims and religious ideas to sociology.⁷⁴ This general aim governs the “critical theory of religion” perspective that seeks to integrate critical studies of religion (as sociological phenomena) into theological perspectives stylized as “critical social theology.” In the work of Charles Davis, this amounts to more of an un-dialectical ‘theologization’ of society than a critique of the social impact of theology, in my judgement. Integrating critical theory into theology means studying the function of religion in society. The result is a ‘social’ theology that, as a distinct form of social theory, takes its starting point from social and political life. In

⁷³ Marsha Hewitt, “Critical Theory,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing), 467.

⁷⁴ Charles Davis, *Theology and Political Society* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and Marc P. Lalonde, ed. *The Promise of Critical Theology: Essays in Honour of Charles Davis* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1995).

this view, critical theology is an effort to defend the present social function of religion, and so dubiously develops Habermas' notion of communicative rationality as the ground and means of religious hope, rather than turning to Adorno and Horkheimer's negative critique.⁷⁵

Likewise, Gregory Baum uses 'critical theology' "to designate a theology that uses critical social theory to uncover the emancipatory meaning of the Christian gospel", and so is generally indistinguishable (by his own admission) to liberation theology in Latin America or the new political theology in Germany.⁷⁶ The fundamental goal of critical theology to defend the preferential option for the poor as a distinctly Catholic position, represented in and defended by Vatican documents and other ecclesiastic teachings; it has a certain affinity for the critical ideas of early Frankfurt School, mostly notably in its purported primacy of action and its commitment to the negation of structures that produce victims of history, which Baum interprets as a biblically grounded option for the perspective of the victims. But it also has shortcomings which theology can ameliorate. It is elitist, lacks "a rich, value tradition" capable of forming social bonds, and failed to take the retrieval of ethics seriously enough; in this way, critical theory is "unable to give a reason for the hope that dwells within it" and so is forever hampered by its "secular humanistic beliefs." What "critical theology" marks, then, in relation to critical theory is the biblical, theological, and ecclesial supplement needed to realize critical theory's desire to

⁷⁵ Charles Davis, *Religion and the Making of Society: Essays in Social Theology* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 188-205.

⁷⁶ Gregory Baum, *Essays in Critical Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 5, 8ff.

free humanity from ideologies' even critical theory itself lacks the self-reflexivity it sought to generate in other forms of thought and practice.⁷⁷ In my view, this is a rather triumphalist account of what critical theory is able to offer critical theory, and I think overlooks the complexity which which the early critical theory engaged religion and theology. It also rather unaware of how incompatible its embrace and endorsement of the authority of the official church teachings is with critical theory's ideology critique. The demands of critique are is not limited to the idea that Christianity must admit that it too is subject to ideology and that there is not innocence to its theological or political positions; appealing to this admission as evidence of its critical posture of theology underestimates how thoroughly dismantling and interruptive the demands of ideology critique are.

Related to this is the work of Michael Ott, Rudolf Siebert, and Warren Goldstein, whose 'Critical Theory of Society and Religion' school contends that the Frankfurt School's critical social theory and religious thought are each other's missing pieces.⁷⁸ By critically correlating religion to social theory, the specific role of religion in the struggle of human emancipation is brought into clear relief in ways that were not clear to the original theorists, who were convinced of the total integration and reification of the world as an effect of instrumentalized reason. While the future of religion is indeed as a critical

⁷⁷ Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation: A Theological Reading of Sociology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975).

⁷⁸ Rudolf J. Siebert. *The Critical Theory of Religion, the Frankfurt School: From Universal Pragmatic to Political Theology* (Berlin: Mouton, 1985); Rudolf J Siebert, ed., *Manifesto of the Critical Theory of Society and Religion: The Wholly Other, Liberation, Happiness, and the Rescue of the Hopeless* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Marc P. Lalonde, *From Critical Theology to a Critical Theory of Religious Insight Essays in Contemporary Religious Thought* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

theory of society, the future of critical theory is not ‘religious’ as much as it is a critical theory of religious *insight*. This final position seems justified on the basis of how early theorists of the Frankfurt School itself engaged religious and theological themes.⁷⁹

Gordon Kaufman argues in his *God, Mystery, and Diversity* for a qualitative distinction between “authoritarian Christian theologies” and what he calls, “critical theology”, the latter of which is tasked with “the cultivation and development of the critical potential of theological symbols and modes of reflection” so as to secure theology’s credibility as a contributing voice to major intellectual issues of modernity.⁸⁰ For Kaufman the distinction between authoritarian theologies “that refuse to take a critical stance towards their own religious beliefs - holding them, on dogmatic grounds, to be beyond questioning- can play only a very limited role” in the life of modern society and critical theology “that opens itself willingly to severe criticism from outside perspectives (as well as from within).”⁸¹ The criterion for narrowing the field of what theologies ought to have a role to play in adjudicating serious intellectual, moral, cultural and political questions of

⁷⁹ James Reimer, A, and Rudolf J. Siebert, ed. *The Influence of the Frankfurt School on Contemporary Theology: Critical Theory and the Future of Religion* (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 1992).; Michael Ott, *Max Horkheimer's Critical Theory of Religion: The Meaning of Religion in the Struggle for Human Emancipation* (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 2001); Eduardo Mendieta, ed. *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Christopher Craig Brittan, *Adorno and Theology*, London: T&T Clark, 2010.

⁸⁰ Gordon Kaufmann, *God, Mystery, and Diversity: Christian Theology for a Pluralistic World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 205.

⁸¹ Kaufmann, *God, Mystery, and Diversity*, 207.

modern life and which ones should not is whether or not they possess a ‘critical consciousness’, presumably which means they are willing to find fault with themselves and accept the fault-findings of others.

What authorizes the publicness of critical theology is “the most radical sort of questioning of its own commitments”, allowing it to be “a contribution to a conversation in which similar radical exploration and question of other living orientations of life...was also being carried one.”⁸² It does not practice “the most penetrating scrutiny” for its own sake, but rather “could in turn lead to the development of proposals for significant reconstruction of some (or all) of [its] perspectives.”⁸³ Critical theology, then requires the commitment of faith, but this is not understood in an exclusive way, but in light of studies of faith as a broad, universal human quality. As such, Kaufmann insists that critical theology “is to be seen, rather, as a pluralist discipline that attempts to investigate and understand, and to find ways of assessing and reconstructing, the actual orientational commitments to which women and men today give themselves.”⁸⁴ (211) What drives this critical activity is praxis: it places an unbearable pressure of responsibility upon theology to exceed itself and its orientations for the sake of broader values. Critical theology then is always pluralist, dialogical, and polysemic in terms of its own self-articulation - and this instability and openness ensures its ongoing critical character. However, for Kaufmann, it is critique that authorizes theology to submit its practices, concerns, and interests for consideration in

⁸² Kaufmann, *God, Mystery, and Diversity*, 209.

⁸³ Kaufmann, *God, Mystery, and Diversity*, 209.

⁸⁴ Kaufmann, *God, Mystery, and Diversity*, 211.

political life, whereas for me, the effect of critique on theology may well be the converse. In my view, critical theology may in fact choose, because of its self-reflexive positions, to restrict itself from asserting its voice into political debate, whether at the official level of legislative bodies/decision-making or that of practical reasoning of subjects in the public sphere.

