The Dialectics of the Religious and the Secular

Studies on the Future of Religion

Edited by

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CHAPTER 3

Bilderverbot and Utopia

_God without Image – Other World Unannounced_

_Dustin Byrd_

For many philosophers and theologians, Theodor Adorno’s invoking of theological concepts in his _Negative Dialectics_ and others works engenders some confusion. The theologian would ask, why would an atheist philosopher, rooted in Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, continually deploy theological language such as “messianic,” “redemption,” and “bilderverbot,” to such a degree that some could accuse him of being a crypto-theologian? On the other side, the secular philosopher is just as puzzled. He asks, “has not religion and theology already been abandoned due to its inability to defend its claims against the Enlightenment?” “Has not the metaphysics of religion been already so discredited that to reintroduce them back into philosophy is to commit a crime against reason; has not religion been responsible for so much death and destruction that we should leave it in the past?” Looking at the history of absurd theological obscurantism and the suffering that theological disputes bore, it is sensible to ask why this atheist philosopher would want to resurrect certain theological categories in a secular age and in a secular philosophy. However, Adorno is insistent that the transcendent and prophetic semantic and semiotic qualities of the theological must be rescued from religion itself, and further transformed, reoriented, and reintroduced within philosophy. Only critical philosophy, and more specifically non-identity forming dialectical philosophy, has the capacity to wield such potent and historically baggaged language without the threat of artificially creating a new totalizing system of thought that furthers the suffering of the subject, or delivers him back to his master through positive (status-quo affirming) religion. In doing so, Adorno inculcates a critical philosophical dimension to old theological concepts; imbuing them with a new prophetic – dialectical spirit.

In this chapter, I examine what I understand to be the core theological concept that gives substantive meaning to Adorno’s _Negative Dialectics_ and his philosophy of suffering; that is the notion of bilderverbot, or the theological ban of images. I claim that the essence of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and specifically the core of Adorno’s philosophy is the sensitivity toward the suffering of the finite individual in the unjust and violent world of history. Equally important to Adorno’s concern for suffering is the imperative
that he identifies as having been “imposed by Hitler” to direct our “thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen” (Adorno 1999:365). Adorno’s conception of bilderverbot takes on a more radicalized meaning than what it is generally understood to convey within the Jewish tradition.\(^1\) His radicalized conception of the image ban assists Adorno’s understanding of the events of the Shoah (Holocaust, Tremendum), and is directed against the re-occurrence of Auschwitz in any form to anybody. I will attempt to elevate and highlight the notion of bilderverbot to the position that I believe it deserves; as a key concept in understanding the theological element in Adorno’s dialectical and utopian thought.

The secondary aim of this essay is to elucidate the political, economic, and social ramifications of the philosophical deployment and radicalization of the concept of bilderverbot in the Frankfurt School’s vision (or non-vision) of utopia. By determinately negating the original Jewish conception of bilderverbot and therefore preserving and extending the concept beyond its original and sole theological meaning, Adorno and the Frankfurt School clarify the inherent double negativity of bilderverbot as well as the concept of utopia. It is with its connection to utopia, as the “totally other society,” as the bilderverbot expresses the “totally otherness” of the divine, that connects the Frankfurt School’s notion of utopia to the ban on any positive articulation of the divine. By translating the theological category of bilderverbot into the social category of utopia, they aid in making clear the nature of “that which doesn’t exist,” i.e. utopian absence of positivity, and by inference, “that which ought to exist” without delivering any positive articulation of what that utopian society would look like. It is my goal to concretely connect Adorno’s theological – bilderverbot language/concept, to his utopian thought about the possibilities of world transformation.

The Ugly Hunchback of Historical Materialism

Walter Benjamin, Adorno’s friend and teacher, and in many ways the one that most influenced Adorno’s theological thinking, wrote in his Theses of the Philosophy of History that theology is so ugly within secular society that it has wizened up and now must “keep out of sight.”\(^2\) However, Benjamin claims that

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1 This is also true for the Islamic tradition.

2 See Walter Benjamin, 2007:253. Many have argued since Benjamin articulated this thesis that the opposite is in fact true for the contemporary: that historical materialism is so ugly that it must disguise itself within theology, or that philosophy itself, which has become exhausted
it is this same ugly theology that animates historical materialism (it is the Hunchback that controls the Puppet), and that only when historical materialism wizens up and “enlists the services of theology” will it “win all the time.” It was Benjamin that impressed upon Adorno the residual significance and power of theological concepts, and that for Benjamin, what religion and theology warranted was a determinate negation, not an absolute negation; therefore the theological impulse must be rescued from religion. He did not advocate any form of an a-historical return to religion as a way of addressing modern society and its inner-antagonisms; the retreat into a naive traditional religious life was simply not possible post-Enlightenment or post-Auschwitz. Un-reflexive and uncritical religion itself, as understood by the Critical Theory, too often contributed to the very suffering that the Frankfurt School’s philosophy and sociology wanted to diminish. Yet, there was something remaining within theology that elicited their attention as worth rescuing due to its liberational qualities.

**Theology Inverted**

In the midst of a world that is increasingly moving towards alternative future one, the totally administered society as well as alternative future two, the totally militarized society, and the resulting increase in violence, oppressive corrosion into a totalizing political-economic schema, domination of instrumental rationality, the depletion of meaning, stupidification of the masses in democracies, and the instrumentalization of the arts as manipulative propaganda and public relations, Adorno was convinced that the theological impulse kept open the possibility for alternative future three, a more reconciled form of society; one that would not abandon all of human life to the dominance of the status quo of modernity – a state of perpetual suffering due to unnecessary social antagonisms unleashed by the dialectic of enlightenment, i.e. the man’s domination of nature and other men, the domination over men by the products of his own labor, totalen krieg (total war) against man and nature, and the triumphalism of the suffering it produces. Adorno insists, in agreement with Kant, that the thing-in-itself (in this case the divine) cannot be penetrated by pure reason and therefore we must remain favete linguis (keeping silent, e.g. the impossibility of a positive articulation of the divine) about the ultimate nature of divinity – a restriction that doesn’t allow any positive articulation of the divine, nor does it allow us to positively construct a vision of a totally-other.

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[1] in the face of global capitalism, has no choice but to be rescued by theology. See Milbank, Žižek and Davis, 2010.
society. Yet, despite the limits of reason, modern philosophers and theologians are impelled to continue to probe and theorize about the possibility of another society that fully negates the negativity of this society. For the critical theorist, the distance of the divine, and the impossibility of fully penetrating its existence and meaning, should not arrest critical thought from turning a skeptical eye towards human history in an attempt to alleviate future suffering by way of a future reconciled society; to abandon such an endeavor in the face of despair is to condemn all of human history, present, and future to the suffering that they wished to alleviate, and to leave the victims of history unredeemed in their unwarranted and unsolicited martyrdom/annihilation. Therefore, silence on the divine can not and should not translate into silence on society or human history, but just as theology is rescued by its inversion in critical philosophy, so too should discourse about society deploy the inverse negativity of “utopia” in its longing for a fully reconciled society. For Adorno, the possibility of an inverse theology should be coupled with the real-world possibility of a “totally other society”; to separate the two would be to diminish the possibility of either and fall back into a wait-and-see eschatology – an option that neither rescues the living hopeless nor redeems the suffering of the dead. Furthermore, according to Christopher Craig Brittain, it is the very negativity of Adorno’s “inverse theology” that resists the dominant schema and coordinates of the status quo from “silencing those who cry out against oppression and who work for a more human and rational society” (2010:14). For Adorno, it is the rescue of the semantic and semiotic material from theology that allows “perennial suffering” to actualize its “right to expression,” i.e. inverse theology allows the suffering to be expressed without being absorbed into the coordinates of the existing society and thus resisting it’s distortion, absorption, and commodification within the already existing society (1999:362). Adorno, echoing Marx’s definition of religion, views theology as the expression of historical wounds and suffering, and without it the cry for emancipation, reconciliation, and redemption is rendered mute, or simply a matter of telling history through protocol sentences – devoid of all moral claims and ethical values judgments. Because of this, Adorno says, “the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectively that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed” (1999:18).

