

After Auschwitz: Islam in Europe

The mass immigration of Muslims into post-secular Europe has caused many to reflect on the state of religion in a society that once believed in the Christianity, moved through the Age of Enlightenment and now finds itself in a mixed society where religious and secular citizens cohabitate. This rapid change in demographics has been a destabilizing factor in a culture that sees itself as thoroughly secular, both politically and culturally.

There are two important factors that have contributed to the West's idea of itself as being without religion, which in turn make the transition to a post-secular society, in which the Muslim community is a dominant factor on the religious side, very difficult. The first can be found within the works of three philosophers, Freud, Nietzsche and Marx. The biological claim of Freud, that religion belongs to the infancy of the human species and that religion is an *interpretative* way of understanding humanity without possessing empirical truth, remains operative in many quarters of the secular society. Just as the natural sciences had already begun to do, Freud's psychological reductionism attempted to demonstrate that religion was a product to man's mind and/or biology, which furthered the separation of religion from metaphysical truth. Following this, I argue that the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who heralded the death of God and the metaphysical reality that was associated with it, plays an abiding factor. According to him, a life beyond good and evil, beyond the slave ethics of Christianity, would give rise to nihilism and the age of the *übermensch*, which came to fruition in the modern period with the ideologies of nationalism and fascism. Nihilism was the future of Europe, and with all of its inherent meaninglessness, nihilism is what Europe received. For many, Marx devastating critique of religion would hammer the last nail in its coffin, a coffin that his contemporary Feuerbach had already begun to build by demonstrating the anthropological genesis of God.

In light of the modern western world's move away from religion, the most traumatic event that has affected the overall worldview of European society originates from the horrific unfolding of fascism in Europe and the absolute destructiveness of Auschwitz. The post-secular society is a society in which most of the population find it impossible to seek solace or comfort in a divine being that allowed for the systematic destruction of the Jews, the mass murder of twenty-seven communists, and millions of western soldiers, without any attempt by such a divine being to intervene into history. Theodicy, in this

case, makes religion unintelligible for many, and therefore loses its place in the modern secular society. Following this catastrophe of the mid-twentieth century, many ask *how can Europe return to their Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox prayers after the barbarism of World War II?* If Adorno once believed *poetry* after Auschwitz was no longer possible, how then is *prayer*? Already recognizing the difficulty for Christians, we must ask: how can Jews return to their prayers after Auschwitz?

Like the biblical Job, many Jews still pray today precisely because the victims of fascism continued to pray despite the nonappearance of the divine in Auschwitz. This recalcitrant devotion to God after the god of history, religion, and theology is dead, and the hope for the Messiah, animated the late religio-philosophical work of the critical theorist Walter Benjamin, who found a way to rescue certain semantic and semiotic material from the depth of Judaism by cocooning it in historical materialism. His work, in the face of the “single catastrophe” that is history, points in a poignant direction that the Muslims of Europe may read as a way of rescuing Islam from the snares of the post-secular society. Can Muslims follow Walter Benjamin and translate their messianic, prophetic and revolutionary ideals, rooted in religion, into secular philosophy, and thus rescuing it from the onslaught of neo-pagan secular society, or will Islam share the same evaporative fate as Christianity?

Violence and the Post-Secular

According to the Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker, the abundance of violence that permeated the life of the pre-modern man has drastically subsided in the modern period.¹ With the advancement of civilization, which includes the rationalization of the lifeworld, the divorce of revelation from law, the separation of church and state, the advancement of human rights, international institutions of law, the creation of war crimes legislation, the integration of economies, etc., civilization has been able to create the conditions by which violence would no longer dictate the parameters of the lifeworld. Daily life, which was once permeated with a low-level of direct violence against the individual and the family, has been lessened to a major degree in the modern West, where nearly all forms of direct violence contravene positive law and most people live in relative safety. Yet when we look into the world-as-it-is today, we see an increasing amount of barbarity; whether it comes from western

1 Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Viking, 2011.

countries' continual attacks on smaller, weaker, and darker skinned nations, especially when they fail to submit to the conditions of global capitalism, or when Muslim extremists attack innocent civilians both in the *dar-al-Islam* or in the West, the increasing callousness towards human life leaves many in a state of fearful paralysis, unable to comprehend the descent into the chaos of violence, hatred, and death-friendliness. In order to understand the barbarity that continues within the relatively peaceful modern world, and especially the antagonism between the West and the Muslim world, we have to return to the beginning of modernity and the emergence of the modern state. In it lies the key to understanding the pathology of post-modern violence which plagues not only the West but the Islamic world as well. This violence, as often cited, culminated in the systematic destruction of the Jews of Europe: *die Endlösung der Judenfrage* (The Final Solution to the Jewish Question). This, I argue, has an important effect on the issue of Islam and Muslims in post-Holocaust Europe.

Violence and the State

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes pointed out in his book *Leviathan* the civilizing affect that a maturing and increasingly differentiated culture can have on a society. In order to prove his basic thesis, the necessity of the state, he engages in a thought experiment that wipes away the existence of a governing power thus leaving man in an anomic *state of nature*. He conceives of this ungoverned situation in his famous paragraph on the 'incommodities of such a war.' He states,

In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and, which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.²

Without the state, Hobbes theorized that man would descend into chaos and war. *Bellum omnium contra omnes* (war of all against all) was the natural

² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Parts I and II*, ed. Herbert W. Schneider (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1958), 107.

outcome of such an anomic condition, as the absolute right to everything and anything is only limited by one's ability to take it from another by force and violence. But Hobbes does not stop at calling only direct violence "war," but rather extends the conditions of war into the lifeworld, the everydayness of being – the common disposition within which humanity would live. He writes,

Hereby it is manifest that, during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war, and such a war as is of every man against every man. For war consists not in battle only, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known; and therefore the notion of *time* is to be considered in the nature of foul weather lies not in a shower or two of rain but in an inclination thereto of many days together, so the nature of war consists not in actual fighting but in the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary. All other time is peace.³

Contemporary fascination with such an imaged state can be witnessed in the popularity of television shows and movies that take place within a situation of complete civilizational collapse, such as *The Walking Dead*, *The Colony*, *The Road* and *The Book of Eli*. The post-apocalyptic situation is the absolutization of the aristocratic law of nature, where the strongest, most clever, and most prepared, and often times most ruthless and merciless individuals, survive the *totalen krieg* (total war) of all against all due to their unencumbered ability to do whatever it takes to survive, including the mass killing of others. Unlike others, Hobbes did not believe the situation of complete lawlessness would lead to a state of anarcho-bliss, that the masses would bind together in an altruistic solidarity, but would rather use the situation to their own personal benefit to the extent that they could – a seriously pessimistic idea about human nature indeed, but one that seems to be fairly accurate so far if we examine history. Today, the popularity of the shows that take place within such anomic situations betrays the unspoken yet perverse desire to return to such a state, thus giving credence to Freud's position that man harbors a deep resentment towards the normative imperatives of civilization – the social "superego" that limits our instincts, our freedoms, our natural inclinations towards aggression and the desire to impose our will on others.

