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THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL ON RELIGION

A review of Eduardo Mendieta, (ed.). *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004. 396 pp. + index. \$95.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-415-96697-3.

AT LAST, EDUARDO MENDIETA HAS GIFTED US with the much-needed collection: writings from members and associates of the Frankfurt School of German Marxism on religion, theology, and related themes. Entries include texts by Ernst Bloch—never actually part of the School but indisputably influential on the formation of Critical Theory and largely responsible for the depth of its engagement with religion— along with others by prominent members like Erich Fromm, Leo Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Johann Baptist Metz, and Jürgen Habermas (among others). In other words: it's all here. What's more, this anthology comes on the heels of Mendieta other great contribution and serves as an ideal companion to it: *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity* (2001), a collection of essays by Habermas which proves extremely informative and insightful even for the non-Habermasians among us. Readers should also know that *The Frankfurt School on Religion* was the product of some degree of collaboration with Habermas and Martin Jay, who know these histories and many of the authors better than anyone, as well as some of the brightest minds of today on the religion-Frankfurt School intersection, e.g., Hent de Vries and David Kaufmann.

This volume leaves no question about the fact that “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.”¹ Some of these writers functioned within an explicitly theological vein, albeit (as Mendieta calls it in a description the awkwardness of which is entirely appropriate) an “atheistic negative theology” rather than the more

¹ Eduardo Mendieta, “Religion as Critique: Theology as Social Critique and Enlightened Reason” introduction to *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1.

traditional kind. Others wrote primarily as social philosophers, sociologists, cultural critics and political theorists, approaching religion from a much more historical-analytic perspective. One of the great achievements of the collection is that it goes far in illustrating the sheer heterogeneity of relationships to the subject of religion that we see among the various members of the Frankfurt School, and in some cases within the texts of single authors. That said, Mendieta's choice of selection and his commentary in the introductory essay attempt, in ways I shall discuss, to consolidate some general features, interventions, and tensions that seem to characterize the Frankfurt School's engagement with religion as both an *object* and a *mode* of critique.

A word about the selection itself: It is an abominable labor to make choices like this, and one can only criticize the omissions having acknowledged that the editorial task is inevitably subject to restrictions of space, availability, and so forth. With that in mind, one wonders why something by Georg Lukács was not included, and why the entries by Walter Benjamin, who is one of the best known cases of the School's quasi-religious tendencies, are limited to three rather fragmentary pieces ("Capitalism as Religion," 3 pages; "Theological-Political Fragment," 2 pages; and "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 9 pages, barely). One is pleased to find that the Adorno section includes excerpts from his first but little known book on Kierkegaard (the product of a *Habilitation* under Paul Tillich), as well as from *Negative Dialectics*, and the illuminating "Reason and Revelation." But might not the correspondences between Benjamin and Adorno over the former's uses of "redemptive" themes (which Adorno wrote positively about with respect to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, while questioning it with respect to other works-in-progress, such as the disputed "Work of Art" and "Baudelaire" essays) have supplied a crucial window into the complexity of the School's debates about the nature of the relationship it would have to certain theological models of social critique? Also, there are less obvious but far more interesting and revealing occasions on which Adorno engaged the topic of religion, such as "Notes on Kafka" in which he disputes a theological reading of Kafka by explicating the way Kafka himself used religious motifs to criticize theology.

And finally, Marcuse's "Philosophy and Critical Theory" in *Negations*, with its extensive defense of "phantasy" as a motive force in social critique, seems to be a major missed opportunity, and it raises what is for me a more compelling kind of question (than, "why not *this* essay on religion?"). That is to say, one of the risks that has been run by this volume is that readers will get the impression that the Frankfurt School's relationship to "religion" can be summoned and exhibited in a handful of "religion essays," when in fact, as Mendieta does seem to agree in the introduction, it is entirely misleading to suggest that religion was simply one