Adorno’s Radicalization of the Bilderverbot

In a letter to Otto O. Herz following Adorno’s death and burial, Max Horkheimer explained critical theory’s connection to Judaism and to the
second commandment of the Jewish Decalogue concerning the construction of images. Horkheimer says,

I tell you this in order to make Adorno’s complicated relationship to religion, his religious allegiance, comprehensible. On the other hand, may I say that the critical theory that we both had in developing has its roots in Judaism. It arises from the idea: Thou shalt not make any graven images of God.

CLAUSEN 2008:365

From this quote, Horkheimer explicitly identified the roots of critical theory as being within the Jewish bilderverbot. The theological core of Critical Theory, no matter how encompassing the Frankfurt School became in its development of its theories, cannot be denied. The negativity of the Jewish bilderverbot is the soil in which the theories grew. Consequently, Adorno’s appropriation of the second commandment of the Decalogue does not limit itself to the ban on any positive articulation of the divine, either by image or by word, but instead goes radically further.³

In his article “Reason and Revelation,” Adorno addresses many issues concerning the importance and danger of “positive religion.” Adorno sees the modern return to religion to be rooted in human longing and need, which is abundant due to the alienated, reified, and violent condition of humanity in contemporary society, and not an expression of the validity of religious truth-claims. For Adorno, this return to homo religiosus sacrifices reason on the altar of what religion provides for humanity (even if it is delusional). Following Freud, Adorno sees positive religion as both providing a false sense of security and assurance, that existence is inherently meaningful and that some a-historical metaphysical being is ultimately in control. Religion, in this non-prophetic sense, is also inherently positive; i.e. that it affirms the status quo as opposed to lending its support towards the protest against the injustices and crimes of the status quo.⁴ Furthermore, Adorno remains skeptical about the reintroduction of religious metaphysics within a secular age; he fears that such

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³ In traditional Jewish understanding, the bilderverbot of the Decalogue bans not only the construction of images, but also the linguistic articulation of any mental and or conceptual image of the divine. All forms of anthropomorphism of the divine, or any positive utterance about the nature and or attributes of the divine, are seen as an attempt to drag the infinite into finite language and capture it. To do so is an attempt to control the divine itself. This will have an interesting influence on Adorno’s notion of non-identity thinking.

⁴ There will be a further discussion of “positive religion” later in the chapter.
a move could only lend itself to the reproduction of suffering due to the instrumentalization of religious metaphysics by capitalism, totalitarianism, and their ruling elite. For uncritical theologians and believers, the hope for a reconciled society directs itself towards a placating eschatology, one that stresses a rapturous divine intervention into history (Kingdom of God), as opposed to a reconciled society brought about by human activity (Utopia). Positive religion can only placate the masses by falsely delivering to them that which they psychically need (the opiate), while leaving the already established and antagonistic society unmolested and intact. For Adorno, the only thing that can be rescued from religion and theology is its oft hidden and neglected negativity. Consequently, Adorno (2005:142) sees that positive religion must be left behind, as “no other possibility than an extreme ascesis toward any type of revealed faith, an extreme loyalty to the prohibition of images, far beyond what this once originally meant” is the only option available to the critical theologian, philosopher, and believer; to rescue the negativity of religion, that which is prophetic and essential, from the positivity of religion is the only way religion can survive itself by its own self-ideologization. Thus, in his book Negative Dialectics, Adorno returns to the concept of bilderverbot and deploys it in a radicalized direction.

**Reason and Revelation**

We should not mistake Adorno’s intentions when invoking the notion of bilderverbot; he does not advocate a positive role for Judaism and or Christianity as systematic worldviews (theologies, rituals, sacred spaces and individuals, etc.) in his critical philosophy or “inverse theology” – that would be a half-hearted return to positive religion as an escape from the already existing society through an attempt to take refuge in irrational religiosity; a religiosity that has no substantive potential for the alleviation of human suffering but can only placate the psychological needs of the masses and/or mask the social, economic, and political antagonisms of modern capitalist society. However, the negativity of theology, embodied in the notion of the bilderverbot, which says nothing positive about the object of cognition (the “totally other”), maintains a space for thought to transcend immanence. Negative Theology is not burdened or limited by that which is the case, but continues to ponder the possibility of that which ought be the case without ever constructing a positive plan, blueprint, or theory, that would serve as another totalizing system (something that Adorno wants to avoid). By thinking through “the given,” and at the same time resisting the temptation to construct a totalizing system of
thought that could transcend the given, Adorno contends that out of necessity negative theology articulates itself through what he calls “constellations” – a way of thinking which provides an understanding, comprehension, and vision without building a new iron cage schema which forces all existence into a totalizing conceptualization. Thus, the nature of theology, and by definition negative theology, is that it always pushes beyond the existing coordinates of what immediately appears to us as reality (the metaphysics of positivism that dictates to us that what is the case is all that there is). In doing so, theology can rescue the protesting voices of the victims of history – those left in the ditch of human existence – and does not render their voices unmusical and unheard by diminishing them to simple material existence (as the positive sciences do) or to abandon their suffering to fate (as in some forms of religion and mythology), for it gives voice to their suffering and protests against that which causes them to suffer in a hope for an concrete existence not defined by what is the case. Their voices embody the longing for happiness and fulfillment, the opposite of suffering; and within those voices, the potential for the reconciled society is preserved and advanced, as their expressed suffering forever testifies in the indictment against the inherent violence of nature and the ever-expanding Golgothic history, while at the same time poetically calling for an ultimate state of reconciliation – that the murderer shall no longer triumph over the innocent victim and that society should be rooted in non-possessive love and agape/solidarity. The negativity of theology, its resistance to what is the case, its insubordination to the unjust material world, its ability to envision another society, and its concern for the suffering, serves as the vehicle for the hopes and longing of the innocent victims of history and nature.

The Hebraic ban on images says,

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.

EXODUS 20:40

Horkheimer and Adorno invoke the Jewish iconoclasm in the Dialectic of Enlightenment, but at this point do not philosophically extend the ramification of the bilderverbot beyond that which it is understood to mean within Judaism itself. They write,

The Jewish religion brooks no word which might bring solace to the despair of all morality. It places all hope in the prohibition on invoking
falsity as God, the finite as the infinite, the lie as truth. The pledge of salvation lies in the rejection of any faith which claims to depict it, knowledge in the denunciation of illusion.

Christopher Craig Brittain points out that this passage can be seen as a form of ideology-critique, but from a close reading of this section, it is clear that the authors here do not explicitly have a conception of bilderverbot that is **radically** beyond that which can be found within the Jewish tradition itself, and therefore it is not quite yet an articulation of what Adorno means by when he says in *Reason and Revelation* that we must have a “extreme loyalty to the prohibition of images, far beyond what this once originally meant” (Brittain 2010:89, Adorno 2005:142). Furthermore, in order for the bilderverbot to be radicalized, the religious image ban has to migrate from the depth of the mythos into secular reason and discourse, and it must extend beyond the non-identification, articulation, and image of a divine being for it to be the loci of Adorno’s critical philosophy of history, society, and human suffering. If Adorno’s bilderverbot is radical beyond its original intent, then it has to go far beyond Jewish theology without losing the theological claim that grounds it.

Although the seeds of the radicalization of the bilderverbot are expressed in the Dialectic of Enlightenment, it is in Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* that the concept reaches its full radicality. For Adorno, that which is theological must become applicable to the material world in which human history dwells. Although philosophical abstraction is not alien to Adorno, the theological abstract concept of bilderverbot, if it is to be rescued from theology, must become radicalized and adorn the attire of the Turkish puppet (Benjamin’s historical materialism) without folding into a petrified dogmatism or “weltanschauung” characterized by “vulgar Marxism,” e.g. Sovietism or Brecht (1999:200, 204).