In contrast, Edmund Arens finds the shared concerns between critical theory and political theology to be indexed in relation to their respective situation between modernity and postmodernity.⁸⁵ Both the Frankfurt School and the early political theologians of the post-war period in Germany, (but, as Arens, notes also in the U.S.) articulated their shared critical concerns with modern dynamics, but neither of them proposed postmodern answers. It is critique namely that critical theory and political theology share, not only in terms of the objects of their critique (idealism, positivism, and capitalism), but the serious praxis concerns that center and ground their theoretical and theological work, whether it be *theologia crucis*, divine solidarity with the suffering and the dead, and anamnestic reasoning, or the irrationality of reason, reification of social relations into culture, and utopian flashes of aesthetic experience.⁸⁶

That this critique is immanent is often unrecognized, nor are its implications often fully explored. The early critical theory (Horkheimer and Adorno) saw little chance, given the destructive potential of modern irrationality, for modern societies to rescue

⁸⁵ Edmund Arens, "Interruptions: Critical Theory and Political Theology between Modernity and Postmodernity," in *Liberation Theologies, Postmodernity and the Americas*, ed. David Blackstone, Eduardo Mendieta, Louis Ann Lorentzen, Dwight N. Hopkins (London: Routledge, 1997), 222-242.

⁸⁶ Arens, "Interruptions," 230-235.

themselves from their own domination, and yet also resisted ways of thinking that were too optimistic. Nevertheless, the “standpoint of redemption” gave philosophy a base from which to imagine and so create the world otherwise. This standpoint can only be a negative image of the present, giving praxis the historically concrete point from which to work; this point is picked up and developed at great length in J.B. Metz’s notion of anamnestic reasoning.⁸⁷ Here, remembering the stories and cries of the suffering and dead remind us all that the victims of history still demand to be vindicated, which can only happen if the universal values of justice, solidarity, and the recognition of the voice of the other are realized *first* within Christianity, its theology, and the lives of its communities; only then the apocalyptic-prophetic potential of its eschatological vision of hope can be realized *within* modernity. Arens proposes that what political theology learns the most from the emphasis on immanent critique by the early Frankfurt School is the fact that we cannot simply escape the pitfalls and abuses of modernity instead of taking up ‘post-’ forms of thinking, which only work to suture its fundamental contradictions and antagonisms. What it means for political theology to convert itself to a critical theology in Arens’ view is to take up a fully dialectical posture in relation to dehumanizing structures of power, authority, and domination, many of which are immanent to itself, instead of trying to transgress them by appealing to a new era, postmodern, post-secular, or otherwise.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Arens, “Interruptions,” 231.

⁸⁸ Arens, “Interruptions,” 222-223, 238-239.

Eduardo Mendieta writes: “at the heart of the Frankfurt School critical theory we find not just an incidental or ancillary attention to religion, but a central, deliberate, and explicit confrontation with both religion and theology.”⁸⁹ The objective of the Frankfurt School concerning religion was not the same as the Enlightenment which oversaw the victory of reason over theology by gerrymandering religion into subjectivity, effectively privatizing it as one consoling and therapeutic option among many. The Frankfurt School by and large saw that the way to secure religion, to protect it against itself, is by means of the relentless critique of religion, or what Mendieta calls “a non-secular critique of religion for the sake of religion.”⁹⁰ It is a critique that uses reason against religion, not as to reject religion, for reason can no more do this than it can reject itself, but for the sake of reason itself. This critique is animated by the urge to rescue religion for the sake of reason, for “theology is reason in search of itself by way of the demystification of social reality.” Religion then is a source of social critique that is freed to confront its own sources with the same critical drive that that seeks “to rescue what makes the religious not just a source of alienation and negation of the world, but also of remembrance, hope, redemptive, and utopia.”⁹¹ The way to the truth of religion is not through theology, but through critique. This generates a theology that is always a negative theology; it starts not only with the absence of God, a God that is not just hidden, but a God that is still on its way

⁸⁹ Eduardo Mendieta, “Religion as Critique,” in *The Frankfurt School of Religion*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (London: Routledge, 2005), 8.

⁹⁰ Mendieta, “Religion as Critique,” 9.

⁹¹ Mendieta, “Religion as Critique,” 11.

and so is yet to be. A critical theology then is “a cipher of dual negativity”: the negativity of the present horror (society) and the negativity of its own ideological self-sufficiency, its presumptions to be able to name God, much less, justice, freedom or happiness.⁹²

There has been much discussion in recent years about Adorno, Horkheimer, and the role of religion or theology in their critical social theory overall, with a specific interest in how theology figures into their ethical and political perspectives. New attention has been paid to the unique way that Adorno especially blends and integrates theology (or in the very least religious allusions and theological terms) into his concept of critique. What I venture to say here is that we can discern in Adorno’s “use of theology” (not in what Adorno thought of theology itself) as a model for a critical task that attends to the serious human needs that make it necessary through negativity. For Adorno, theology articulates, or perhaps more passively illustrates, the political point of critique’s negative vector: its task is to struggle to achieve and to articulate an utopic position, supplied by the ‘stand-point of redemption’ that remains beyond reach.⁹³

But lest Adorno’s critical negativity be mistaken as an instance of ‘negative theology’⁹⁴, it is important to point out that Adorno was wary of this way of thinking as yet another undialectical, affirmative tactic of identity-thinking that snuck in positive

⁹² Mendieta, “Religion as Critique,” 10.

⁹³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

⁹⁴ While the *via negativa* tradition experienced a renaissance of sorts in the post-war years, it dates back very far in the history of reformed, protestant Christianity. Given new theological and pastoral voice in the protestant reformation, its origins are very patristic. Kierkegaard mediated it to both Barth and Schelling, which is perhaps why Žižek’s atheistic Christianity (influenced as it is by Schelling) has resonances with Barth.

knowledge of God through the backdoor under guise of negation, losing all its validity. He contrasted this approach with his own “‘inverse’ theology.” The metaphorical use of ‘inversion’, or ‘reversal’ is meant to illustrate the negative image of reality supplied by the double movement of immanent critique. This stands in sharp contrast to the positivity and affirmative tendencies inherent even within so-called “negative theologies”, theologies that try to gain affirmative, determinate knowledge of God through negation and so bring God back in under the auspices of negativity and denial, as the positing of a third, positive term in the Denysian negation of negation: “being, non-being, supra-being.” To counter this, Adorno proposes that critique insists that while ‘perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world’, the ‘messianic light’ in which the world will ‘one day’ appear will not come from an outside stance, “a standpoint removed (...) from the (...) sphere of existence.”⁹⁵ A negativity of ‘inverse theology’ emphasizes the failure of social reality to live up to the utopian expectations. It looks ‘beyond the immediate’ at what-is-hoped-for: ‘the messianic standpoint of redemption.’ When it is inverse, dialectical, and negative, theology can be one such perspective.⁹⁶

This helps explain the ‘critical’ promise of theology: namely, as negative critique of oppression and injustice in present social existence that also resists the practicalities of a ‘historical project’ or the immediacy of actionable solutions, is large part due to its

⁹⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

⁹⁶ Elizabeth Pritchard, “*Bilderverbot* Meets Body in Theodor W. Adorno’s Inverse Theology,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 95.3 (2002): 309-310; Brittain, *Adorno and Theology*, 102-106; The utopic character of critique, let alone theology, is too complicated for fully establish here, but suffice it to say that theology is critical insofar as it is always utopic, which is to say that it is thoroughly negative and so cannot be considered a foundation for any system of thought or action; it cannot be occupied, located, or accessed by reason without being instrumentalized, at which point its critical potential is lost.

utopic thinking. Critical thought resists system-building whose desire for totality and completeness gives way to the conformism, exclusivity, and coherence of identity-thinking, all of which end up masking the antagonism that give rise to our present wretched conditions of social life. Adorno sees in ‘inverse’ theology an illustration of the critical approach to politics, in that it is a form of thought or rationality that sustains the negativity and immanence of critique: “certainly a *ratio* that does not wantonly absolute itself as a rigid means of domination requires self-reflection, some of which is expressed in the need for religion today.”⁹⁷ Theology, in this way, is related to the immanent critique of reason itself that keep its attention on the particulars of damaged human life, and away from systems of thought and activity, easily reducible (in today’s culture) to the consolations of sentimentality.⁹⁸ It supplies us with a sense that unjust social life should and can be otherwise *without* telling us exactly what this otherwise ought to look like. It does this by supplying an utopic vision that is both immanent and negative (and so critical), but only as a result of its own ‘inversion.’