Nevertheless, the lawlessness of a life within a context of continual fear and anxiety about one's survival would penetrate even into the most religious of

³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 106–107.

individuals. Their altruistic concern for the other would often surrender to suspicion about everyone that they are unfamiliar with for fear of the threat they may pose. In such a society the masses become *totally atomized* – in a state of absolute concern for oneself. This is similar to the ideal state idolized by Ayn Rand and other advocates of hyper-individualization (albeit within the content of modernity with a modern state and police force). An atmosphere of paranoia, which would be most appropriate for survival, would drown any religious sense of solidarity with victims, as one's primary concern is making sure that they and their family are not the next victims. Social bonds, the adhesive that binds communities together in common projects and concerns, dissolves before the power of individualistic survival: the absolute reduction of man to his most basic animality.

In order to remedy this situation, Hobbes believes that society enters into social contracts, which is the process by which every individual relinquishes some "natural rights" that they would otherwise have within the state of nature, and by relinquishing those rights they gain certain guarantees to protection, safety, security, and the rule of law. This creates a situation where *absolute* rights are limited, whereas *political* rights – rooted in the social contract – create a space for substantive and subjective freedom. For Hobbes, one cannot live a human life in an absolute state of freedom, as each person's freedom to engage in behavior harmful to others is a concrete eclipse of another's freedoms to exist without such impingement. The political boundaries of subjective freedom have to be positively constructed as to allow for the free development of society unencumbered by the absolute violence of nature – which destroys subjective freedom as much as it allows for objective freedom.

In modern society we do not live in a complete lawless situation, but are rather governed by a minimum level of law, social contracts, and reciprocal norms.⁴ The growing complexity of culture and civilization, especially in the realm of law and government, has continued to sublimate the instinctual drives that would otherwise be necessarily utilized to survive within the state of nature. Marx, following a Rousseau-like line of thought, takes this line of argument a step further. He optimistically believed that if we could overcome the class structure, we could not only overcome our instinctual inclinations towards violence and destruction, but we could also create a utopic society of equality. Marx posits a vision of a post-capitalist society that is classless and stateless, with common ownership of the means of production – a society

4 There are instances of complete breakdown of otherwise universal governing norms. The systematic destruction of Europe's unwanted, i.e. Jews, homosexuals, communists, etc., during WWII, opened up the floodgates to the most perverse spectacles of violence.

beyond the realm of necessity – where each gives according to their abilities and receives according to their needs.⁵ This just society is a free association of individuals that expresses solidarity with all, have been liberated from labor exploitation, and have overcome the problem of alienation. Marx theorized that the revolutionary working class, itself a product of, and response to, the Bourgeoisie, would serve as the agent of historical change – transforming a society that is rooted in exploitation, injustice, imperialism, and the private accumulation of collective surplus value, into one that would be governed by the interests of the universal. Nevertheless, Marx's vision of the just society, which ends the exploitation of one part of humanity by another, is not without criticism. From a Freudian psychological analysis, Marx's vision of a just society may be predicated upon an overly optimistic understanding of human nature that cannot be reconciled with Freud's idea of the death-drive (*Todestrieb*), often referred to as the *Thanatos* (θάνατος).⁶ Taken from the *daemon* of death in Greek mythology, the drive towards death within mankind was seen by Freud to be a major impediment to the peaceful and utopic dreams of social philosophers, artists, and religious believers. Utopia would always be stunted by man's inner-daemon.

Freud's Unbehagen mit Marx

To say the least, Freud is pessimistic about the chances for the kind of civilization that Marx wishes to bring about. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud proposes a theory that attempts to explain the continual aggressiveness and destructiveness that he sees throughout history. This instinct towards death directly contravenes his prior belief in man only having an instinctual will to life (*Eros*), a realization that he was initially unwilling to accept. He wrote, 'I remember my own defensive attitude when the idea of an instinct of destruction first emerged in psycho-analytic literature, and how long it took before I became receptive to it.'⁷ Nevertheless, his study of history and his clinical work with neurotics compelled Freud to adopt the idea that 'the inclination to

5 Some scholars of Marx, especially Liberation Theologians, believe Marx's notion of a society that gives according to needs and receives according to abilities is mirrored after the early Christian community, as described in the book of Acts 4:32–35.

6 Freud did not use the word *Thanatos* to describe the death instinct, but later Freudians titled it as such.

7 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1962), 67.

aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man...⁸ For Freud, man's tendency to destroy that which he has built, his continual antagonistic attitude and behavior towards others is rooted not necessarily in socially constructed edifices of civilization, i.e. class antagonisms, religious antagonisms, national antagonisms, as phenomenon like these are just the manifestations of a more primal cause. For Freud, the drive towards death and destruction is an instinct that is *within* mankind regardless of their social, political, and economic situation (although some social conditions are more conducive for their manifestation). Freudian theory rejects the idea that if only we had the proper education, laws, rituals, philosophy, social construction, etc., mankind could invent the *totally reconciled society* – a society where aggression, war, competition, etc., would cease to be part of man's existence. Man's inherent instinct towards death (Thanatos), is co-determinate with his inherent instinct towards life, and this inclination for aggressiveness is the 'greatest impediment to civilization' in Freud's view.⁹ Even if we could resolve the problem of alienation, as articulated in Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in which man is estranged from other men, Freud believes man would remain hostile to others due to his instinctual drives, and no amount of social changes could empty man of such a disposition.¹⁰ One is a social construction created *within* history, which can be transcended. The other is nature and is a permanent aspect of mankind's psyche.¹¹

Freud defines the "death drive" as the particular instinct that's 'aim is to lead what is living into an inorganic state,' to return the animated to the inanimate.¹² This internal drive often operates tacitly within the organism in routine daily life but manifests itself in destruction and aggression when it's directed outward. Although Freud believed that the death instinct could in some cases be put in the service of Eros – destroying things as not to destroy the self (eating, sexual activity, etc.) – it nevertheless opposes the work of Eros most vehemently in the world. He believed that 'civilization is a process in the service of Eros,' that civilization 'combine[s] single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Karl Marx and Friederich Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, trans. Martin Milligan (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), 78.