**Bilderverbot Secularized: Contra Identity Philosophy**

Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* not only secularizes the Jewish concept of bilderverbot, i.e. the non-identification of the divine, into a critical philosophy of society, but he extends the meaning of that “which cannot be articulated” from strictly speaking and imaging the divine to a possibility of conceptualizing anything in its full givenness. Not only does the notion of God (the divine thing-in-itself) resist penetration by way of reason and its inherent conceptual schema, but the universal “object” also resists such a conceptualization. It may
BILDERVERBOT AND UTOPIA: GOD WITHOUT IMAGE

be a mistake to even say that the knowing subject fully knows itself. Bilderverbot has become radicalized to the point where all is thoroughly inconceivable to the other in its full givenness or from within itself. Adorno contends that reason violently imposes certain structures, definitions, qualities, etc. upon the objects. These false imports that are projected onto the object by reason's impulsion to categorize deny the subject the ability to grasp the object itself, as the qualities of the object that remain recalcitrant to the conceptualization are ignored and or severed. The violence of the imposition of the concept renders the object something other than what it is – for what it is must include that which is non-conceptualizable – that which was severed when conceptualized – the recalcitrant remainder. The mode of reasoning that remains oblivious to it's own dominating force is what Adorno calls “identity thinking.” According to Adorno's student Gerhard Schweppenhäuser (2009:41), “confusion of rational categories with nonobjective reality amounts to an identity compulsion: the human mind cannot avoid classifying objects according to normalizing and deviant characteristics, according to the criteria of identity and nonidentity.” Identity thought, which serves as a “single cognitive schema” has a twofold function. First, it serves as the object's pervasive structure of knowing, and secondly, it dismantles the singularity of the object so that it fits easily within the schema of our conceptions and perceptions. In doing so, the conceptualization violently transubstantiates the object into something that it is not. The conceptualization of the object can never fully grasp the object itself, and therefore there always remains a remainder, i.e. the non-conceptual. Despite this, according to Adorno, the philosopher has no choice but to work through concepts, for it is “inherent in thought itself...To think is to identify” (1999:5). Despite this impulse to conceptualize, the dialectician must remain perpetually cognizant of the tendency of the concept to distort and dominate the object, for “dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity” and thought which is directed “against itself” (1999:5, 365). For Adorno, this awareness of the violent and deforming nature of the conceptual is missing in Idealisms’ tendency to conflate thought with the object – rendering it impossible to grasp the very thing that idealism set out to understand (Schweppenhäuser 2009:41).

As stated before, Adorno transfers reason's inability to grasp the “totally other” without turning it into a stagnant idol (which limit's the totally other to a certain time, space, and being, which is the most extreme form of theological identity thinking) down to the level of the subject's inability to grasp the object through conceptualization. However, because humanity cannot live within a conceptless world, and has no choice but to construct concepts, the ability to say that the object that appears in front of him is a “totally other” is not
acceptable. The “totally other” can only apply to that understanding of what the divine is (and simultaneously isn’t). A complete transference of the theological bilderverbot to a social, material, and historical bilderverbot is not possible, as it would render human life unintelligible, as human thought and being would be impossible. Adorno is forced to make a compromise with the radical nature of the theological bilderverbot, i.e. the subject must attempt to grasp the object with conceptual thought, with full understanding that his conceptualizations cannot fully comprehend, grasp, or possess a full penetration of the thing-in-itself. What’s equally important, it must constantly be engaged in a rethinking of the object itself as not to petrify and stagnate the concept – object. The dialectical philosopher (the subject) must always be mindful of that which resists conceptualization, i.e. the singularity and uniqueness of the object. Binding yet elastic statements concerning the object comprise a philosophical “constellation” of thought – characterized by its fluidity (absence of absolute coordinates), and thus escaping the production of a system of thought that seems to renders all of reality intelligible. Knowledge of reality in its totality is false (in its claim to completeness) as it becomes akin to the idol when it claims to be divine, (a false claim of being absolute). In essence, Adorno’s insistence on the non-identical in thought is a philosophical bilderverbot that is less radical than the theological in the sense that it cannot make reality into the “totally other,” as the discourse about the divine does, but more radical in that it forces the subject to see the non-conceptual as being beyond the discourse about the divine and is extended into the discussion about the physical world and society in which we live. For Adorno, the theological ban on images must migrate into the secular discussion about society if it is to be relevant in the modern-secular world.

Bilderverbot and the Suffering of Auschwitz

The notion of bilderverbot finds its ultimate importance in Adorno’s concern for suffering of the finite individual. Rejecting the traditional answers to the theodicy question, as well as a descriptive analysis of Auschwitz, and wanting to rescue the autonomy or irreducibility of the suffering of the innocent victim, Adorno writes,

After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims’ fate. And these feelings do have an objective side after events that make a mockery of the
construction of immanence as endowed with a meaning radiated by an affirmatively posited transcendence.

1999:361

Adorno rejects any conceptualization of the suffering of Auschwitz, as any attempt to construct a positive interpretation of the event would render it meaningful; a prospect he finds perverse and absurd. For Adorno, Auschwitz remains and must remain without any meaning; as all attempts to imbue the mechanized extermination of a people, the production of corpses, with some form of altruistic purposivity, whether that be philosophical, theological, or ideological, would be a mockery of the meaninglessness of their suffering, as it would imply that Auschwitz was an inevitable part of some divine or cosmic plan – that its occurrence was simply a moment in a meaningful blueprint of human history, as opposed to understanding it as a product of perverse social organization that was completely unnecessary and should have never happened. Furthermore, Adorno understood that any attempt to impose a conception upon the victim’s fate would inevitably fail to comprehend or account for every micrological moment of suffering, pain, humiliation, and agony. Suffering of the innocent victim is, for Adorno, that which can never be conceptualized. As such, there is no possibility for any concept to grasp Auschwitz without denying the suffering of the victim; the moment of suffering exists as the “remainder” that at all times resists the deformative violence of the concept. For Adorno, any form of positive meaning for Auschwitz would originate from the analyzing subject, never from the object, i.e. those suffering. It is only on the “authority of those who suffer” that such suffering can be analyzed for meaning; yet even then it will always resist ultimate meaning and remain in the realm of subjectivity (Schuster & Boshert-Kimmig 1999:24).

The agony of transcendence (prayer) without countermovement (a divine response) in the concentration camp, which didn’t bring the intervention of the totally other, but only the brutality of the SS and their cries of “Deus Volt”; the inconceivability of the bourgeois “coldness” that was required to exterminate children by the thousands; the humiliation of witnessing humans being beaten and starved; the dance of the “walking dead” (muselmänner in lager language); the assembly line production of corpses; the extreme instrumentalization of human life, all defy meaning as they are moments of sustained somatic terror and suffering which escapes any positive articulation. Language is provoked by suffering but is utterly incapable of formulating a single sentence that can convey or transfer the experience of suffering from one individual to another. The fullness of somatic suffering can only be experienced, as linguistic expression fails to relive the completeness of the moment
or state of suffering. Therefore for Adorno, every theological, philosophical, and historical attempt to provide such conceivability, and thus render it meaningful (such as the theodicy answers), only leads to the further victimization of the victims – to render their suffering conceptually less than suffering, to render their agony understandable, and to render their brutal deaths meaningful. This impulse to conceptualize must not be allowed to re-victimize the victims. Faced with the violent and destructive nature of conceptuality, Adorno states “Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity is death” (1999:362).

The Jew as Concept, the Jew as Remainder

For the Jews, the concept of Der Juden, and all its perceived negative connotations, diminished the uniqueness of every Jew, and rendered every Jewish individual into a conceptual framework that portrayed each Jew as a threat to the Deutsches Volk. This allowed for them to be conceived of as the perpetual enemy. Unlike centuries before, where Jewish religion, especially the messianic claims, was the core insult of the Jews for Christendom. However, the Jews’ very existence in Hitler’s Europe was a threat to the Aryan race. In thinking so, and as a concept, every Jew was stripped of his or her individuality and was rendered “life unworthy of life.” and a mere “specimen” (Adorno 1999:362). On the other side of the conceptualization, i.e. what is German, the Nazis understood the “remainder” which resisted conceptualization within the Deutsches volk as the Jew, and as such had to be eliminated, as it served as the persistent reminder that Europe is not how it is conceived to be (or ought to be) by their racial ideology. To intellectually conceive of Europe as Jew-free, led to the attempt to physically make Europe Jew-free. In the Nazi consciousness, the Jew was both the non-conceptual component in Europe, as he resisted a full integration into the Nazi conception of Europe and their cult of Aryanism, and therefore was the perpetual and unwanted “other.” Furthermore, the Jewish remainder, the non-conceptualizable recalcitrant, was not simply a benign phenomenon, but was conceived of as a disease, a plague, and an existential threat. For the fascist, the non-conceptual/concept had to be eliminated. In Adorno’s estimation, the identity thought of the Nazi’s led directly to the gas chambers because the Jews were first that which remained outside the conceptualization of Christian/Aryan Europe, and second, a conceptualization of the degenerate and dangerous other. In essence, the Jews were both

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non-concept and concept, and as such posed a double threat that had to be terminated.