Adorno was ruthlessly critical of the positive claims made by Jewish and Christian religious traditions. Nevertheless, theology plays a surprising role in his articulation of Marxist philosophy, both in terms of the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ within modernity

⁹⁷ Adorno, “Reason and Revelation,” in *Critical Models*, 138.

⁹⁸ Cf. Brittain, *Adorno and Theology*, 98-102. It is the ‘theological content’ in Kafka, for example, that Adorno prescribes to Benjamin in order to hold him back from politicization of artwork that uses them as fodder for political sloganeering.

and the negative dialectics at work within his critical response to it.⁹⁹ While Adorno rejects theological appeals to traditional notions of God, he nevertheless utilizes religion as an element of his overall critique of our rationalized and technicalized world - and indeed sees it as a part of the critical labor of the negative. There is something critical within the theological, insofar as theology negatively invokes the divine transcendence of God as the absolutely other, it installs a non-dialectical positivity that keeps social antinomies from being exposed to thought. This non-dialectical positivity is responsible for reproducing the totalizing logic of integration and identity, which naturalizes and universalizes the socio-historical processes that condition the relations between persons and between persons and objects, and so to the extent to which theology can counter this as an immanent force within religion, it can be thought of as critical by revealing the subjugated of thought and practice. By bringing the suppressed and occluded to the surface of what is, one is able to negatively introduce the possibility of the world existing otherwise.

If the political task of critical theory is to keep rationality from closing in on itself, remaining open to “suffering [as the] objectivity that weighs upon the subject”, then Adorno assigns this task to the impulse of ‘dual negativity’ in theology, the inverse form of which turns to both a critique of social conditions and to its own theological concepts. ‘Negative’ theology, in this way, reveals important insights on existing social conditions by probing the wounds of human suffering, in order to reach beyond the ideology that the

⁹⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Theodor Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, trans. Shierry Weber NicholSEN (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 39-54.; Theodor Adorno, “Theses Upon Art and Religion Today,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, trans. Shierry Weber NicholSEN (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 292ff.

actuality is the real and instead articulates a utopic, but negative, hope for an alternative possibility.¹⁰⁰ The utopic, for Adorno, is the conviction that the world can be otherwise than its currently wretched, damaged, corrupt state. Sustained attention to the fallenness of the world is what is needed, however, not aspirational longings for an eschatological futurity; this is the negativity of utopia, and of ‘inverted’ theology. The truth of this world is elusive, and so Adorno calls for thought to ‘ruthless criticize itself’ in order to better understand its fallen state.

This critical perspective nevertheless requires “the perspective of the redeemed”, which is utopic (and so critical) in that it is not actualized, nor even possible, but always already negative. Theology can become critical only through its own negation, metaphorically described by Adorno through the proscription, or ban, on divine images:

The materialist longing to conceive the thing wants the opposite: the complete object is to be thought only in the absence of images. Such an absence converges with the theological ban on graven images. Materialism secularises it, by not permitting utopia to be pictured positively; that is the content of its negativity.¹⁰¹

Adorno’s use of theological concepts illustrates the reversal and negation necessary to maintain the paradox: theology is inverted when it is developed from the “perspective of the redeemed”, but also when it attends to unrealized possibilities while also eschewing the seductions of immediacy and utility. This critical inversion extends beyond the idea of God as theology’s proper object, but also shapes theology’s immanent relation to praxis. Theological concepts from Judaism (and to a much lesser extent, Christianity),

¹⁰⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 3, 159-160.

¹⁰¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 207.

such as redemption, the messianic, and the *Bilderverbot*¹⁰², confront and question society, keeping open the potential for new insights into the current social order by resisting to acquiesce to the ideology of ‘what is current and possible’: the idolatry of naming the state, the market, or ‘culture industry’ as total, absolute, or transcendent; in a word, divine.¹⁰³

Adorno and Horkheimer write in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* about the importance of Jewish theologies of idolatry for understanding what theology should not be, relating it directly to ideology critique as a critique of positivity, actuality, and identity-thinking.

For this, Adorno says, critique learns from “the absence of images” proscribed by the image ban, or the the *Bilderverbot*, which may be adapted into a potential inverse theology of ideology critique:

The Jewish religion brooks no words which might bring solace to the despair of all mortality. It places all hope in the prohibition against invoking falsity as God, the finite as the infinite, the lie as the truth. The pledge of salvation lies in the rejection of any faith which claims to depict it, knowledge in the denunciation of illusion.¹⁰⁴

Theology’s “ban of images” aids critical theory as a dialectical form of negative thinking. Theology is ideology critique in Adorno’s critical theory of society, but only in its inverse form as an ‘empty- shell’ that resists ‘identity-thinking’ and the easy positivity of political immediacy, both of which seek immediate practical solutions to political problems. Critical theory turns to a negative concept of truth in order to hold open the possibility of something between immediacy and pessimism. Take for example, Max

¹⁰² Adorno, “Reason and Revelation,” in *Critical Models*, 138-142; Brittain, *Adorno and Theology*, 88-89.

¹⁰³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94-137; Horkheimer, *Dawn & Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950- 1969* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 224.

¹⁰⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 17.

Horkheimer, who finds in the theology of Jewish and Christian religions both a negative concept of truth that keeps the world open for criticism and the moral longing for the “wholly Other.” These are both vital for protecting theory from idealism, absolutism, and positivism: simply put, ideology. In his essay “Thoughts on Religion”, Horkheimer contends there are aspects of theology, despite its metaphysical beliefs, that are invaluable for critical theory:

[Humanity] loses religion as it moves through history, but the loss leaves its mark behind. Part of the drives and desires which religious belief preserved and kept alive are detached from the inhibiting religious form and become productive forces in social practice...the concept of infinity is preserved in an awareness of the finality of human life and of the inalterable aloneness of [human beings], and it keeps society from indulging in a thoughtless optimism, an inflation of its own knowledge into a new religion.¹⁰⁵

The kind of negativity in theological thought resembles the struggles and goals of Marxist social theory, and so Horkheimer observes in theology “the image of a perfect justice”: a resilient (though not always consistent) moral vision for society and a commitment “to sustain, not to let reality stifle, the impulse for change.”¹⁰⁶ Theology incubates ‘the longing for the Wholly Other’, meaning that “theology means here the awareness that the world is appearance, that it is not the absolute truth, the last [word].” The ‘wholly other’ for Horkheimer is the “most perfect justice”, which always already lies beyond the actual in the potential which cannot be transcribed, blueprinted, and enacted.¹⁰⁷ The

¹⁰⁵ Horkheimer, “Thoughts on Religion,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. by M. O’Connell (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1972), 131.

¹⁰⁶ Horkheimer, *Dawn & Decline*, 163 and Horkheimer, “Thoughts on Religion,” 129.