11 The idea that man's nature is also a product of history and therefore can be modified via historical changes, thus disproving the idea of man's "fixed" nature, is not an issue Freud addresses adequately.

12 Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: w.w. Norton & Co., 1989), 18; Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 65–66.

unity of mankind.¹³ If Eros is meant to bring together that which is disparate, the death instinct's work is to do the opposite – it opposes all forms of solidarity. It is the 'hostility of each against all and of all against each,' which inhibits the 'programme of civilization.'¹⁴ Marx, who has a more pacific view of human nature (when it's not distorted by the conditions of capitalism), still believes man is capable of wanton destructiveness, especially when it is pressed into the service of the Bourgeoisie, either through war, nationalism, imperialism, or the reproduction of capitalist economy. For example, capitalism continuously falls into crises situations, where there is an 'enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces' a 'conquest of new markets,' and a 'more thorough exploitation of the old one.'¹⁵ This continuous destruction of the status quo in favor of an ever expansion of the capitalist production keeps man's destructive capacities employed as it destroys the old to usher in the new for the increasing benefit of the few. Where Freud saw the expansion of civilization, even within a Bourgeois society, as being in service to Eros, Marx saw it in service of the ruling class.

Marx's underdeveloped psychological analysis of the working class doesn't take into account the psychological insights that were later discovered by Freud's theory of Eros and Thanatos. His more optimistic attitude towards the realization of a society in which the interests of the Proletariat would determine the existence of social norms, laws, etc., didn't calculate into the overall picture in the instinctual drive towards aggression and destructiveness. Even if there was an ultimate triumph of the working class over the Bourgeoisie, even if the dictatorship of the Proletariat triumphed and brought about a transition from their rule to communism, even if social conditions were most optimal for social solidarity, the innermost drives of the human mind – the division between the "world-dominating" instincts of Eros and Thanatos – would continue to ensure that antagonisms, aggression and violence, would plague humanity. For Marx, the problem is not *solely* outside of the mind, as the social consciousness of the people has to be reformed in light of critical analysis, ideology critique, etc., it is however *primarily* outside of the mind – the material world – where the change has to be made most radically. Yet for Freud, it is the

13 It's telling that Freud did not include "class" as a unity that organically came from civilization. The ones he mentioned in this passage are all *libidinal unities*, and not a unity solely understood as being bound together by a particular "interest" such as class. This maybe a tacit critique of Marx's notion of *class unity* – that it lacks the libidinal adhesive that is characteristic of racial, national, and familial unity.

14 Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 69.

15 Marx and Engels, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts*, 215.

inner-world – the ‘struggle between Eros and Death’ – that continues to drive the ‘evolution of civilization.’¹⁶ Any change to the material world that does not take into account man’s conflicting instincts will suffer from a relatively benign surface-transformation and will not get to the root of the problem – humanity’s own inherent psychological antagonisms. If Marx’s vision of a communist society is true – as being the society most conducive to the actualization of the human potentials – then an adequate way of sublimating the Thanatos will have to be major part of the structure of society; for if it fails to adequately discover ways of channeling such instinctual aggression, then such a ‘civilized society’ will be ‘perpetually threatened with disintegration’ just as every other society has been before it.¹⁷

In Marxist theory, class solidarity is the adhesive that binds individuals together under the banner of their common interests. Yet Freud is skeptical as to whether or not common interests, or as he describes them ‘reasonable interests,’ are strong enough to resist the power of instinctual passions.¹⁸ The highest ideals of mankind, such as *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*, are all supreme values to which mankind can aspire, but too often prove to be based on weak intellectual foundations when opposed by the instinctual passions. Following Rousseau, Marx’s assumption that mankind is ‘wholly good and well-disposed to his neighbor,’ combined with the idea that private property had ‘corrupted his [mankind’s] nature,’ Freud also finds to be an ‘untenable illusion.’¹⁹ Freud sees a mistake in Marx’s anthropology. He says,

Aggressiveness was not created by property. It reigned almost without limit in primitive times, when property was still very scanty... it forms the basis of every relation of affection and love among people... If we do away with personal rights over material wealth, there still remains prerogative in the field of sexual relationships, which is bound to become the source of the strongest dislike and the most violent hostility among men who in other respects are on an equal footing.²⁰

Freud does not believe that the common ownership of means of production would lead to an existence free of hostility and aggression, as the most basic

16 Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 69.

17 *Ibid.*, 59.

18 *Ibid.*, 59.

19 *Ibid.*, 60; Marx and Engels, *Philosophic & Economic Manuscripts*, 209.

20 Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 60–61. It is doubtful Freud had studied Marx thoroughly but was instead familiar with certain Marxist tenets.

of human relationships, i.e. love, sex, marriage, and family, would inevitably serve as the conduit in which the death instinct makes its presence known. Neither would the abolishment of the traditional family (or the Bourgeois family as Marx understood it) have the desired effect of eliminating aggression.²¹ Wherever Marx's revolutionary changes would take society, Freud believed that the 'indestructible feature of human nature [would] follow it there' as well.²² Furthermore, similar to Hegel's analysis of war and the impossibility of Kant's notion of *Perpetual Peace*, Freud believes that it is possible to bind some together in a common subjectivity as long as there remains an "other" that serves as the object of negativity, i.e. it 'receives the manifestations of their aggressiveness.'²³ For Freud, peace among some unavoidably means aggression with others – the "other" has to be there to allow the expression of man's negativity via his death drive. If the "other" is not present, the death drive will turn on itself and become self-destructive. Yet Marx believes that resolving the class conflict *within* a nation would end the hostilities *between* nations, a view of humanity's future that Freud's analysis of the inherent destructiveness of the death drives would reject as overly optimistic as it doesn't account for man's inherent negativity toward the other.²⁴ In the end, the death instinct will find its subject, regardless of the type of society that is constructed. Therefore for Freud, it is doubtful if there can ever be 'an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' as long as human instincts remain the same.²⁵ Even within a fully realized communist society, with its liquidation of alienation, man's destructiveness will inevitably break through and sabotage the project of the fully reconciled future society.