among a list of pet topics for these authors. There are two points to be made here. One is that the origins of Critical Theory in Hegel on one hand and radical Jewish messianism on the other make it virtually impossible to say when they are *not* somehow enmeshed with religious themes; the centrality of “negativity” to their work is the prime example. The second point is that a collection such as this forces one to impose boundaries on the domain of “religion” that are frankly simplistic. Marcuse’s “phantasy” essay is an example of writing that to my memory never invokes the term religion but deals squarely with the problem of ideology in the Marxist tradition, which is inextricable from the problem of religion in that tradition. Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” may not have seemed an obvious choice, but it cannot go unsaid that it played a major role in Derrida’s “religious turn” in the 1990s, which, like it or not, provided much of the interest in the very scene of intellectual history that *The Frankfurt School on Religion* explores (i.e., a relation of social theory to religion beyond traditional ideology critique). What this book should provoke, then, is not merely a discussion about how there is an awful lot of interest in “religion” within the Frankfurt School, but also one having to do with the variety of levels on which one can engage the subject of religion, both of which is evident in this volume’s selections *and* in its omissions.

Apart from the aforementioned concerns about the selections, it would be unprofitable to attempt to say too much about the content of those selections, which run a hair short of 400 pages. Readers should buy the book and see for themselves. On the other hand, the other aspect of this volume that warrants discussion is Mendieta’s lucid and well-informed introduction. It is here that Mendieta takes advantage of a powerful opportunity to provide readers with a heuristic perspective with which to assimilate the plurality of the texts in the volume. “Religion as Critique” (the title of the introduction) is Martin Jay’s *The Dialectical Imagination* and Wiggershaus’ *The Frankfurt School* in seven pages (this is the section titled “Critical Theory”), plus a few more pages that make suggestions about the specifically religious and theological elements of the School (the section titled “Religion as Critique”). Following a very brief sketch of the origins of the Institute for Social Research, which we now call the Frankfurt School, the section “Critical Theory” informs readers about the basics of the Frankfurt School’s research interests and methods. Mendieta rightly traces part of the prehistory of contemporary “Cultural Studies” (a British based project dating from the 1960s) to Critical Theory’s early interest in the study and theory of culture, especially “mass culture” (dating from the 1920s and 30s).

The significant thing about their work was that, as Marxists, they thought it worthwhile to examine not just economics and history but radio, TV, cinema, literature, and the rising commodity culture. And in most cases those

examinations were characterized by a dialectic: on one hand they studied culture as a clue “in the processes of the psychology of assimilation and resignation that undermined the revolutionary fervor of the working classes in industrialized nations”²; on the other hand, they studied them in order to “understand those products that both mediated and gave expression to yearning and hopes not exhausted and totally commodified by the culture industry.”³ Aesthetics, in other words, was a central topic throughout the Frankfurt School, and much of the debate over culture (high and low, autonomous and commodified, etc.) revolved around the question of whether advanced capitalism’s colonization of art and culture was a threat to one of the last bastions of autonomous experience, or whether the idea of autonomy was becoming archaic and the revolution was now going to be televised and marketed. This debate, carried on at its height of sophistication by people like Adorno and Benjamin, was at the heart of the crisis of the avant-garde at that time. Mendieta smartly comments on the way much of the Frankfurt School’s engagement with religion can be compared to, or perhaps read as a component of, its theories of art and culture: “like art and the products of mass culture, religion also becomes the site for the negotiation of critique, remembrance, and emancipatory projections.”⁴ What he means is that, as with the changing material production of culture at that time, the School’s attitude toward religion was generally ambivalent; cautious about religion’s susceptibility to totalitarian ends while curious about the role of religion and theology in providing a Horkheimian “record of wishes and wrongs.”⁵

The “Critical Theory” section of the introduction also supplies readers with important information about the methods and so forth of the School, such as its innovative inter-disciplinarity. It should not go unnoticed that we owe this concept in large part to the Frankfurt School. The program at which I performed graduate studies is one example of its impact: Santa Cruz’s History of Consciousness program, where former students of Adorno and Marcuse teach, consciously patterns itself after their model of interdisciplinary social inquiry. And just as History of Consciousness continues to be organized around an interactive nucleus of, among other things, Marxism, psychoanalysis, sex and gender studies, philosophy of science, and Continental sources of theoretical input (post-structuralism, for example), the Frankfurt School, Mendieta notes, marked the confluence of a genealogical analysis of Marxism in radical

² Mendieta, *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, 2.