¹⁰⁷ Max Horkheimer, “Longing for the Wholly Other,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol 7, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1985), 389.

Christian theological idea of God as infinite alterity is paired with the Jewish critique of idolatry, which prohibits the figurative naming or portrayal of the divine; as such the limits to political knowledge and action are the same in reference to theological knowledge and action. One cannot know and speak authoritatively what justice is, only what injustice is. Idolatry, the theological critique of graven images, serves as a negative concept that prevents reason from foreclosing itself into ideology, thereby preserving the critical element of theory. This safeguards the substantive form of rationality sought by a negative dialectics and keeps it from becoming co-opted or compromised into an affirmation of existing society and what is actual, rather what it ought to be, its possibility.

One place where the discussion about critique and praxis interfaces directly with theological questions is utopia. Utopia is an important and challenging question for theology, namely because of the role that eschatological expectations has played in the concepts of the kingdom of God and the redemption of human beings from wretchedness, both their own and that of the world. What ought Christians to expect, given their theological predilection for futurity over the present stage of history and society? Take for example, a discussion between Adorno and Ernst Bloch where Adorno argues, along with Bloch, that the critical position *is* utopic while also remaining negative and immanent, and that it receives this character from theology.¹⁰⁸ Departing from deprecated and shrinking misconception of utopia as “illusionary dreams”, “wishes for a better life” that

¹⁰⁸ Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch, “Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing,” in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 1-17.

would apparently link utopia more to ideology than to its critique, Adorno argues that “one can actually talk about utopia in a negative way.”¹⁰⁹ “Utopia refers to what is missing”, Adorno says, and so “what is essential about the concept of utopia is that it does not consist of a certain, single selected category that changes itself, and from which everything constitutes itself.”¹¹⁰ He further links utopic thinking to critique by insisting that “utopia is essentially in the determined negation, in the determined negation of what which merely is and by concretizing itself as something false, it always points at the same time to what should be”¹¹¹; in this way, “the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present”¹¹², aligning utopic politics with the ‘false thing’ that is both the ‘sign of itself’ and “the correct”: *index sui et veri*¹¹³:

Utopia is the false thing...that means that the true thing determines itself via the false thing, via that which makes itself falsely known. And insofar as we are not allowed to cast the picture of utopia, insofar as we do not know what the correct thing would be, we know exactly to be sure what the false thing is. That is actually the only form in which utopia is given to us at all.¹¹⁴

This critical negativity of utopia stands in sharp contrast to the ‘the wishful striving for some impossible state of perfection and idealism’, a caricature supplied by those parties

¹⁰⁹ Adorno and Bloch, “Something’s Missing,” 10.

¹¹⁰ Adorno and Bloch, “Something’s Missing,” 7.

¹¹¹ Adorno and Bloch, “Something’s Missing,” 12.

¹¹² Adorno and Bloch, “Something’s Missing,” 12

¹¹³ Adorno and Bloch, “Something’s Missing,” 12, n8.

¹¹⁴ Adorno and Bloch, “Something’s Missing,” 12.

who have a very clear interest in making sure that the seemingly impossible remains so.

Adorno elaborates why it is that utopic thinking has deprecated into ideology:

what people have lost subjectively in regard to consciousness is very simply the capability to imagine the totality as something that could be very different. That people are sworn to the world as it is and have this blocked consciousness vis a vis possibility, all this has a very deep cause, a cause that I would think is very much connected exactly to the proximity of utopia...My thesis about this would be that all humans deep down, whether they admit this or not, know that it would be possible or it could be different.¹¹⁵

In this way, we can see how the messianic light (illustrated by inverse theology) is both critical and negative, while also remaining thoroughly politically oriented. The ‘messianic light’ shines through the “cracks and deformations of the modern age” in order to rouse considerations of world being imagined and so made to be otherwise.¹¹⁶ The messianic light is a negative light that does not supply redemption, freedom, happiness, or the good, but rather “wrenches” reality apart” to reveal its depravity and its perversion. The “refuse” of the world, what Eagleton calls the biblical *anawim*, is brought to our attention by critique, and so it becomes ‘a reverse light’, what Adorno and Horkheimer called in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ‘the light of inversion.’¹¹⁷

The negative images supplied by ‘the messianic light’, when dialectically rendered, turn theological thought against itself: “Dialectics discloses (...) every image as script. It teaches us to read from its features the admission of falseness which cancels its

¹¹⁵ Adorno and Bloch, “Something’s Missing,” 3-4.

¹¹⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 259.

¹¹⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 250.

power and hands it over to truth.”¹¹⁸ For Adorno, this particular kind of reversal seems to be “the position of ‘theology’”. at least as it concerns how Adorno understands his rapprochement with Benjamin): “[their] agreement in philosophical fundamentals...could indeed be called ‘inverse’ theology.”¹¹⁹ An ‘inverse theology’, then, illustrates how critique works; it entails and enacts a particular kind of reversal that is emblematic or representative of the ‘critical position’ or gesture, in that an inverse theology is an immanent gesture that negates itself, supplying a view of itself that does not include redemption or reconciliation, but rather the gnarled and monstrous effects of its wretchedness. The light of inverted theology is a critical, and so, negative light, but is oriented toward praxis nevertheless. As Mendieta suggests, “in an age in which religion itself is continuously sequestered into the service of totalitarian ends, only that religion which is useless is true, and if it is useful it is not true.”¹²⁰

This exploration of critique in relation to political theology has returned us the original questions of the dissertation: namely what is theology to do with ideology critique. Instead of sublimating or absorbing ideology critique in to itself (as Eagleton and Žižek call for) or turning to its own tradition of idolatry critique (as we saw happen repeatedly in chapter 4). By coaxing political theology towards critique, I have tried to show how important critique is as the key to emancipatory praxis, not in the sense that critique provides practical solutions to be acted upon, but how essential critique is for

¹¹⁸ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 18.

¹¹⁹ Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Henri Lonitz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 66-67.

¹²⁰ Mendieta, “Religion as Critique,” 11.

how political theology understands its immanent relation to praxis. The purpose here is to help theology see and acknowledge that it may not possess the resources required to fulfill its own internally binding demands of praxis, and as such needs further theory, and so critique, ideology critique especially.

Although this critique may call the practicality of theology into question, at least provisionally, this is nevertheless thoroughly praxis in that *critical* theology is always motivated by the unbearable and incessant demands made upon it by the memory of the suffering and the dead: demands to heed their cries, to alleviate their injustice, to vindicate them by furthering happiness and freedom amidst the challenges of damaged life. Careful attention to where theology has failed, a task of critical theology certainly, both discloses what leads to shortcomings, and also highlights resources immanent to theology that can offer more critical clarity, all the while potentially chastening current proposals for action. As it was with Adorno, this kind of critique cannot mean, however, leaving behind one's theological traditions any more than it can mean an abandonment of praxis. This kind of non-dialectical critical posture is as cheap and easy as it is socially and politically harmful. Rather, the more difficult critical posture to maintain (and to describe) is self-reflexive; theology must be critiqued from within and as such, the results and the effects will always be equivocal, uncertain, and non-scripted. This is close to what Adorno means when he insists that "one must have the tradition in oneself, to hate it properly."¹²¹ Critique inhabits this sense of hating one's tradition properly as the very thing that gives it any life at all; only in showing to itself that it presently incapable of achieving its own

¹²¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 52.

potential, its own promise, its own aspiration, that it is but ‘a shell’¹²², can theology point beyond itself to anything just, free, or utopic; that is, can it become praxis.