In explaining his position that poetry after Auschwitz was inconceivable, Adorno (2001:110) stated,

...just as I said that after Auschwitz one could not write poems...it could equally well be said, on the other hand, that one must write poems...that as long as there is an awareness of suffering among human beings there must also be art as the objective form of that awareness.

Faced with the alternative of remaining silent concerning the human catastrophe that was Auschwitz, Adorno chose to rethink his poetry-ban, and in remembrance give voice to suffering of the past. However, for Adorno, in giving expression to the suffering of the finite individual through art and poetry, one must not violently impose some form of meaning through conceptualization upon the suffering object, but invokes a constellational moment of insight that allows the subject an insight into the suffering – a moment of somatic-empathy/experience that does not propose to render a judgment, an understanding, and or a conceptualized meaning. Poetry, the specter behind the thought, the ‘thereness’ and equally ‘not-thereness’, opens the space for the voice of the suffering, so that remembrance of the innocent victims is sustained and their history of suffering is never forgotten, but does not fall into the conceptualizing temptation of prose.

**Bilderverbot and the Negative Utopia: Non-Defining of that which doesn’t Exist**

The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School has been highly influential on the theory and praxis of sociology, psychology, history, philosophy, and religion. The first generation of Critical theorists, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, and Leo Lowenthal, etc., came from variable Jewish backgrounds. Although many of these thinkers moved from a religious context, into a secular theory-praxis orientation, as we have seen, they nonetheless retained certain religious and prophetic impulses within their theory that where deeply rooted in messianic and prophetic Rabbinical Judaism.

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7 Although the degree to which their families adhered to a religious life is variable, it is certain that all were exposed to Judaism via their Jewish heritage, whether that be a religious exposure or simply to cultural Judaism as practiced by assimilated Jews of Germany.
In the second part of this essay, I will discuss various details concerning the Frankfurt School's notion of utopia, especially how it relates to religion and most specifically Horkheimer and Adorno's notion of the “totally other,” as a gesture toward defining (by way of not defining) God, i.e. the concept of bilderverbot, and the “longing for the totally other” as a definition of religion. I will attempt to make explicit, if it is theoretically possible, what the critical theory of religion, in its prophetic form, only leaves implicit within their discussion of utopia. Furthermore, the ultimate goal of this section is to elucidate the connection between the “negative utopia” of the Frankfurt School, and the “negative theology” that is rooted in Adorno's radicalization of the Jewish bilderverbot.

Exodus to America

Most of the first generation of critical theorists that escaped Hitler's fascist Germany came to America in search of sanctuary. They did not come looking for a new permanent home, as they had always intended to return to Germany after the defeat of fascism, nor did they accept Zionism as a valid response to fascism and emigrate to Palestine although they did have great concerns for the safety of Jews in the newly formed state of Israel (Kundnani 2009:58). The Frankfurt School theorists believed the Jews of Europe had an immense role to play in the redemption of Western civilization, not only through a reconciliation between the Jews and Gentiles, but for a critical redemption of the European Enlightenment project itself – the very movement that liberated them from the ghetto's of Medieval Europe. However, while they found refuge within the US and were greeted warmly by the New York academic community at Columbia University, and eventually in California as well, they nevertheless remained reserved on many political and social issues, due to the pervasive suspicion of foreigners, especially those who where German, of the political left, Marxist, and or represented a critical view of American democracy and or capitalism. The “Red Scare” was not only directed towards Russian Bolshevism, but Western Marxism was also a target of suspicion and persecution. When the Frankfurt School scholars did speak, they spoke in an idiom that was not accessible to the average American, and hardly accessible by those in their own

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8 Walter Benjamin was the one exception. He was unable to escape Europe and eventually committed suicide in Portbou, a small town on the Spanish-French border in the Pyrenees. Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm decided to stay in America, yet Fromm would eventually return to Europe via Switzerland. See: Wheatland 2009.
philosophical and sociological fields (at least in the American academic academy), a problem that still perplexes many today when reading their literature. However, their relative silence and philosophical obscurantism should not tempt one to think that they retreated from dialectical philosophy and sociology. Although some enjoyed a comfortable life, most especially Adorno, they refused to conformed even slightly to American consumerism or the ideology of liberal democracy and capitalism; they remained the *genius loci* (guardian spirit of a place or issue) of critical leftist thought within academic circles and later within the 1960s youth movement (Kundnani 2010:25–28, 37, 44, 57–59, 78–80). In the global context of Auschwitz, world war, genocidal aggression, nuclear bombs, and increased oppression and suppression of substantive freedom, what Schopenhauer identified as “Golgotha history,” or what Hegel called “the slaughter-bench of history,” the critical theorists conceived their philosophy within the inevitable sadness of the age, but imbued it with ageless hope, while resisting the vulgar Marxism of Russian Bolshevism and the the cultic “actionism” as exemplified by the ‘68 generation (Wheatland 2009: 44–45, Klapwijk 2010:94, Adorno 1999:378). It is part of my argument, that this irrepressible hope for a future reconciled society, while actively engaging in a dynamic and dialectical analysis of the world torn apart by reason made myth, fear made praxis, and love made murder, has its roots in the longing for a messianic age (without expecting it) – or a development of a society rooted in the transvaluation of all capitalist values, i.e. the utopian society of reconciliation and peace.

**Horror of History and Utopian Reaction**

According to Horkheimer, modern utopian thought and theory are reactions to the rise of bourgeois society and its “legitimating philosophy” that reifies an antagonistic system of political economy, rooted in man's exploitation and domination over mankind, into the realm of nature; thus causing it to appear as inevitable and natural. The “Aristocratic law of nature” – the guiding principle of fascism, which augments the inherent “mechanistic killing cycle” of nature to the level of normative human interaction – is indicative of modern capitalist society, and as such, it is the “dispossessed classes of people (peasants, farmers, proletariat) who have to bear the cost and suffering” of

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9 I define "hope" to be the perpetual belief in the possibility of negating what is the case; the horror and terror of history and nature. Horkheimer seemed to be less hopeful than the rest concerning the prospects of a second Enlightenment or a self-correcting enlightenment.
such a system (Ott 2001:47). Within the pain and suffering of such a society, the utopian impulse is born (Ott 2001:47, Adorno 1999:361–408). As such, utopia expresses the sum of desires to negate what is the case in nature and history, to relieve the suffering of man and nature in a society that would be, if it could be, endorsed by the divine, especially that of the Abrahamic God. Utopia, as an all-encompassing social concept of negativity, i.e. criticism of all that exists coupled by the desire to replace it with that which doesn't exist but is nevertheless longed for, reflects the notion of the “kingdom of God,” i.e. the eudaemonic society of man rooted in absolute justice, perfection, unconditional love, and closeness with the divine. Utopia is not that which is, and thus the meaning of the word: “that which has no place” (Greek: οὐ “not,” and τόπος “place”). Yet, since it is not that which is, it also contains within it the dialectical-critical function of the prophetic – it remains outside of the “metaphysics of what is the case,” as Adorno identified scientism-positivism and vulgar materialism, and stands as both the accuser and inquisitor of existing society (that which is the case).10 The utopian impulse of critical theory is constitutional; having been rooted in and appropriated from utopian impulses in Marx, Freud, Hegel, the prophets, and eschatology. Furthermore, for the Frankfurt School, it was their background in the messianic Jewish upbringing and education (bildung), with its theological concept of bilderverbot that, as explained by Leo Lowenthal, was co-determinate with secular socialism in their desire for a more reconciled society.11

For the Frankfurt School, working in a secular capitalist post-Christian society, a very important absence that gives rise to the desire for utopia is the parousia-delay – the non-appearance of the promised messiah (Jewish and Christian), and the absolute longing for reconciliation and the cancellation of suffering and despair that would accompany the advent of the messianic.12 However, the promised “kingdom of god,” which was to be the fully reconciled and godly society, seems to have been abandoned, not by the masses and their move toward scientific, materialistic, mechanistic, and naturalistic causal explanations of existence, but for many by the divine itself. The Enlightenment, a project that they remained fundamentally committed to, was an attempt to