Religion's role in the history of mankind's ability to sublimate their existing libidinous energies, including those of Eros and Thanatos, into something positive was questioned by the most radical of anti-religious thinkers: Friedrich Nietzsche. His ultimate verdict on religion was not a positive one; he did not believe it was a great accomplishment of religion that it sublimated and/or repressed man's natural tendencies towards aggression, competition, and violence, but rather a crime against mankind and his true human potentials. To actively confess a religion was already transgressing the true nature of man,

21 Ibid., 61; Marx and Engels, *Philosophic & Economic Manuscripts*, 226–227.

22 Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 61.

23 Ibid., 61. The 'other' for the Marxist, Freud says, is the Bourgeoisie. Yet he wonders what will happen when the Bourgeoisie is no longer in existence (Freud, 1962: 62). For certain, within his analysis, the Thanatos will find another 'other' to direct itself towards.

24 Marx and Engels, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts*, 228.

25 Ibid., 231.

to witness for such religion was to embody the evil that was inherent within religions that, for Nietzsche, denied the moral goodness of man's potential for heroism.

Witnessing and Professing in a Nietzschean Age of Nihilism

In the revolutionary year of 1848, Karl Marx and Friederich Engels published their *Manifesto of the Communist Party* that began by heralding an ominous development: 'a spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exercise this spectre: Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies.'²⁶ For Marx and Engels, the dialectics of class struggle had finally brought to the foreground of history the revolutionary potentials of the industrial working class. History was on the verge of a new epoch. Just as slaveholders were once overthrown; just as the feudal lords were once overthrown, now the Bourgeoisie would soon be overthrown. Communism, predicated on the radical use of reason and dedicated to the notion of equality, would eradicate man's domination over man. However, another herald was soon to be on the horizon, and his insights into the nature of history and man's potentials would have a far more lasting effect in the West than Marx's communism.

Friedrich Nietzsche instinctively, intuitively, and philosophically witnessed the coming crisis of faith in Europe. Heralding it as the 'death of God' and the 'triumph of nihilism,' he saw that the impossibility of maintaining an authentic commitment to religion and traditional metaphysics, and therefore the morality that was historically legitimated by such religion and metaphysics, was becoming impossible to maintain. The advancement of modern epistemology, science, autonomous reason, the inability of religions to adequately address the questions of theodicy, unconditional meaning, and provide real consolation in the face of human suffering, all pointed to the fact that the West had moved into an age on nihilism. Like Marx's conviction that the historical inevitability of communism was soon to come, Nietzsche believed that nihilism was as equally the inevitable state of modern man. He writes,

... why is nihilism inevitable now? Because the very values current amongst us today will arrive at their logical conclusion in Nihilism – because Nihilism is the only possible outcome of our greatest values and

26 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 473.

ideals – because we must first experience Nihilism before we can realize what the actual worth of these ‘values’ was... Sooner or later we shall be in need of *new values*.²⁷

For Nietzsche, man’s traditional values, rooted in Judeo-Christian metaphysics, had been the guiding moral values within the West for nearly two thousand years. So strongly were those values held, that they once overthrew mankind’s most natural values, the master morality of those who *overcome* their personal limitations, their social contexts, and achieve greatness in-and-of-themselves. Christian morality, with its worship of the poor, the broken, the weak, and the decadent, by sheer power of numbers, imposed on the strong their morality; that which was condemnable in nature was elevated to godliness, to virtue. Nietzsche thought these altruistic values to be a perversion of man’s potential for greatness, for heroism, and for the will to power. Although the normal functioning of society failed miserably to embodying such “degenerate” values, and rather pursued the life of power, pleasure, greed, and gluttony, the moral values of Christianity were maintained as *truth*, deserving of admiration, and eternally good, a status that was rarely questioned since the establishment of Christianity in the West.

Because these values were so entrenched within the western psyche, within its civilizational superego, because they were held to be the supreme good by nearly all peoples, the clash against the scientific, rational, and secular values that was occurring during Nietzsche’s lifetime was painful and deeply traumatizing. The trauma of this crisis of faith, brought by the accusations against religion from science, philosophy, and natural history, was increased by the depth of the commitment to those Christian values, and therefore he states that ‘Nihilism harbours in the heart of Christian morals’ itself.²⁸ They were considered eternally true even if the civilization failed to realize them. Now, the whole worldview that was built upon those metaphysical truths was crashing under the weight of its inability to defend its claims against modern knowledge. ‘Nihilism is at our door’ Nietzsche wrote, because the downfall of Christian morality left mankind ontologically adrift, detached from any firm metaphysical moorings and unable to find meaning within a world that was reduced only to physical matter and human will.²⁹ Where once Christianity assigned meaning to the world, value to each and every individual life, and an eschatological

27 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (New York: The Barnes & Nobles Library of Essential Reading, 2006) xviii.

28 Ibid., 3.

29 Ibid., 3.

telos for which the individual could strive, such gifts of religion were no longer available to the contemporary individual, leaving them to themselves, alone and abandoned by the once meaningful and expansive otherness of God. The clash between the absolute necessity of such metaphysics – both psychologically and socially – and the *thief of modernity* which robbed mankind of such comfort and certainty, is the historical condition of the western man. It is that condition which brings about nihilism. Nietzsche states that,

The time is coming when we shall have to pay for having been *Christians* for two thousand years: we are losing the equilibrium which enables us to live – for a long while we shall not know in what direction we are traveling. We are hurling ourselves headlong into the *opposite* valuations, with that degree of energy which could only have been engendered in man by an *overvaluation* of himself.³⁰