By adopting an immanent and critical perspective, critical theology does not direct political theology to recommend solutions to social or political crises. The critical expression of theology, albeit in inverse and negative form, express its own relation to truth and as such, is part of praxis’ struggle to end of human misery. It does not seek a theological justification for political projects, nor a theological justification for political endeavors. The emancipatory moment in critical theology, its anticipatory utopian character, reveals only a negative appraisal of its immanent relation to praxis, seeking to do justice to the idea of God, the eschatological status of human person, the church’s relation to the state, graced nature of divine love, and so on, from the starting point of negativity, that starts from the grotesque facticity of our broken and depraved conditions.

Conclusion

The objective of this dissertation was to study ideology critique from the lens of political theology, with the final goal of reinterpreting it via an immanent “dual negativity” that directed it both towards a critique of social conditions and an immanent critique of theological concepts and their immanent relation to action and politics. For this, we needed the Marx’s critique of religion as ideology at the outset, so as to position this study within that tradition. I continued by exploring the turn to theology in philosophy, done under the heading of ideology critique by both Terry Eagleton and Slavoj Žižek, all

¹²² Theodor Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*. ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 57.

in service to a radical and critical politics, respectively. What I have done here is to take up theology and ideology critique as spelled out by significant representative voices in the discussion in order to gain clarity about how might ideology critique be integrated into political-theological work more thoroughly - and indeed, more critically. Philosophy paves the way for ideology critique, but how to do it within theology can only be discerned and articulated immanently. Both Eagleton and Žižek mostly considered theology to be 'false' but happily employed it for political purposes so as to counter the contemporary political ideologies and to defend their respective political responses, anti-capitalist critique of social order, in the case of Eagleton, and an aggressively "unplugged" politics, in the work of Žižek. However, it was the politics of theology that attracted them; they found theology in this way to be useful, even if in the end of the day, none of it was true. By 'instrumentalizing' theology for their own purposes, they made theology merely a political site, self-consciously emptying theology of its proper concepts and ideas.

From these previous chapters, we learned that the positive relation of theology to ideology critique ('theology as ideology critique') is often motivated by the interest to put theology to work for a specific program of politics, and as such, often slides into ideology, a propensity that Žižek is admittedly more prone to than Eagleton. This instrumentalization of theology leads to serious questions as to whether or not theology does the same thing to itself and so is equally as ideological. Part of what motivates the turn to a critique of critique here, as applied to the immanent relation of theory to praxis in political theology, is an attempt to avoid this particular problem. A critical theology reconfigures political theology so that it is not a practical theology but is still distinctly political,

meaning that it works to create space to dismantle and transform an economic and political order structurally governed by injustice. It however insists that to do this requires a return to thinking, indeed a recovery of deep theory, which may for a time, mean a ‘suspension of the ethical’ for the sake of political possibility. If the point of political theology is to change the world through action, the point of critical political theology is to change the world by first critiquing itself (as it interfaces with its social conditions).

And yet, of course the turn to critique here does not abandon, or leave behind, the theory of ideology anymore than it eschews consideration of emancipatory political objectives as part of what theology tries to achieve: justice, human freedom, happiness, well being, and so on. What it means to employ ideology critique as a theological concept cannot be clarified by studying ideology alone, but calls for focused consideration of the critical position itself, especially with respect to what impact it has on the practices of political theology itself. I suggest here that the tendency to relegate critique as something auxiliary or a counterpart to praxis, as having to do with the luxury and privilege of theory, and so which poses a threat to practical, actionable responses to the serious, concrete demands of the present speaks to the need for the dual negativity of immanent critique.

This negativity has a double movement. First, immanent critique concerns the relationship between theology and present social conditions, a dynamic with which political theology, as well as its liberationist, feminist, and queer counterparts, is quite familiar. It presents this relationship in a negative fashion that is distinct from, but not opposed to, other ways of configuring this relationship in modern theology, whether it be correlative, dialectical, or constructive. Its primary concern is to bring to the surface the negativity of

the present horror in an ongoing critique of social conditions. Second, it directs the negativity of immanent critique towards own ideological self-sufficiency with regard to praxis and political action. This concerns both its theological and political presumptions towards justice, solidarity, freedom, antiracism, and the like, and as such, will have a critical impact on the ease with which political theology is accustomed to prescribing action, turning theology back to itself in an effort to return to theory, not as divorced from praxis (as if true theory can ever be!), but a return to thinking. The dual negativity at work within critical theology offers a way to uncover, according to its immanent norms and values, the specific limitations and relative pitfalls of the assumed unity and univocity between Christianity and liberation, freedom, happiness as well as specific social identity and emancipatory movements like anti-racism, gender justice, and economic struggle of the working class against wage labor, crushing debt, and other processes of subjection like desire, consumption, and the privatization of common, public resources.¹²³

I argue then that ideology critique places a certain limiting or restricting demand on political activity; it places it under the double movement of negativity within immanent critique that brings together the critique of social conditions and immanent critique of theological concepts under the rubric of political theology. In this way, critical theology remains political in that it considers the condition of possibility for intelligibility,

¹²³ For examples of this univocal logic getting played out within genres of theology that identify themselves as ‘critical’ and/or ‘liberationist’, see Joreg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics and the Future* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (London, UK: Routledge, 2000), Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*. trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987); Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Post-material Citizens* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009); Lisa Cahill, *Global Justice, Christology and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

recognition, and visibility in the present ordering of the world: the object-field of contestation in which subjectivity, agency, and action are made possible. Judith Butler, when discussing Foucault's view of critique, suggests that

not only is it necessary to isolate and identify the peculiar nexus of power and knowledge that gives rise to the field of intelligible things, but also to track the way in which that field meets its breaking point, the moments of its discontinuities, the sites where it fails to constitute the intelligibility for which it stands. What this means is that one looks both for the conditions by which the object field is constituted, but also for the limits of those conditions, the moments where they point up their contingency and their transformability.¹²⁴

Critique is a political practice in the sense that it aims to “offer a new practice of values” that are possible precisely because such judgments are actively suspended for the sake of something more politically fundamental, but difficult to always discern, to see, in the context of already existing coordinates that condition and circumscribe human action. Butler further argues that Adorno does something parallel: as a form of identity-thinking, judgement precludes and overdetermines the critical gesture of exposure, effectively separating critique from praxis in the name of ‘revolutionary activity.’ To counter this, critique seeks “to apprehend the ways in which categories are themselves instituted, how the field of knowledge is ordered, and how what it suppresses returns, as it were, as its own constitutive occlusion.”¹²⁵ In this way, critique is not judgement, but an inquiry into the conditions that make judgement possible. Critique is prior to judgement, but also places a difficult burden on judgement and action. Politics, however, require not only judgement,

¹²⁴ Judith Butler, “What is Critique? On Foucault's Virtue,” in *The Political*, ed. David Ingram (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 222.

¹²⁵ Butler, “What is Critique? On Foucault's Virtue,” in *The Political*, 213.

but also decisions about what kind of arrangements and attachments we want to pursue, what values we will struggle for, and what norms we will use and how we will use them. Critique is not opposed to all this nor is not an operation separate from political action, but an immanent, self-reflexive force within politics, interminably bringing itself into the field of contestation.