10 See: Brittain 2010.
11 For the first generation of Frankfurt scholars, messianic Judaism’s task was not only eschatological and theological, but was a political task assigned to present a model of what life on earth should be if all things were perfect. See: Lowenthal 1987, and Rabinbach 1985:78–124.
12 Although the Critical Theorists did not include this, it is clear that the Islamic longing for the messianic would also be included in this image.
liberate man from his superstitions, and therefore cultivate a sense of agency in man – that he is the master of his own history – and thus recognize the fact that the divine has abandoned human history through his non-intervention and or that God, as Ludwig Feuerbach insisted, simply didn't exist outside of humanity's projections. Indeed, Nietzsche's “God is Dead” didn't propose the death of God, but the inability of the modern masses to believe that a thing such as God could ever exist.\textsuperscript{13} Although they paid homage to the divine and his revelation, modern man found his morality and ethics elsewhere. Furthermore, many of the assimilated modern Jews could no longer believe that a God so-conceived could exist, especially after what would appear to be his flagrant violation of his covenant with, and his neglect of, the “Chosen of Israel” in the Holocaust/Shoah. One can see this very dynamic in the trial of God in Auschwitz-Birkenau, where through the deployment of reasoned juridical arguments, a group of Jews put God on trial and found him guilty for his violation of the covenant through his involvement in Jewish suffering (or non-involvement in ceasing Jewish suffering, or active involvement in imposing Jewish suffering). Although reason and law, both understood to be creations of the divine in Judaism, were used to condemn God, some inmates in the extermination camp, awaiting their last minute of life, returned to their unreasonable prayers after they found God guilty of violating his covenant (Schuster & Boshert-Kimmig 1999:7–52). However, some found praying in Auschwitz disgusting and absurd, and could not address the divine via prayer within the barbed wire of the camp (Levi 2011:98). Yet even prior to Auschwitz, many enlightenment and utopian thinkers expressed through deistic language their impatience for the messianic age. As all of history disclosed itself to them as a piling up of one catastrophe after the next, as Walter Benjamin's “Angel of History” saw it, they became pessimistic about the possibility of a divine intervention and or rescue (Benjamin 2007:257). Many disillusioned believers concluded “if the God of justice and mercy is unwilling to intervene in human history on the side of the victims, the oppressed, the murdered, and the raped, then humanity is unwilling to wait for him.” Why should humanity wait for the promised messiah if in its worst suffering that messiah seemed not to take interest nor did he appear – despite his promises and ability? Can humanity not do for itself what was once promised by the divine, especially since humanity has advanced it capacity to determine its own future and environment

\textsuperscript{13} It’s interesting to note that Nietzsche’s Zarathustra announces the death of God to the marketplace, and indicts those who are going about their “business” there as the murderers of God. The bourgeoisie, Nietzsche tacitly announces, are the executioners of the divine. Why do they laugh at him? Because they already know they’ve killed God.
since the days of the Prophets? Consequently, for those who still maintained a belief in a divine being that is active in human history, the theodicy problem, or questions of God's justice in the face of the absence of justice in his world, had driven many to seek a utopian solution without the blessing of the divine, regardless if they still believed in the divine. Marx's secular communism is an attempt to do just that; that in the face of the totally other's non-appearance, non-intervention, and unconcern, man should make the “kingdom of heaven” on earth without the divine's blessing or input – that it is a historical necessity that cannot wait for the uncaring, powerless, or absent God. He was Deus Absconditus, and thus irrelevant for human society. However, this utopian impulse, which can be found in Marx, Freud, Bloch, and other critical voices, preserves the utopian impulse of the theological inspired kingdom of god, while negating the religious imperative of God's intervention into history to bring about such a utopia. The promise of and longing for reconciliation, justice, and peace remains powerful within human relations, while the notion of a divinity becomes ever more distant. Because the divine was not only “imageless” within the concept of bilderverbot, but also seemingly remained unavailable for human petition, the responsibility for the construction of an optimal society is increasingly viewed as a human obligation and not that of an eschatological event or the interjection of the divine into history.

Religion, Utopia, and Suffering: Dal Segno al Coda

Unlike other modern theories that claim to be secular in nature, the Critical Theory of Religion of Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Habermas, Siebert, etc. does not unrelexively reject religion and religious claims as mere ideology (like certain forms of Marxism does), as residues of mental material that truly belongs to the historical infancy of humanity (the “universal mass neurosis” of Freud), or the projections of human wishes and desires into a metaphysical realm (Feuerbach), or as slave morality, moralizing all that is weak over all that

14 Despite what the “sociology of religion,” currently championed by Peter Berger, tells us about secularization and religion, all points of reference within the family, civil society and the state are geared towards the ever increasing nature of secularization – which sparks the “religious” reactions of many individuals and groups. Unfortunately, they take this reactionary stance by the few as being proof of a societal-global return to religion. It is precisely because of the fact that society, polity, economy, etc., is becoming more secular, that some choose to be religiously reactionary. The Berger thesis unfortunately puts the cart before the horse.
is strong (and therefore good) as Nietzsche tells us.\textsuperscript{15} On the contrary, the Critical Theory of Religion takes seriously the emancipatory and prophetic claims and desires of religion, while it attempts to rescue certain semantic and semiotic materials from the depths of their \textit{mythos} (sacred story) and reformulate them into revolutionary theory and praxis. While such material is preserved within the critical theory, the mythology, untrue ideology, pathology, and criminality of positive religion is negated.\textsuperscript{16} Determinate negation (\textit{bestimmte negation}), as taught to the Frankfurt School by Marx, and Marx by his dialectical teacher Hegel, is applied to religion, to liberate its emancipatory potential from its violent criminality and distorted pathological history and orientation. The truth and power of the story, its prophetic core, often located within the micrological details of every moment of human suffering, have been embraced, amplified, and therefore preserved within the theory.\textsuperscript{17} As discussed before, this rescue of the negativity of theology from religion is what Walter Benjamin pressed upon the younger theorist Adorno. Furthermore, an integral component of critical micrological analysis of society and individuals is the rescue of the desire for a “utopian other” than what is the case, the remembrance of past suffering, with the practical intent to diminish future suffering; suffering that is often expressed in small details of the pain and existential anguish in the lives of those who find themselves in the ditch of history.\textsuperscript{18} Through the micrological focus on the suffering, pain, and misery of human existence, what Adorno identifies as the non-identical or non-conceptualizable, which remains secure in its’ particularity, the experience of the individual does not get absorbed and lost in the totalizing whole. As stated before, for Adorno (1999:361–408), by thinking about human suffering and the singularity of the individual through constellations (as opposed through systems), the utopian alternative becomes recognizable, if only in its negative form, i.e. that which utopia is not yet. Furthermore, the utopian image through constellation thinking escapes the destructive tendency to become an

\textsuperscript{15} See: Eduardo Mendieta (ed.) 2005.

\textsuperscript{16} I use the term “positive religion” here to mean a religious orientation that confirms the status quo of nature and history, or one that does not engage in an active attempt to move history toward the prophetic. I will discuss in detail later.

\textsuperscript{17} See: Siebert 2006.

\textsuperscript{18} A good example of a micrological hope for a reconciled society is Herbert Marcuse’s 1967 identification of “benches” in Hanoi that only seat two people, “so that another person would not even have the technical possibility of disturbing.” In this small detail lies the hope for a future society rooted in inter-subjectivity and unconditional love. Also see: Adorno 2005:191–204.
encompassing and dogmatic whole – a closed system that warrants orthodoxy, developmental stagnation, and an authority to enforce its coordinates. The non-conceptualizable constellation – which is only accessible in insightful flashes – that vague but powerful notion of the messianic – utopia, yet unknowable force, allows the deployment of its prophetic course without retreating into a oppressive cannon of being – the idol. The remembrance of the pain and suffering of the victims of history garnishes a response from the spirit of utopia, but does not press the suffering into a conception that does violence to its singularity. Ultimately, every micrological moment of somatic, intellectual, and spiritual suffering, gives birth to the utopian ideal of what a society without unnecessary suffering would be, without its concrete articulation. It remains vague, but the longing only increases.