In Nietzsche's posthumous book, *Will to Power*, he defines nihilism in various ways. He states that nihilism is (1) 'the absolute repudiation of worth, purpose, and desirability,' (2) 'a yearning for non-entity,' (3) 'that the highest values are losing their value... there is no answer to the question 'to what purpose,' (4) that 'life is absurd,' (5) that 'we have not the smallest right to assume the existence of transcendental objects or things in themselves,' and (6) 'Nihilism is therefore the coming into consciousness of the long waste of strength, the pain of 'futility,' uncertainty, the lack of opportunity to recover in some way, or to attain to a state of peace concerning anything.'³¹ To Nietzsche's keen mind, mankind is lost within himself, laboring only for himself, and confused about himself; he is without values, without meaning, without purpose, and therefore longs for a Buddhistic "nothingness" that would end his ontological misery. The connectedness of religion – that it provided mankind a feeling of *being-with* (both with God and others) – has been lost to a form of extreme atomization, isolation, and disconnectedness to the world. Man's "progress," his development of thought and technology, his advancement of a scientific and materialist form of being-in-the-world, drives man into a pathological condition, where purpose, unity and truth no longer remain valid – they are but meaningless verbiage in a meaningless world – a signifier that signifies nothing. Nietzsche realized, much like the religious fundamentalist today (at least since Luther), that the 'belief in the categories of reason is the cause of

30 Ibid., 15.

31 Ibid., 5–7.

Nihilism.³² Or, as Max Weber understood it, the rationalization of the world brings about the disenchantment of the world, wherein mankind no longer can find his place; he is a stranger, eternally hostile to the world around him as it has been demythologized and transformed into matter that lacks any form of moral consideration due to its ontological status that can no longer be experienced as having value in-and-of-itself. In such a world we come to realize that our most important desiderata, our highest values – unconditional meaning, unconditional love, hopefulness, and the certainty of truth – are only necessary illusions that exist for our own psychological wellbeing. But in realizing their non-existence – their lie – our knowledge undermines our being, our progress diminishes our capability for happiness, and we live a life *with* truth but *in* despair. We live in a *post-metaphysical world* where *becoming* leads to *nothing*. Reason cannot point us in the direction of the “totally other” and traditional metaphysics are no longer adequate to the psychological, social, historical, moral, and political-economic problems of the today. We are left alone on our global island: the world has become godless and God – if only as a postulant – is worldless.³³ ‘Now,’ Nietzsche says, ‘everything is false from the root, words and nothing but words, confused, feeble, or overstrained.’³⁴

According to Nietzsche, in the aftermath of losing a metaphysically justified existence, western man looked for replacement gods to fill the cipher for their once religious souls, to give consolation and to bandage the wounds that were inflicted.³⁵ The post-religious western society searched for authorities that would slay the chaos created by the descent into nothingness; that would pacify the ontological restlessness and would cancel the epistemological confusion created by the reality of meaninglessness. Instead of trying to

32 Ibid., 9.

33 As discussed before, this is an ontological condition that is understood in the West as being normative for the entire world. However, it is not the case that the Muslim world by and large has adopted such a nihilistic attitude towards religion or metaphysics. For most Muslims, the de-theologizing effects of the secularization process have not penetrated into the religious psyche of the believer. Islam has proven to be much more entrenched within the Muslim mind than Christianity was in Christendom, mainly, I believe, because the theological underpinnings of Islam were much more reasonable than in traditional Christianity. Additionally, Islam didn't have the same abuse by authorities – thus causing so much bloodshed – as it did in Europe. Europeans couldn't wait to abandon religion while Muslims are still holding on to it vigorously. In Europe, to leave religion behind was eventually to find a new and truer identity. For the Islamic world, the identity had to be found within Islam itself.

34 Ibid., 15.

35 Ibid., 12.

revitalize the necessary *illusions* of the past, western society deliberately settled for *delusions* (deliberately self-imposed illusions). The post-religious man was tempted by the new gods provided by racism, nationalism, consumerism, egoism (the deification of self via power, status, and wealth), and war. These false ideologies, these new consoling idolatrous deities, gave man an artificial sense of belonging, a new sense of identity, and a new sense of meaning. By losing oneself in the project of the big, the mass, the nation, the race, etc., the anxiety of existing in a world confronted by its own meaninglessness was alleviated and the individual gained a new sense of power – they were a part of something bigger than themselves, greater than their small existence, and they experienced themselves as being once again intrinsically full of worth. The isolation that came with the atomized society was momentarily anesthetized, as the big project absorbed the alienated into itself and transformed them into a congealed mass of power. The *fascis* blade, held together by the binding of individual rods, is a poignant symbol of the capability of these new gods to transcend the pain of severe individualism and loneliness. It brought together that which had previously disintegrated. By providing control, structure, and guidelines, they once again restored mankind to certain equilibrium; he knew his place within such a society and thus experienced himself as free within the confines of that role. Because the coordinates of his existence were clearly demarcated, he felt secure, having escaped the anxiety of rootlessness. Although the transcendence of isolation may sound like a net positive for the individual and society, we must, as critical religiologists, be keenly aware of the nature of the new god these projects were in service to. The gods of modernity, which were meant to slay the God of pre-modernity, failed to eradicate the values and principles anchored within the Abrahamic traditions, and the post-secular condition was the subsequent result. This clash of the modern gods and the pre-modern God of Abraham is at the core of the troubles within the post-secular conditions.

While Nietzsche himself advanced a *new* set of values, ones that embraced the *Dionysian* way-of-life – which emphasized embracing the will to life, the passions of human drama, and potential for overcoming – the rise of the *übermenschen* – he was also painfully aware that the advent of nihilism in the European context would lead those of lesser intellectual strength and fortitude to gravitate towards ideologies that he thought to be rooted within slave morality – the ethics of the *untermensch*. Either way, Nietzsche could already see from his late 19th century perch that the 20th century would be reduced to ashes via society's attempts to overcome nihilism. These instances were ultimately feeble (yet destructive) attempts to "escape from freedom," which was at the same time an escape from nihilism through the creation of nihilism.

In their desire to overcome the state of meaninglessness, rootlessness, insignificance, powerlessness, and disconnectedness – those conditions created by the “death of god” – modern man turned to various authoritarian systems – the new gods – that guaranteed man’s liberation from the anxiety of freedom via the suppression of his autonomy. They became united with the big project and in doing so liberated themselves from the burden of individualization and their conscience.