I hope this adequately explains why I do not think that critique separates theory from praxis, furcating it from its transformative, practical, or ethical role, even while it raises certain difficult questions as whether our ideals, our commitments really are what they claim to be. It may appear to be an abstract claim, but it is true to the instability and undecided equivocation of praxis. Even though critical theory wishes to resist certain claims made by political theology that justifies itself by linking itself to certain moral and political claims, i.e., advocating for justice, participating in solidarity, struggling for the good, opting for the marginal, and so on, the task of critique in relation to political theology is to point out “its breaking point, the moments of its discontinuities, the sites where it fails to constitute the intelligibility for which it stands.” As it turns out, the unbearable demands of praxis are the site of theology’s breaking point, the moment of its failure. The immanent ideology critique in critical theology helps to correct this over-determination of theology by activity and aids political theology by establishing for itself a critical position that opens its own political commitment and theological concepts up to a reconfiguration and assessment that is directed towards its socio-historical context and governed by its own political impulse. In this way, critical theology concerns the immanent relation of

theory and praxis within political theology, and in a gesture of dual negativity, takes up immanent critique, applied both to the political and to theology.

It is here that political theology is able to become ideologico-critical; that is, actively engaged in serious questions and concrete analyzes concerning human well-being, freedom, and happiness while also restricting itself from privileging action, spelling out the theological grounds for the perfect social state, or recommending itself as the basis for social renewal and political hope, all in light of its immanent theological and political demands. Rather, seeing rupture as the dominant force of the theological, in reference to both social conditions and its own concepts, the critical force is a practice of resistance, at times even against actionism, but always for and on behalf of praxis. It always keeps the Marxian accusation front and center: theology will always risk ideology, no matter how attached or grounded it is to justice, freedom, solidarity and the like.

The concept of critique in 'critical theology' is not merely the inherent element of self-interrogation that ideally catalyzes action and transformative change, nor is it the correlative dynamic within theology per se that makes all theology political. In the view of critique, political theology in this context means neither the contestation of sovereignty, theological genealogy of political ideas, justification of power, nor is it a postsecular attempt to supersede the modern secular-religious divide or acts of political self-definition (whether it be in the case of the various religious motivations of nationalism or of the religious dimensions of the 'secular'). It is rather concerned with explicating the various forces and factors (many of them as philosophical and political as they are religious

and theology) involved in the turn of religion to politics and the use of theological reasoning and values in the course of collective political life and the everyday struggles of public affairs, including its various practices, systems, and institutions.

A critical theology, as an immanent force within political theology, does not appeal directly to emancipation, progress, or revolution, but instead makes political theology (which does take up positions along these lines) its central object, submitting its ethical, moral, and political claims to immanent critique. In this way, Christianity is shown to be an agent in promoting social and individual liberation and how faith and politics positively relate in contemporary society, but also needs the negative self-reflexivity necessary to regulate the equivocation of theory and praxis, effectively exempting itself on the account of its stated emancipatory and progressive ethical and political agendas.

In this way, a critical theology is neither disinterested in practical activities nor is it opposed to praxis, understood as transformative action in history by the material practices of political subjects, but rather considers the relation of theology and action with the negativity of its double movement. This negative critical position is immanent to theology, not operating as a distinct discipline or method in relation to political, systematic, or practical theologies that acts upon them, but rather is an impulse within and inherent to theology whose negativity sheds light not what should be, but rather what should *not* be. While this does chasten or restrict theology in relation to the actionable solutions it offers as consequences of its various theological positions, it does not oppose practical solutions or social and political action; it is, instead, minimalistic in that it provides the practical

reasoning for the negation of the bad, rather than for ideals, standard, actionable solutions towards the good.

To say more would require sketching out the more positive agenda of a critical theology. What comes next for a critical theology that has determined, as a political theology, that the task of theology nows shifts away from spelling out the distinctions of nature/grace in 'la nouvelle theologie,' the state of gender in Barth's doctrine of creation, or responding to debates about ecological health by reciting the Thomistic virtues (as basic examples)? It abdicates the work of charting out the parameters of perfect social order, and for a moment perhaps, suspends efforts to prescribe sets of actions based on theological concepts. Indeed, further work is required to spell out the exact consequences of a critical theology on political theology, especially its use of major concepts like justice, reconciliation, compassion, and solidarity. It would require spelling out each of these concepts, making use of the double movement of critical theology, and clarifying what difference this makes for the overall agenda of political theology in relation to our social world. This work lies ahead.

I do believe, however, that in taking up political theology as its object, critical theology modifies the posture it takes as it prescribes actions and values, whether on the basis of specific theological commitments, or political convictions, even so-called emancipatory ones. A critical theology helps moderate the relation of theory and praxis within political theology, making it clear to theology that it may know less about justice, solidarity, reconciliation, and human happiness than it appears to, or believe it does. This highlights again what is most important about the dual negativity of immanent critique, that it

is the means of coming to terms with contradictions/deficiencies within the object of critique, from the perspective of object itself; that is, its standard of immanent critique belongs to and exists in the object of its critique. For critical theology, it is the relentless demand of praxis that becomes the basis for the theological critique of the use of justice, freedom, liberation, solidarity, and the like as the basis for political theology.

This is what it means for the critical position of political theology, as Judith Butler, says “to look both for the conditions by which the object field is constituted, but also for the limits of those conditions, the moments where they point out their contingency and their transformability.”¹²⁶ As it turns out, praxis emerges at ‘the limits of the conditions’ in which theology is constituted; it is a moment by which theology’s ‘contingency and transformability’ is made visible and for this, theology needs critique as much as it is need praxis; or closer to the point, it needs to be critique in order to become praxis.

¹²⁶ Butler, “What is Critique? On Foucault’s Virtue,” in *The Political*, 222.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation began with a question: what does ideology critique have to do with political theology? Since ideology critique originates from within modern philosophy, it is sensible, although not natural, to begin there; but more specifically, we begin with the turn to theology in philosophy. This is itself an odd starting point, given the complex way that philosophy has, from its side, positioned itself in relation to theology, at least in modernity. A distinctive feature of modern philosophy's indebtedness to the Enlightenment tradition is its critique of religion. Karl Marx, one of the modern "masters of suspicion," encapsulates what has become the classic critique of religion as ideology, and in turn, has fueled the secular critique of religion that it has become politically problematic and intellectually outdated. And so, when we encounter the turn to religion and to theology that occurs within the postmodern intellectual shift in the late 1990s and early 2000s, we find that it is motivated in large part by a desire to undo the modern foreclosure of religion and its emancipatory potential, not only for thought but also for action: that is, for both theory and praxis. In this way, theology has become interesting once again for theorists and philosophers on the 'left'; what is all the more surprising, after examining it more closely, is that this interest in theology is shown to be concurrent with a return to ideology critique, both of which are motivated by political concerns. And so this creates an opportunity for both philosophy and theology to reconsider their mutual relationship to ideology critique, and as such, their relationship to each other.

This reconsideration has raised many questions, not only for political theology but also for ideology critique. Can theology be ideology critique, especially considering the long established tradition of the Marxist critique of religion as ideology? How is one able to satisfactorily respond to Marx's critique of religion as ideology in such a way as to position political theology, not only as learning from or being subject to ideology critique, but also interpreted as ideology critique? Certainly, this must come from within theology's own traditions and sources, otherwise political theology would simply become sublimated into ideology critique, and so lose intelligibility as a separate and distinct discipline. At the outset, it would seem as if the most likely candidate for this would be the analogue between ideology critique and biblical critique of idolatry, which is itself a critique of appearance and representation that directly concerns the material difference between that which appears to be and that which is.