³ Mendieta, *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, 3.

⁴ Mendieta, *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, 8.

⁵ Max Horkheimer once summarized Marx’s attitude toward religion when he wrote that “the concept of God was for a long time the place where the idea was kept alive that there are norms besides those to which nature and society give expression ... religion is the record of the wishes, desires, and accusations of countless generations”. See “Thoughts on Religion” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, (New York: Continuum, 1995), 129.

Enlightenment thought, Hegel and German idealism, social-psychological engagements with Freudianism, science studies (or the role of technology in late modernism), the politics of sex and pleasure, and aesthetics.

“Religion as Critique,” the second section of the introduction, comments on the relationship of the Frankfurt School to religion and theology in particular. Here, one of Mendieta’s initial points is that religion was for many members of the School what philosophy was for Adorno, namely, something Marx disparaged and predicted would become irrelevant when the world was transformed by communism. Given however that “the moment of its realization was missed,” and the world did not (to borrow Hegel’s phrase) “become rational,” both religion and philosophy live on⁶. In other words, we live in a world that according to those with Marxian predispositions operates on the basis of reificatory and fetishistic disavows, where freedom (which for Hegel was reason’s “end” or goal) is repressed by mechanisms and systems that make the dark or hidden irrationality inherent to Enlightenment pervasive throughout the experience of our lives. Thus religion, paradoxically, provides a kind of lexicon for the dream-life of modernity: it expresses what the Texan in me can only call a “hankering” for transcendence in a social situation that reduces the life-world to pure immanence. This is not some “return to religion” because modernity is so bad; instead, “theology is reason in search of itself.”⁷

Mendieta warns the giddy theological reader that the form of “theology” one encounters in the Frankfurt School is never positive, confessional, or fideistic, but rather one that begins with the absence of God, a “negative theology” for which “God is gone” is a kind of trope for the false Enlightenment promises of progress that have proven, according to Benjamin’s well-rehearsed analogy, to have taken the form instead of a storm of catastrophe. Suffering persists, and “theology” simply counteracts the tendency for modern ideological systems to naturalize suffering by registering the conviction that suffering should not be, that things might be otherwise. Here, Mendieta might have done well to cite Adorno’s remark in *Negative Dialectics* that “at its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology,” because materialism (according to the view of it that Horkheimer impressed upon Adorno) consists not of a mechanical account of the determination of things by matter, but of the urge to bring physical suffering to an end; “its great desire,” Adorno continued, is “the resurrection of the flesh”⁸. Adorno’s point in this passage is that materialism rather than abstract idealism shares theology’s indictment of the world’s failure to reconcile physical reality

⁶ See Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Continuum: New York, 1973: 3.

⁷ Mendieta, *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, 10.

⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 207.

with the goal of suffering's end; idealism falsifies reality by positing that a reconciliation has already occurred.

Finally, I cannot agree more with Mendieta's summation that the Frankfurt School's critique of religion "is neither a sociology of religion, nor is it exactly a philosophy of religion, nor is it a mere theological approach. Its approach is neither functionalistic, nor phenomenological, nor existentialist ... This is what makes the Frankfurt School's approach to religion and theology particularly fertile and generative today."⁹ *The Frankfurt School on Religion* is, as such, an invaluable contribution to a field, Religious Studies, which suffers from a lack of methodological and theoretical imagination, repeating and reinforcing the phenomenon-function-ultimate concern deadlock.

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⁹ Mendieta, *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, 11.