In Erich Fromm’s 1941 book *Escape from Freedom*, he identifies the ‘mechanisms of escape’ that are frequently found within modern man’s psyche when confronted with the pain of freedom.³⁶ Witness the social, economic, and political chaos that ensued between the two world wars in Germany; the diminishment of a proud and industrious people to the level of paupers, the humiliation of defeat and the oppressive insult of the Versailles Treaty, the sense that the divine had left them in the ditch of history, the feeling of hopelessness for the future, the witnessing of their children’s lives being wasted, and the resentment about those at the top of the social ladder living a good life while the rest scavenge for their daily bread. Although it is an extreme, such a situation, where the individual finds no sense of meaning, purpose, or prospects for the future, leads many to abandon their personal freedom for the rule of the authoritarian, for “creative destruction,” and for the newly formed identity of the congealed masses – who, by creative propaganda and conditioning, invest themselves into a larger project that they perceive conquers their sense of isolation and insignificance. Hitler provided the German people a way of regaining their honor, their integrity, and the respect they felt they had lost. In order to regain such qualities, the German population had to abandon their individuality, their autonomy, and their freedom, to which they gladly did. They joined a national project through which they received a new sense of purpose, a new sense of meaning, a new and powerful identity, a new “secondary bond” with the greater community, and a new sense of divine legitimation.³⁷

Within the context of the recent Muslim immigration to the West, we are witnessing a similar situation, albeit not one situated within the absolute destruction of war. Second generation Muslims, the sons and daughters of immigrants to Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, etc., have been raised within two cultural systems; first is the religio-moral system of the home and family, where religion and “home culture” governs the expectations of the individuals. This “home culture”

36 Erich Fromm. *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1994), 135–204.

37 *Ibid.*, 205–238.

determines the rights and responsibilities of the each family member, it teaches the individual how to live with others, to fulfill the traditional roles that the family expects of one, and inculcates a sense of belonging and an altruistic *geist* in regards to kin and religious community. The home culture is rooted in social norms that are still valid within a religious context; it is the result of both traditional cultural norms, stemming from Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Libya, and other Muslim countries, as well as Islam as it is practiced in the “home country.” In the formative period of the young Muslims life, during the process of *bildung* (moral formation), and familial acculturation, young Muslims are absorbing certain normative beliefs and practices that are deeply saturated with religious legitimation – they are good and correct because they represent the will and truth of the divine. Even if young Muslim do not become actively religious but rather enjoy the secular and often time morally questionable trappings of life in the West, the *belief* that such normative values and principles are true because they are from the divine rarely dissipates – they just happen to be “bad Muslims” at the time. Many Muslim parents, fearing they’ll lose their children to the trappings of secularity, work very hard to inculcate such traditional values in their children, believing it will be a strong defense against the *hedonism* (which is itself an inadequate answer to the state of nihilism) of modern life. If we understand this first home culture as being the dominant source of values within the most formative *bildung* years, then we can see how and why it becomes so traumatic later in life for Muslims in the West face Nietzsche’s nihilistic culture. Their pre-modern morality is in conflict with the modern world, yet simultaneously it is *of* the modern post-secular world and cannot totally retreat from it. Everything the home culture taught about good and evil, right and wrong, about the meaningfulness of the world, its purposivity and goodness, is confronted with a society that is full of crass consumerism, spiritlessness, relativism, atheistic idleness, drugs, extreme isolation and atomization, and the abandonment of religious truth for a spirit-crushing meaninglessness. The young believer sees the remnants of a meaningful world in the churches and cathedrals, but also witnesses that which was expressed by Nietzsche when he says ‘what are these churches now, if they are not the tombs and monuments of God?’³⁸ Yet, from the perspective of the West, what the individual is truly confronted with is *freedom* – the possibility of determining oneself outside of one’s heritage, culture, and historical baggage. This “freedom” to be that which what one determines oneself to be is an incomprehensible possibility for those who have been already pre-determined through a religiously constrictive *bildung*. It means that one has to

38 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 104.

consider the abandonment of the home culture for one that lacks theological legitimation – as it is conceived and constructed by the individual and their secular, individualistic and egoistic culture – as opposed to being inherited from generations of pious ancestors. This second culture, embodied in the notion of individual freedom, coupled with the culture of nihilistic narcissism and hedonism, is a major challenge for the young Muslim in the West as it confronts them with something religion has rarely gifted its devotees: a radicalized notion of personal autonomy.

Yet we are no longer in an age where secularity and post-metaphysics has confidence in itself. The secular world, which hardly believes in its own truth claims, no longer recognizes the “inherent” value in human life, is death-friendly and crass about direct, systematic and systemic violence, and is pathologically directed towards all the new and *false* gods of the market, has stepped fully into Nietzsche’s nihilism, yet it has not determined a healthy way of *being-with* such nihilism. It has sufficed to simply anesthetize the pain of being in a meaningless and godless world by bandaging the wound with the necrophilic materialist *zeitgeist*. Consequently, it is no longer the case that modern man is valued because the Divine itself gave him worth, but man is valued based on his ability to consume, to purchase, to accumulate commodities. For sure he is the bearer of rights, but those rights are not justified by a divine being, rather they are advanced by a democratically elected governing institution – and therefore those rights are contingent upon such institutions: there is no *absolute* guarantee as there was within religious systems.

The difficulty in internalizing the values of two very different cultures is massive and extremely traumatic. According to the Dutch-Muslim psychologist Bellari Said, depression was most prominent in first generation immigrants to Europe – as they longed for their homeland – but schizophrenia was most common in the second generation, having never lived in a country outside of the country their parents immigrated to. According to Ian Buruma, who interviewed Bellari Said, ‘a young Moroccan male of the second generation was ten times more likely to be schizophrenic than a native Dutchman from a similar economic background.’³⁹ The normative expectations of two very different cultures tear apart the psychological wholeness of the person who is attempting to be both Muslim and western. If this reconciliation does not occur at the individual psychological level, the non-amalgamation of both creates an intense neurosis in the individual and ‘lead[s] to the disintegration of the personality.’⁴⁰ This disunity within oneself – the *house divided* – is a

39 Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam*, 121.

40 Ibid., 121.

disintegration of the ego that forces the individual to seek out ways of overcoming the accompanying confusion, anxiety, and the schizophrenic identity.

Such a situation leaves many Muslims with two options: either fully adopt the “home culture” of Islam and abandon their parent’s “accommodating” ways, or assimilate fully into the predominant culture of the nation-state in which the individual resides. Those who choose the former, who withdraw from the culture that they’re alienated from, as it has often shunned them through racism and Islamophobic bigotry, acquire the “zeal” of a convert, which further isolates them from the predominant secular culture.