After setting the stage in the first chapter which reviewed the relationship between theology and ideology critique in Marx's critique of religion, the first part of the dissertation proceeded to take up these questions in chapters on British Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton, and Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, both of whom are devoted to philosophies of ideology critique that turn to theology and interpret it as critique. In Chapter 1, I argued that both the Marxian critique of religion and the critique of ideology centered not so much on the material or substantive theological content of religion as ideology, but was far more concerned with the social impact of theology and its function in and on the material reality of social conditions that shape the consciousness of political subjects. Marx's interest was not to abolish religion because it was ideological; rather he

sought to abolish the conditions under which religion emerged a necessity for human beings whose experience of alienation and exploitation cut them off from their own practical activities. For instance, Marx's critique of the fetish in religion serves as an analogy for his critique of commodities in the capitalist political economy; his intention is to use religious metaphors and theological allusions to illustrate the social impact and function of ideologies in society, not to identify religion as ideology tout court or calls for the end of religion tout court as a necessary byproduct of and condition for revolutionary praxis.

Terry Eagleton also takes up a functionalist account of Christianity as ideology critique, pointing to the way that traditional theological concepts such as sin, creation, love, Christology, even the idea of God, preserves a way of thinking against the capitalist grain, and so resists both the instrumentalization of thought and the commodification of critique. Its normative commitments to justice, equality, and radical acts of other-regard can also be counted on to generate an actionable alternative to the social injustice produced by neoliberal and postmodernist approaches to theory; its preference for the *anamim*, its practice of love, and its materialist consideration of human well-being (feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, meeting the needs of the poor, valorizing self-sacrifice, associating with scapegoats) all afford us an incessant ideology critique of a left-liberal politics that shows little interest in any of these normative criteria, all of which are seen by Eagleton as essential to any anti-capitalist alternative to the social order worthy of the Marxist name. The critical answer, then, is not to marginalize theology, but rather to put it to use as a Marxist ideology critique of social conditions, which is only but a single part

of a larger, pragmatic, diverse, and pluralist strategy to contend with secularization, post-modernism, and an anemic left.

Radical politics is ‘a politics of the possible’ for Eagleton, and so the eschatological futurity of the Christian socio-political vision of the Jesuanic tradition energizes the struggle of theology as ideology critique towards a better future. Slavoj Žižek, however, is unsure whether such a future is possible or even desirable. Recalling the Marxist tradition that calls for, and seeks to bring into existence, the condition of possibility for the revolutionary subject, Žižek turns to Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to contend with the eclipse of ideology critique by politics in late modern philosophy. He blames the end of thinking in politics on the ‘vulgarized’ Marxist preference for action that has produced the hyper-pressurized kind of acts that effectively substantialize the void of the originary trauma of becoming a subject. In this way, action becomes the symbolic force that covers up the unbearable demands of the Real, and for Žižek, the task of critique in this context is to tear open the ideological sutures and to expose once again the dark negativity that lies beneath and behind all of our cherished political values and struggles, even democracy, freedom, love, equality, and justice. Christianity, it turns out, is particularly helpful for this kind of work; its brash admission to God’s impotence and indeed God’s eventual death in Jesus’ crucifixion, effectively renounces the sacred and unplugs itself from the social order, and so can become a model for the kind of ideology critique captured in the psychoanalytic slogan, “the big Other does not exist.”

In this way, theology is Eventful in its ruptural and inaugurative force. Its apocalyptic rupture, modeled on the divine death by the cross, is the condition of possibility for

the authentic political Act that stands outside the coordinates of action laid out by ideology. This takes theological form in the divine resurrection of ‘the Spirit,’ the ‘unplugged’ community of believers who are not liberated to act, but freed from action, at least action as we currently understand it; that is, they are freed to be passively resistant to the dictates of the social order, opting out of, rather than struggling against, the order. In all this, Žižek shows us not only how ideologies are subject-forming realities (this argument was made quite persuasively by Louis Althusser) or how theology is both complicit in and also resistant to this malformation, but he goes further in taking yet another approach, albeit a more troublesome and complicated one, that sees Christianity not as ideology, but interprets it as ideology critique. Žižek explicates a materialist understanding of Christianity’s social impact as a radical political alternative, not only to ideological practices that masquerade as justice or freedom or multiculturalism, but to political theologies that consider themselves to be resistant or subversive. The “death of God” theology that Žižek adopts has a distinctive dual negativity attached to it: it is not only a critique of social conditions, but also a critique of its own theological concepts: the truth of God must be a negative concept, an inversion of false claims that keeps us from spelling out what ‘God’ may mean positively, much less politically. This was an important building block for the dissertation as it turns to theology and ideology critique in search of what can only be gestured towards here in the final part: critical theology.

As Christian theology has sought to respond to the modern critiques of religion, it has attempted to heed Marx’s accusations, not always by integrating them into its rules, language, and discourse, but by turning instead to the critique of idolatry as analogous to

Marx's ideology critique of the fetish. The biblical critique of idolatry, however, presents a problem because, after consideration of major trajectories in the biblical scholarship and the archaeological record, we find that it functions as a theological support for identity politics in the context of religious and political struggle in the ancient near east. Idolatry critique itself is not an analogy to ideology critique, but is caught within the ambit of ideology itself. Furthermore, even when theologians take up the concept of idolatry critique as ideology critique, this gets lost, in large part due to the emerging and ongoing nature of the biblical scholarship that inform my reading of the biblical theology.

Take, for instance, the Protestants Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, both of whom are eager to rescue theology from the Marxist critique, not by dismissing the critique, but by active responding to it by adjusting and repositioning theology so as to free itself from the critique; this positions theology within social conditions (Tillich's 'theology of culture') or *ad extra* in such a way that they are strategically positioned to be antagonistic, as is the case with Niebuhr's Christian realism. In contrast, the Catholics Johann Baptist Metz and Marcella Althaus-Reid align themselves respectively with the dialectical lineage of prophetic dissent also present in the Hebrew bible; this argues that for theology to be itself, namely for it to speak of God, it must be interruptive, both towards itself (privatization of theology, the bourgeois subject, heteronormativity), and towards social conditions (indifference towards suffering, historical amnesia, systemic injustice); it maintains the dual movement of negativity that uniquely belongs to immanent ideology critique but is lacking in idolatry critique, both in its original form in the biblical theology and its use by political theologians. Even Metz and Althaus-Reid utilize and call upon

theology of the biblical critique of idolatry, but so do without addressing or critiquing the politics behind it.

What we have learned from this analysis is that ‘a critique of critique’ is needed within political theology, one that is able to bring to the surface the social impact and political function of idolatry critique which feeds off the tension between the different concepts at odds with each other in the biblical theology, and sustains the negativity of the critique of ethical and practical concept immanent to theology itself. For this, we turn, at last, to the question of theory as critique of praxis, which I argue, may take theological form as a critical theology whose negative ‘double movement’ may prove capable of such a ‘critique of critique’ without falling to the trap of either the quietism of Žižek’s active passivity or the pseudo-activist pressure of fully praxis-oriented theologies.

The mutual engagement between critical theory and political theology has a long history and is still on-going; from Johann Baptist Metz’s new political theology, to Marsha Hewitt’s feminist critical theory of religion to Gregory Baum’s critical social theology, political theology has long recognized in the shadow of critical theory a demand to account for itself as ideology critique. But it has struggled to do this for a number of reasons. First, critical theory configures ideology critique as immanent critique and so calls for a kind of negativity that is difficult to sustain by political theology’s own methods; that is, it calls for a negative concept of truth but cannot become, as Adorno has convincingly argued, a “negative theology.” Second, attention to the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ implicates theology directly as an agent and site of commodification that plagues modern social conditions. It is clear that, as Adorno memorably phrased it, “religion is for sale,”

and political theology seems unable to forestall its deleterious effect on theology. Third, the appeal of political theology lies in its the invigoration of the practical impulse essential to the normative vision of Christianity's political desire, much which is desirable in our contemporary context because of its attention to suffering, its commitment to memory, and its stubborn insistence upon that which appears to be impossible: forgiveness, reparations, non-violence, the end of authoritarian power, and the ethics of the "grand reversal": the elevation of 'the least of these' as God's preferred ones.