**Capitalism and the Abandonment of Utopia**

Despite the Critical Theory’s rootedness in an utopian negation of the aggressiveness and destructiveness of nature and society, recent history and recent trends toward alternative future number one, the totally administered society, and number two, the totally militarized society, have led some to abandon the utopian ideal, alternative future number three, the totally reconciled society; some have done this out of despair, i.e. Leo Lowenthal, and others out of pragmatics, i.e. Jürgen Habermas (Siebert 2001:53). In a lament of current society and history, Löwenthal (1987:237), the critical theorist of society and literature, said,

> What has not been lost is, of course, the critical approach: the process of analysis, retaining the good and rejecting the bad, the need to accuse, the indictment of all that exists..., but without explicit hopes. What has occurred is not a retreat into skepticism or cynicism, but sadness. The utopian motif has been suspended.

The horror of Critical Theory can been read from this text; despite the desperate need for the destruction of “socially necessary illusions,” (those untruths that sustain, perpetuate, and legitimate already existing society) it is those illusions that posses the minds of much of humanity, and as such the social, political, cultural, and economic power of capitalism, with its tendency to reify, objectify, commodify, commercialize, and oppress, turning all living organisms into a meaningless part of the “exchange society” (*tauschgesellschaft*). For the Frankfurt School, who saw WWI and WWII, Hiroshima & Nagasaki, the Shoah
and Vietnam, etc. as consequences of such a society, it was incredibly disappointing to see an entrenchment of such a society as it becomes more barbaric; Golgotha history perpetuates, while the slaughter-bench expands to make room for even more victims. The march towards alternative future No. 1, the totally administered society, and No. 2, the totally militarized society, continues to expand and invade more and more of the earth; subjugating whole societies as it infiltrates their culture and consciousness via globalization (neo-liberalization). This move towards a society of control, instrumental rationality, and bourgeois callousness, as Adorno described it, also continues to penetrate deeper in the Western world from where it originated. However, through an analysis of social, economic, and political trends in the 1960s and 1970s, the Frankfurt scholars, now second and third generation, foresaw the capitalistic turn towards its own death through the increasingly more radicalized free-market, especially of the kind advocated by the University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman. Yet, despite capitalism’s inherent suicidal antagonisms, state sponsored attempts to resurrect capitalism were viewed as superfluous, because it would inevitably decline, but would not die. They foresaw that through state interventions into the economy (back to basics ideology), those most geared towards social justice could nurse the capitalistic system back to health, via modifying and taming it; capitalism with a smiling face. Herbert Marcuse saw this clearly when he described the “working class,” Marx’s agent of historical change, as having exhausted its energy to resist capitalism, and had been co-opted into the system – thus giving them something to lose if a socialist/communist revolution were to occur. The working class had become apologists for their masters and would defend them and their system at all costs. This led Marcuse to identify those on the margins of society, the students, minorities, hippies, “revolutionary communists,” 1968 generation, to be the new possible agent of change.\(^\text{19}\)

This Neo-liberal trend opposed a radical departure from the already existing society towards alternative future three – the fully-reconciled society, i.e. the creation of a utopian-like existence through socialism; a society that could be later endorsed by the Messiah.\(^\text{20}\) Now in the 21st century, we must say that Löwenthal and the Critical Theorists have a justified right to be sorrowful with these turn of events, but do not have an absolute obligation to be so. If to accept the notion that the utopian motif has been suspended, then should it not, in the name of those who suffer while refusing to abandon hope for a reconciled society, be vigorously resuscitate as the philosopher Slavoj Žižek has recently

\[^{19}\text{See: Marcuse 1964.}\]
\[^{20}\text{See: Žižek 2009:9–85.}\]
challenged the political left to do? In light of the centrality of the utopian motif in the first generation of the Frankfurt School, it appears that the utopian impulse cannot be abandon into sadness for it remains constitutive of the Critical Theory itself. Implicit in Löwenthal’s “sadness” is the reality of capitalism’s barbaric victory and the retirement of a radical vision for a just and reconciled society. However, we have to question whether or not the elimination of the negativity of the utopian motif would collapse the entire project of Critical Theory into banal skepticism, meaningless nihilism, or uncritical description, and thus perpetuating the sum of all antagonisms already entrenched within the status quo. In fact, coupled with the concern for the suffering of the finite individual, it is this very longing for the totally other than what is the case that is at the heart of the Critical Theory. Without it, Critical Theory retires itself into pure academics; a critique that it has already been accused of during the 1960s youth movement in Germany.

Utopia and the Theological

As stated above, most of the first generation of Critical Theorists took refuge in the United States during the Fascist period in Germany. Knowing that they were not in a Left-friendly country, as the primary ideological enemy of the US prior to World War II was Bolshevism, and that the alliance between Roosevelt and Stalin was only pragmatic and not a reconciliation between the Bourgeois and Marxist Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno, et al. were careful not to blatantly demonstrate their leftist and socialist political philosophy for fear of retaliation and or deportation (but neither did they abandon it). Conservative America was not a friend of their political and philosophical orientation and consequently they understood that their position within the

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21 See the film Žižek, dir. Astra Taylor, with Slavoj Žižek, Zeitgeist Films, 2005. Also see Marcuse's 1967 article, “The End of Utopia,” where he expressly points out the need to abandon, not the substantive idea of utopia, but the pejorative nature of the word “utopia.” If we forgo the use of the word (while preserving the concept), so that the word no longer stands in the way of its actualization, then we can begin to make the necessary changes to produce the real possibilities of utopian change, without the undermining effect of the accusations that such a project is merely utopian. Marcuse's point is well taken, and it may be the case. Yet, another possibility is the aggressive defense of lost causes, or causes to be, even if they are utopian (in the pejorative sense of the word).

us was precarious at best.\textsuperscript{23} We have since learned that those scholars associated with the Frankfurt School in American exile were under surveillance by the US government, and thus confirming that the Institute in exile was correct in being careful about publicly articulating their positions in the 1930s, 1940s, and after.\textsuperscript{24}

However, despite the obvious historical reasons for Critical Theory not to articulate a positive utopia (as the indictment of all that exists), there is a much more important reason. The Frankfurt School thinkers understood themselves to be utopian iconoclasts, having philosophically appropriated the Hebraic ban on images (bilderverbot). As such, Adorno (2008:210) defines Utopia in his lectures on negative dialectics as,

consciousness of possibility, adheres to the concrete, the unspoilt. Its path is blocked by possibility, never by immediate reality; this explains why it always seems abstract when surrounded by the world as it is. Its inextinguishable colour comes from non-being. Thought is its servant, a piece of existence that extends, however, negatively, into that which does not exist.

In much the same way that they adopted a radicalization of the second and third commandments of the Decalogue, the ban on making images or names for the imageless and nameless "totally other," so too have they adopted this position in terms of utopia. Utopia, by its very definitional nature, treads very close to the definition of the divine, as \textit{the totally other then what is the case}. Utopia, is the "totally other society" than \textit{what is the case} in really existing society, articulated via the \textit{servant of thought}. The Jewish ban on idolatry, which includes any positive statements about the divine, is taken seriously by the Critical Theory of Religion, not because they were Jewish, or even religiously committed to Judaic law, but that it is within this hope for the totally other – in the possibility of the nameless and imageless other's redemptive existence – that there is any hope for the rescue of absolute meaning, perfect justice, human compassion, and unconditional love, etc. The sorrowful

\textsuperscript{23} Even though it generally remained on a friendly basis, the Frankfurt School often had serious and open disagreements with American Leftist intellectuals. For a good review of their critical discourse with Pragmatists scholars, see Wheatland 2009.