Most people think of a convert as a person who has left one religion and has adopted another, but there’s a different kind of conversion that happens when a nominal “cultural believer” leaves behind the “religion as official identity” form of religiosity and enters into a “religion as complete lifestyle” form of religiosity. Religious norms, convictions, and ideals become intensified and take on a heir of immediacy – for the “convert from within,” the attachment to religious thoughts, principles, and practices, stemming from the newly discovered “relevancy” of religion, are all the more intense because they no longer identifies themselves with the predominant cultural that has been abandoned. In this sense, their religious beliefs are infused into all aspects of the believer’s lifeworld because that is all they have. From the perspective of Bellari Said, these ‘converts from within’ are looking for a ‘paradise lost,’ a sense of purity within religion by which they can cleanse themselves of the stain of secularity and nihilistic culture.⁴¹ Consequently, the more hedonistic and nihilistic the West becomes, the more it drives these young alienated individuals into an equally as deep hatred for such culture.

Not all witnessing and professing is positive. Some forms of witnessing and professing are highly destructive because they are either integrated aspects of diabolic ideologies while others are functionalized to further the aims of nihilistic violence. Just as the German of the 1930’s looked to an ideology to overcome their current social and psychological challenges, many Muslims in the West, especially in Europe, look to radical Islam, often referred to as *Islamism*, as a way of overcoming their personal identity conflicts.⁴² Through adoption

41 Ibid., 122.

42 I will only use the term Islamism as to denote the transformation of Islam into an ideology. I use this term “ideology” in the Marxian sense as “false consciousness” or the “masking of specific interests behind a religious façade.” I do not consider Islam or any other religion an ideology in-and-of-itself and I do not use that term in the non-critical sense of a collection of ideas, thoughts, and values. Islamism, in this sense is false – because “it is not identical to itself” – as it abandons certain aspects of Islam that are essential to

of an authoritarian version of Islam, one that cancels personal autonomy and autonomous ratio for the certainty of authority, the literalness of scripture, the security of absolute moral correctness and the “purity” of thought and deed, the individual alleviates himself of all confusion about the meaning of existence, all questions of his purpose in life, and all doubts about truth. He hands over his schizophrenic existence to a movement that will provide for him a single identity – a prefabricated schema in which he melts into. This form of authoritarian Islam is a radical cancelation of subjective freedom, which he confronted within the secular society but could not find a way to reconcile himself to. In handing over his subjectivity to the objectivity of the schema, he also intimately ties himself to the “big project” of radical Islamism – the attack on the West.

From looking at testimony from former Islamists, we see that this attack on the West is both socio-political and psychological. From the first perspective, it is true that the individual has witnessed many evils done by various western countries to Muslims. Whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Israel, etc., these young men have grown up with the twenty four hour news cycle, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, where such atrocities are witnessed seemingly as a normative practice (albeit denied as being intentional) at least since the 1950's, wherein American foreign policy took over the European colonial and neo-imperial projects in the Middle East. The witnessing of these atrocities invokes the notion of the ummah, the transnational “family” that all Muslims feel themselves a part of, and it increases the feeling of global victimization: as western countries victimizes the Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan, they simultaneously victimize all of the global ummah. Injury done to some is injury done to all. The bombardment of images of Muslims being slaughtered at the hands of western governments and militaries, the powerful symbolic image of *Muhammad al-Durra* – the 12 year old boy hiding behind his father in Palestine who was brutally assassinated by the Israel Defense Force (IDF) for example, increases the humiliation and rage that is felt by the ummah which feels helpless and impotent to aid their fallen brothers and sisters in faith. They know that there is a moral imperative that impels the community at large to aid their fellow believers, but they are ashamed they do not. Nevertheless, the injustices of such actions are felt deeply and hearts are wounded.

it (such as substantive spirituality, intellectual inquisitiveness, and compassion for the other), without which it is merely formal and can be functionalized for the purposes of politics, economics, war, etc.

Consequently, the confrontation with the West from the perspective of the “convert from within” is also a psychological *jihād* (struggle) against himself. No matter how much he wishes to cleanse himself of his upbringing within a western society, which inevitably has an effect upon his psyche, language, customs, etc., he cannot fully eradicate it from his being. It is always there as a constant reminder that he *is* a westerner even if he hates that aspect of himself. The convert hates that part of him, loathes its very existence, and desires to extract it from his being, for it is seen as a cancer. He psychologically projects such hatred of himself at the abstraction deemed “the West” as a way of killing off that which festers inside of him. By attacking “the West” he attacks, suppresses, and attempts to assassinate a part of him that constantly reminds him of what he now believes is “evil” residing within. The West has become – beyond its own sins against the Muslim world – a symbol for his own self-hatred. Psychologically, that symbol must be destroyed in order to alleviate its own self-hatred. As long as the West survives, it survives in him and therefore his personality, his ego, remains intractably divided and schizophrenic. Islam as an *ideology* has not the capacity to transform the individual into a fully integrated Islamic personality, although it promises to do so, as itself lacks an integrative wholeness. It is a distortion of Islam that has falsely liberated itself from its more powerful and transformative aspects in the name of political expediency. It was not the political-economic aspects of Islam that transformed Malcolm X into a true Muslim, but the integrated wholeness of its truth content which includes its spirituality, its social justice, its intellectual inquisitiveness, its boldness in the face of a cruel world, its compassion for the poor, sick, hungry, orphans, and widows, etc. In other words, it was not just its politics, but its spiritual aspects, its moral code, its epistemology, its history, its radical social claims and its theology. Islam, in-and-of-itself, as embodied by the Prophet Muhammad, may be capable of such a transformation, but an authoritarian distortion of Islam which merely serves as a political ideology can never serve as the catalyst for a revivification of the Muslim world, nor the complete conversion of the individual. *Islamism* is itself a modern form of nihilism, albeit one disguised in the clerical garb of religion. The death-friendliness of Islamism, the willingness to unjustly sacrifice self and others for a cause that cannot gain a consensus via intellectual contestation and discourse, is a sign of such nihilism. In an attempt to flee from Nietzsche’s nihilism, the Islamist runs into a religiously camouflaged nihilism: *nothing* is worth living for except the illusion of a restored caliphate, so the Islamist is ready to die for that illusion. However, dying for something is cheap as anyone can do it. As Prophet Muhammad once said, ‘The ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of the martyr,’ living for something is the greatest of all *jihāds* as it is the most difficult to endure.