And yet critical theory calls upon ideology critique to question and problematize, not the norms inherent to this theologico-political impulse per se, but the apparent immediate link between theological concepts, these norms, and praxis. A critical theology, which adopts the dual negativity of immanent critique, is always a ruptural and inaugurative thinking that interrogates "that which is" in order to bring into being "that which is currently not present" in our social conditions. Its project is not amelioration, but transformation; the Christian theological imagination is stubbornly utopic in this way, meaning that it privileges both the directions of the negativity of critique because it recognizes that only by negating 'the false' will 'the true' appear, whether 'the false' resides in social conditions or within itself. It does not presume to be able to bring to being that which lies beyond, but rather tries to fracture the present, and in this way, sustain the eschatological expectation for something other than what currently is. In this way, critical theology hopes to be a practice of resistance, but one that cannot offer prescriptive ways forward.

This critical theology is presented as an immanent critique of political theology, in that it takes up political theology as its object. This self-reflexivity completes the double movement of negativity that enables it to remain critique of ideologies, whether they concern social conditions or the political functions of its own theological concepts. It cannot in this way be considered a practical theology, but rather focuses its work on naming the problems as they exist in the normative orders and structures that govern human being and acting. Political theology as critical theology can only do so however when it takes itself *as* ideology; in this way, it is more Marxist than the 'left' philosophies of Eagleton and Žižek whose political uses of Christianity conveniently skip over the critique of religion as ideology, effectively instrumentalizing theological concepts to fit their respective political programs. Critical theology resists this, knowing full well that the work that lies ahead of itself is only possible if and when it stays focused on its own propensity for ideology. It knows that it is not inoculated from ideology by its stated commitments to justice, equality, solidarity and the like, as long as the social conditions of the inverted world remain in effect.

EPILOGUE

OPEN QUESTIONS, FURTHER DIRECTIONS

Projects such as this one present a significant challenge in that the questions they raise and the directions they point to are not easily recognized or programmatically sketched out. The work here in many ways to struggle, and admittedly stumble, towards a formulation of a complex question, one that we may not know to ask quite yet. But, as an attempt at a final word, I hope to say a bit more about where I hope this attempt at a critical theology might go in the future and how I expect my own research agenda to be shaped by it.

Within the dissertation itself, there are many open questions. The interruptive negativity of immanent critique plays such a dominant role in critical theology, and yet in order for it to be *theo*-logical, it must have something to say about God, in the very least. It is insufficient and perhaps even dangerous to follow Žižek completely and concede that the crucified Christ is the final political-theological word and the divine, as a result of the incarnation, has been fully sublimated into the revolutionary community of unplugged subjects. In Žižek's vision, the rupture here is complete; the Void it creates, or rather reveals from underneath the sutures of the Symbolic order, is total and so it remains to be seen how critical theology can rely so heavily on the critical formula of dual negativity while also still remaining a theology. Can critical theology sustain the heavy demands of

negativity before it breaks apart and is sublimated into a sociology of religion, or worse, a philosophy of religion?

More work must also be done to distinguish between the two critical lines of thought in the biblical theology of idolatry: the prophetic understanding and the critique of idolatry. A more theologically grounded “critique of critique” will be required to address this tension and its implications for political theology. One possible way forward here is further attention to whether this identity politics of idolatry critique endures in the New Testament version, especially considering the central role that the theological and political theme of community plays in early Christian ecclesiology and soteriology. Žižek insists that the decentralized and diffused presence of the Spirit reveals itself in the life of a community that, in light of the “death of God” as the big Other, is freed from ethical and political constraints, and so is freed to act outside the social order and to resist it in ways presently unknown and unthought. Eagleton opposes Žižek here, namely because the Christian community is ideologico-critical precisely because of the norms it insists must be in place for redemption, which is always social and universalist, to occur. How is the Christian community to act out of its theological bearings if its effect on social reality, as the ruptural Event, is precisely meant to foreclose the kind of acting it seems called to?

Further clarification on this matter might be reached through a stricter analysis of the relationship of ideology critique and utopia, now from the perspective of what I have been calling ‘critical theology.’ This would help widen the project to include more philosophical treatments of ideology critique with respect to theology from figures like Paul

Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas, whose respective work on tradition, conviction, and communicative action would balance out the emphasis on negativity maintained here, concretize the argument with more political specifics, while also updating the conversation from the 1970s and 1980s with respect to recent debates about religion, the secularization, and post-secular politics.

Oddly enough, the long theoretical detour taken in this dissertation actually leads back towards theology. For the theoretical questions to be answered, and their practical implications to be fully understood, the theologian must return home to concepts within the various Christian traditions in order to explore their potential as resources for this dual negativity, and also to reshape said themes in accordance to the critical attitudes towards political action taken here. Certainly one could easily start with Marcella Althaus-Reid whose interaction with and movement in-between political, liberationist, queer, and postcolonial theologies offers much to think about and work through in reference to the relationships between critique, theory, praxis, and action. In this way, a critical theology quickly becomes a queer theology, but one that resists the temptation to adopt the 'preferential option for the queer' as an ideology free perspective, one that is immunized in light of its resistance to and struggle against heteronormative orders of normalization and legibility. It also reshapes entirely, in my view, the perspective on utopia and politics in political theology, which changes the discussion on dialectical 'crisis' theology and the theology of hope that followed it. What happens, for example, to apocalyptic theology and demythologization under the rubric of critical theology? Does it strengthen the critical perspective on action and politics that the dual negativity of critical theology insists upon,

only now coming from the theological, rather than the theoretical, perspective? Or does it raise questions about whether the strictures of critique placed on action and politics in this vision are tenable as *theological* positions?

Perhaps the most important and pressing of the further directions for critical theology concern the pressure that critical theology places on the relationship between philosophy and theology. Correlation and dialogue have been productive metaphors for the relationship over the last half century, and yet the future of the relationship will largely depend on how they can help each other with accurate, timely, and productive political responses to the predominant social order. It is understandable that the turn to theology by philosophy has been lauded by theologians who feel vindicated to be at the table once again, and yet this dissertation gives several reasons why theology must find the courage to assert its own resources and define itself and the critical parameters of its negativity. Perhaps Christianity can find this courage in its utopic thinking, which is supplied by the dual negativity of its immanent critique. When Christianity takes itself as the object of its own ideology critique — that is, as a critical theology — the negative truth behind its stubbornly utopic expectations is able to emerge. It is this negativity that fuels its critical engagement with its social conditions and the relationship of its theologies to these conditions. It does this because it actually expects that a new world is possible, even if it may not know what it looks like or how to bring it into being. Meanwhile, a critical theology directs Christianity and Christian communities to seek to instigate the critical ruptures necessary to see the world and ourselves differently.

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VITA

Dr. Silas Morgan is a graduate of Northwestern College (B.A., in 2004), Bethel Seminary (M.T.S., in 2007, magna cum laude), and Duke Divinity School (Th.M., in 2008). He was awarded the Arthur J. Schmitt Fellowship by Loyola University Chicago in 2014. Dr. Morgan is married to Laura (Voight). Their son, Elliott James, was born 01 September 2014 during the writing of this dissertation. Dr. Morgan and his family reside in the Lakeview neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois.