\textsuperscript{24} See: Jenemann 2007:180–183. Herbert Marcuse however was very vocal and active against the Vietnam war and admonished other members of the Frankfurt School for retreating into the University and not standing with the students in their revolt against the "established society." Also see: Kundnani 2009:80.
longing for the messianic return, the parousia event, or the coming of absolute justice, so that the unrepentant murderer shall ultimately not triumph over the innocent victim – that the injustice of history and nature is not the final word of all – expresses the need for such a hope.\textsuperscript{25} For the Critical Theorists, the complete and total abandonment of the longing for the totally other is a complete and total abandonment of humanity, left simply to the devises of nature and history – the “Aristocratic Law of Nature” (Hitler 1943) – which fascistally extends into human society. The grave risk associated with such an abandonment is to increase the suffering, despair, and violent annihilation of man at the hands of man, and his continued enslavement to his passions, irrationality, instrumental reason, aggression, narcissism, sado-masochism, and self-destructiveness. The Critical Theory of Religion understands religion to be the echo of the cry of the innocent masses, and their longing for absolute justice – of which the Critical Theory has sympathy and fully identifies with, because at its core is the sensitivity for the finite human creature and their suffering.\textsuperscript{26} The first generation of Critical Theorists understood that to make an image of or name for the totally other is to drag the infinite into finite language (species language) within a finite world, and thus cancel any hope in the totally other, as it has become less than the totally other (Horkheimer & Adorno 1986:23, 24). Likewise, the utopian desire must remain the unknowable society if it is to remain the relentless inquisitor of all that exists within nature and history. Any positive articulation of the utopian ideal is to make it a idol, a false ideology, and thus a tool for manipulation in the hands of those who would manipulate for the benefit of one over “the other,” and as such reinstate an antagonist and dictatorial “unfree” society. As Adorno expressed, it is utopia’s non-being (that it does not participate in the reality of what is the case) that gives it other-worldly emancipatory power, or what Adorno calls its “colour.” Furthermore, positive religion (which is a full participant in what is the case), as a set formula of dogmatic statements, takes on administrative quality, an enforceable orthodoxy, which calls for an enforcer – the priest – who then, because of his power position, has the power to enforce uniformity that orthodoxy demands, and thus stifle the free and creative articulation of human thought and action – the emancipated being (Fromm 1981:41–57). Positive

\textsuperscript{25} See: Ott 2009:367–186.

\textsuperscript{26} The Critical Theory has taken seriously the entire quote of Marx from his “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.” See: Andrew McKinnon, “Opium as Dialectics of Religion: Metaphor, Expression and Protest” in Goldstein (ed.) 2009.
religion, especially rooted in authoritarian hierarchy, abandons its prophetic geist (if it’s a prophetically inspired/revealed religion) when it becomes a petrified system – a system that stands in direct competition with the totally other society of utopia. However, with inverse theology, or cipher theology as Adorno identified it, religion has to be forcibly rescued from the hands of those who functionalize it as a “contingency management experience subsystem.” For the Critical Theorists of Religion, the only way to do that is to rescue God from religion, and justice from the world – as all attempts to posit God in the positive lead to idolatry, and all historically mediated human attempt to bring universal and perfect justice are ultimately failures, for the dead cannot be resurrected, the raped cannot be made pure, and the maimed cannot be made whole again by man’s hands alone.27 Consequently, the utopian impulse must also remain only in the negative – or expressed only in such a way that it articulates that which it is not. The double-negativity of utopia, first by definition as “that which has no place,” and secondly by only being able to be expressed in the negative, that which utopia is not, is the only way to effectively understand the phenomenon without loosing its quality as a sum of all negations, and thus its prophetic geist.

With this political-theological maneuver, the Frankfurt School takes a tacit position on utopia – like the Jewish second commandment, banning all positive images of the divine, so the Frankfurt School, still rooted in a secularized Jewish prophetic and messianic hope, refused to positively identify any notion or system of utopian society.28 Utopia is inexpressible. This is what Lowenthal meant when he said that utopia is the “indictment of all that exists...without explicit hopes.” In agreement with Ernst Bloch’s notion that the only true believer is the atheist, so to the only true believer in Utopia is the atopists – those who believe but leave any notion of a positive utopia unarticulated. The only way to rescue the utopian motif from total abandonment is to preserve it in silence via its double negativity. In this sense, the Critical Theorist were more utopian than the classical utopianists.

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27 See: Siebert 1994. It is interesting to note that the English word “cipher” derives from the Arabic “sifer,” which means 0 (Zero). Zero, according to Mathematics, serves as a “placeholder” for the negative space. With this in mind, Adorno’s negative or “cipher” theology is a placeholder theology, devoid of positive content.

28 This is one of the reasons that the Frankfurt School could not endorse the Soviet Union and other “Communist” countries, despite their initial excitement about their creation. Marcuse most likely remained the most optimistic about Soviet and other Communist societies, although he had serious doubts as to whether it could distinguish itself radically from capitalist society due to the inherent violence and oppression in both systems, despite the differences in how that violence and oppression manifested itself.
No Utopia with Positive Religion

Horkheimer and Adorno identified religion as the *longing for the totally other than the terror and horror in nature and history*, and as such utopia, which is the negation of such conditions, cannot be compatible with any positive religion.\(^{29}\)

For the Critical Theory, “the longing” expresses the indictment against history and nature; it expresses the prophetic critique against unjust society; it expresses the Socratic questioning of all presumptions and assumptions, all ideology that masks itself as “common sense,” and all ideological truth claims. Therefore the notion of utopia is inherently *contra mundum* (against the world as it exists) without being “anti-world,” as the possibility of *another world* (way-of-being-in-the-world) was certainly imaginable by the Frankfurt School.\(^{30}\)

They saw, with the Bourgeois Enlightenment, that religion became more positivistic, privatized, and atomized; it was pushed further into a dark closet of personal experiences, kept out of the public sphere, and depleted of its dialectics. It was thoroughly castrated of all its potential for substantive social critique. The predominant use that the ruling classes had for religion was as a “contingency management experience system,” a system to restores equilibrium to political economy through the calming and soothing “opiate” religion, for the benefit of stabilizing civil society and or nation-state within any given historical catastrophe.\(^{31}\)

Religion’s positive injunctions concerning life in this finite world – such as Apostle Paul’s encouragement to obey all legitimate authority,\(^ {32}\) suffer peacefully while waiting for the coming of the Messiah, and the ascetic abandonment of the prophetic for a mystical retreat into oneself, were functionalized by the Bourgeois for their own benefit, separating religious critique from the state and economy. However, the hypocrisy of the situation was apparent, as the Bourgeoisie expressed no sincere belief in such unscientific, irrational, and obscure metaphysics, but nevertheless found it a useful tool for the control and exploitation of the

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\(^{30}\) Despite their lack of optimism, the Frankfurt School scholars remained imprisoned in hope about future human relations. They did not retreat into Schopenhauerian pessimism, although they learned a lot from his philosophy.


\(^{32}\) “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” (Rom. 13:1–2).
The religious worldview and life-world were soon replaced by a new social ethos in which the market and exchange society became the dominate mode of public existence, while religion, and its prophetic indictment of society, stayed a private affair between the divine and the individual, not to be consulted on matters of national importance (at least not the prophetic side of religion). As the market-oriented way-of-being-in-the-world became socially dominate and civil society became the most powerful force within and on the life-world of the individual, its influence penetrating into the family and state, religiously mandated or inspired social tendencies toward rituals, theologies, morals, ethics, and institutions had to be made docile and complacent, and thus non-prophetic and uncritical of civil society. The Bourgeois ruling class, although personally in contempt of religion, especially its leftist prophetic core and its rightwing obscurantism, allowed for its continual existence in society albeit in the form of “positive religion.” This was especially true in the United States where the separation of church and state allowed for an abundance of religious life; religion became democratized and commodified, which also fractured and privatized it, robbing it of its collective social power. However, what remained was religiosity in its most status-quo affirming positive form, which reifies and affirms the existing class structure, unjust economic conditions, inhuman imbalance of wealth and power, environment catastrophes, and the systematic subjugation and destruction of part of humanity for the benefit of another part of humanity. As such, Jesus and the Prophets were reconciled with the American economic ideology. The social nature of religion, that which would posit what the world ought to be based on the teachings of Jesus, Moses, Muhammad, etc., was de-emphasized for the quest for personal redemption and social-political-economic legitimation, as

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33 In the 20th century, the functionalization of religion was coupled by the functionalization of psychology. Positive religion legitimated the political-economy, and positive psychology, through the use of marketing and public relations, helped maintain the conspicuous consumption that perpetuated it. Both religion and psychology, which at their core is the liberational intention, were both used to enslave in capitalist political-economy. The first critical study of the functionalization of psychology for the benefit of capitalist political-economy was done by Vance Packard (1957). Although some of the material is certainly dated, it is well worth the read as it sheds light on the genesis of consumer market manipulation that is still in use today. Also see: Adorno 1991.

34 Of course Western prophetic religion resurrected itself mainly among minorities and the dispossessed at various times during the 19th and 20th centuries, e.g., Dr Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Liberation Theologians in Central and South America, etc. Although these movements were generally successful in reforming the societies they were located in, they nevertheless did not radically transform them.
opposed to social renewal and transformation – the kingdom of God was sacrificed for this worldly empire. The social gospel was all but canceled as a civilizational imperative and was at best given occasional lip service and followed exclusively on an individual basis if at all. The Nietzschean “master morality” of competition, greed, and aggression, those qualities needed in civil society, became the new moral code, as capitalism’s core values extended into the state and family, which, according to the bourgeois philosopher Hegel, is disastrous for both.\textsuperscript{35} This “domestication” of the prophetic religion is precisely what Marx was critical of in his last of three definitions of religion, the “opiate of the masses,” i.e. a religion that normativizes unjust social relations and reconciles humanity to such injustice. For Marx, people should not be harmonized with social antagonisms, and it was ideological to claim that they already were reconciled under the present capitalist society – they were not, regardless of what their consciousness told them. Horkheimer and Adorno likewise identified that in the post-Bourgeois, Freudian, and Marxist enlightenment, positive religion was and is the dominant mode of religiosity in the West.\textsuperscript{36} Nevertheless, the critical-prophetic aspects were taken over, rescued, and often fulfilled by secular Marxist revolutionaries, who were generally honest about their opposition to positive religion, while appreciating the revolutionary aspects of religious thought and history, for example, Friedrich Engel’s and Ernst Bloch’s work on Thomas Münzer, the theological and political leader of the Peasant’s Revolt in 1524. These Marxists, including Marx himself, and subsequently the Frankfurt School, already engaged in an inversion of religious motifs, semantic and semiotic potentials, into secularized principles, values, etc., not motivated by their dislike for religion, but for their appreciation for its liberational qualities and the need to preserve and further develop those qualities (Horkheimer 1974:49–50). For these revolutionaries, it was painful to see that those who would proclaim to follow the “religion of love” could not see that the gospels’ ideals had been dialectically rescued and transformed into secular “solidarity.” It only confirmed their suspicion that Christianity had exiled itself far away from its historical critical-prophetic core, and had become fossilized in a positive form, especially post-Constantine and his Romanization of Christianity.\textsuperscript{37} Marxism was not only the self-critique of bourgeois liberalism, but for the Frankfurt School it was also the self-critique of Judaism and Christianity.

\textsuperscript{35} See: Hegel 2010.
\textsuperscript{36} See: Horkheimer and Adorno 1986.
Because positive religion affirms the status quo and therefore its unjust conditions, utopia, as the sum of all negations of injustice and imperfections in society, stands in complete contrast. There is no place for a positive religion in utopia, for if utopia where to be actualized, there would be a lack of injustice for positive religion to affirm. As such, positive religion is the ideology that stands in perpetual opposition to negative utopian thought, and as such, utopian thought will continue to be the enemy of the conventional religious believer as nearly all attempt to build a secular-utopian society have rejected by the traditional believer. The possibility of a historical utopia, sadly for the Frankfurt School, is not commonly accepted by the traditional believer who will continue to suffer within alternative futures No. 1 and No. 2 – and thus, as Löwenthal says, it is in sadness that utopia was abandoned.

No Theocracy? But Who’s Behind the Puppet?

In Walter Benjamin’s (1978:312) brief essay “Theologico-Political Fragment,” he addresses the temptation for humanity to confer upon themselves the power of the Messiah when he states,

Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this reason nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic. Therefore the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal. From the standpoint of history it is not the goal, but the end. Therefore the order of the profane cannot be built up on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and therefore theocracy has no political, but only a religious meaning…The order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness.

For Benjamin, the Messiah represents the total end of history, the messianic jetztzeit (now-time) that stops the clock of history; the total consummation of all that has gone before and the redemption of the suffering and those who have suffered.38 It is the messianic breakthrough into history that ushers in a society that is at the present time, and with the present language, unable to be articulated. For Benjamin, it is not a possibility for humanity to construct a society that fully embodies that which the messianic intervention would

establish. However, Benjamin, like Adorno, although leaving a positive vision of a utopian existence unannounced, does leave us with a small criteria, one that can be used to guide the building of the best society that man can build, i.e. that it should rest on the foundation of mankind's happiness. Without getting into the particulars of what each individuals' happiness is, because some surely garnish pleasure from cruelty, exploitation, and oppression, and that is not what Benjamin is proposing, we should understand Benjamin to be saying that such a society should direct itself towards justice, compassion, equality, solidarity, and peace; i.e. the succession of man's domination over man, domination over nature, and his self-destructive ways. If such a society could be created, it would produce the conditions for which every individual could fulfill themselves and their talents within the bounds of justice, yet it would not seek legitimacy from any notion of the divine. Needless to say, if such a society was brought about by human activity, as flawed as it would be, Benjamin and the rest of Frankfurt School would understand this to be the end of bourgeois society and capitalism, as the values of such are anathema to the values of a society rooted in happiness via the incarceration and eventual abolishment of injustice, violence, and needless suffering. For Benjamin, the point is not to reject the prophetic values, principles, and goals of a messianic theocracy, but to secularize those prophetic tendencies into a secular society that can be endorsed by the Messiah if and when he ever enters into history. If there is a vague image of the utopian potential within the corpus of the Frankfurt School, it is the secularized prophetic theocratic society; the society that is explicitly governed by the values of historical materialism (the puppet), but are tacitly rooted within the ugly little dwarf (prophetic theology). Furthermore, if Ernst Bloch is correct in his understanding that the only true believer is the atheist, because unlike the theist, his absence of faith leaves the divine unarticulated and therefore secure in its complete otherness, then we can say, in light of Benjamin's ban on theocracy, that a just society, absent the intervention of the Messiah, could only be brought about by an a-theocratic state and society, as it would be the society that does not make a mockery out of the divine by rooting its existence in it, which would inevitably bend and distort the divine towards its own earthly ends, or by claiming that it is doing the work of the Messiah, which, according to Benjamin, is the end of history, not a movement within it. For the Frankfurt School, without the Messiah, only the secular state and society can adequately address the needs of humanity, by allowing those prophetic values and principles from prophetic religion to migrate into legislation and culture; any legitimation appeal to the divine would render the divine less-than-divine, and utopia as less-than-utopian.
In the case of the Frankfurt School's refusal to articulate a positive vision of a utopian society, it is not that they lack the ability to intellectually construct what a blissful existence of full reconciliation, absolute justice, and non-possessive love would appear to be concretely, but they leave that to the silence of the messianic. They refuse to fully articulate what ought to be the case in the positive, a comprehensive and concrete vision of a utopian society, for no other reason other than their commitment to the radicalized 2nd commandment of the Decalogue – the ban on any image of the divine, but instead root their critique in the double negativity of the bilderverbot, which does not allow the construction of a false idol, nor a kingdom of God on earth. Yet, this radicalization extends from theology into political-economy, where what is currently wrong with a globalized neo-liberal world is clear to all those who want to see, as it pushes society into ever increasing social antagonisms, advanced technological and administered control of humans, perpetual wars on mankind and nature, loss of existential meaning, religion castrated of its prophetic potential, dominance of instrumental rationality, and the threat of global Auschwitz through a nuclear *toten krieg*. For the Frankfurt School, the prophetic and anti-idol essence of the bilderverbot is the most important conception of Abrahamic religion; it is the very negativity of the bilderverbot, its refusal to comply with the existing coordinates of the world, which allows religion to remain critical. Furthermore, as we have shown, the theological negativity (Benjamin's hunchback) also animates the notion of utopia, the “unarticulated no-place,” which, for the Critical Theory of Religion, needs to be preserved, augmented, and deployed in a dialectical critique of all that is; the triumph of positive religion, the eternal enemy of utopia, is the assassination of the philosophical grand inquisitor in the advance of a non-prophetic, neo-liberal globalized society of hopelessness, despair, and suffering. In sadness the Frankfurt School may retreat, but it must not forget the new categorical imperative that was imposed on us by Hitler, that they (we) are to “arrange their (our) thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen” (Adorno 1999:365).

39 No man is more deaf than the one who will not hear.