Witnessing and Professing after Auschwitz: Theodor Adorno's Poetics

One of the main concerns for the Frankfurt School's critical philosophy was the question of life after Auschwitz. How does one go on living in a God-filled world where the mass production of corpses, the idolization of death, and the systematic extermination of "life unworthy of life," is possible? How can one believe in any form of metaphysical truth or unconditional meaning, especially conceptions tied to a deity and or revelation, after the reality of Auschwitz? How can one witness and confess anything joyful, eudaimonic, and or hopeful in the shadow of absolute catastrophe; is this really a world that a loving and all-powerful God created? Or, as Adorno poetically questioned, can we really write poetry after Auschwitz?

In order to fully understand Adorno's philosophy as it pertains to what is often called the Holocaust or Shoah, we must first examine why Adorno prefers to neither describe it as "Holocaust" or "Shoah." The most commonly used phrase, "holocaust," coming from the Greek *ὁλόκαυστος* (*holokautein*), was first made popular by Elie Wiesel, who thought it a fitting term to describe the fate of the Jews in Europe. Nevertheless, this term is imbued with theological and historical problems that render it morally unacceptable. A "holocaust" is a "burnt offering," the word that was used to describe the Jewish ritual act of sacrificing animals to the divine in Jerusalem during the two Temple periods. When Wiesel appropriated the word from ancient history and used it to describe the mechanized mass destruction of Jews during the Third Reich, he inadvertently transformed Hitler into the high priest of Judaism – an unintended ramification of a poor choice of words. Hitler, who oversaw the near-complete annihilation of the Jews of Europe through gas (Zyklon B) and fire, was likened to the High Priest who oversaw the burning of the animal offerings to the God of Israel. This would be a perverse insult to the Jewish victims of fascism – an unfortunate insight that Elie Wiesel only realized after the word had already been well established in literature, etc. In effect, each utterance of the word "holocaust" in this context re-victimizes the victims of fascism as Hitler semantically takes his place at the center of Jewish temple worship.

Additionally, the Hebrew word "shoah," which can be translated as "catastrophe," finds itself substantively inadequate to describe what happened to the Jews by the Nazis; it remains too vague a concept to represent what Adorno calls 'the millionfold death [that] has acquired a form never feared before.'⁴³

43 Theodor Adorno. *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann. trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 106.

The systematic mass *extermination* of the unwanted “other,” the mechanized production of corpses, the complete identification of the totalizing concept with those who are conceptualized, has no precedent in history, and therefore the word or phrase used to express this “new” development should also embody this particularity if it is going to be a meaningful term at all.⁴⁴ “Shoah” fails at this task.

It is needless to say that the Third Reich’s own triumphalist title, which in itself expresses the eternal desire to rid Europe of its Jewish “pestilence,” is also morally repugnant; *die Endlösung der Judenfrage* (The Final Solution to the Jewish Question) need not be considered for the task. It should most certainly be remembered as it expresses the instrumental rationality, mentality and ideology that intoxicated a people with the insatiable lust for racial purity, but should not be used to remember the victims. To do so allows the perpetrators to once again define who the victims: they’re the pestilence that warrants a “final solution.”

What Adorno, and hence many others following him, including Elie Wiesel, have understood to be the most proper term to carry the weight of the history and the singularity of the crime is the term “Auschwitz” itself, for “Auschwitz,” according to Adorno, embodies the unthinkable beyond the unthinkable. History itself has burdened it with the culpability of the crime that had the capacity to changed metaphysics entire, to which no previous crime has ever acquired the capacity.⁴⁵ Adorno strips Auschwitz of its limited geographical understanding, and transforms it into a concept that embodies the worst that modern man is capable of. The little Polish city returns to its Polish name, *Oświęcim*, while the mass extermination of individuals that took place there congeals into a conception that represents the totality of human destructiveness (in general), that is so clearly articulated in the gas chambers and crematorium (in particular). In his analysis of society post-Third Reich, Adorno posits that Auschwitz is both the period of the mass extermination of the Jews, as well as the ‘world of torture which has continued to exist after Auschwitz.’⁴⁶ He makes it clear that Auschwitz is *still with us* even after the liberation of the extermination camps. I mean “still with us” not as poetic phrase to sentimentally

44 Theodor Adorno. *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1999), 362. This is not to say that genocidal acts had never occurred prior to fascist anti-Semitism, but that the way in which the forces of industry, mechanization, political-state resources, etc., were mobilized to accomplish the stated task of complete annihilation of a group of people was new to history.

45 Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 101, 115–116.

46 Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 101.

memorialize the horror and terror that was exacted upon the innocent victims, but as a way of articulating Adorno's contention that the conditions that produced Auschwitz have outlived Hitler both in the social, political, and economic realities of neo-liberal capitalism, as well as in the psychology that is molded and conditioned within the parameters of capitalism – particularly among authoritarian personalities and those who wish to escape the anxiety and *unbehagen* (uneasiness) that is forced upon the individual while in a state of freedom. Just as we can express that Auschwitz is *still with us* (objectively), we may also be impelled to say it is *still in us* (subjectively).⁴⁷

The fascistic conditions that remain post-Hitler produces both the rapacious aggressiveness and hatred for the Muslims just as it creates the desire within some Muslims to exact revenge upon the West for its crimes against the Muslim community. Indeed, the post-secular society, in which secular citizens are integrated with their fellow citizens who are still religious, contains within itself the potential for a fascist resurgence. However, unlike the first outbreak of fascism, in the early 20th century, in which religious and secular fascists (via nationalism) colluded against the secular critics of capitalism, the international communists, this outbreak could very well be between secular forms of fascism and religious forms of fascism. Either way, the failure of the left to integrate religious communities into the broader body politic, and improve their economic conditions, leaves the door open for such a barbaric confrontation.

History and Metaphysics after Auschwitz

In Horkheimer and Adorno's essay *Elements of Anti-Semitism* in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, there is an absence of a direct confrontation with Auschwitz in-and-of-itself, but instead they turn their critical analysis towards the phenomenon of anti-Semitism as a symptom within the process of enlightenment's reversion to barbarism. To reflect on what Auschwitz itself is and was, beyond the simple protocol sentences of the positivist social sciences that seek to understand the mere mechanics of the extermination camps, deportations, and systematic terror of the *Einsatzgruppen*, is a much more intense and troublesome sort of thinking to engage in. Writing the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1943, Horkheimer and Adorno felt confident that they could offer a theory of anti-Semitism that explained National Socialism's perverse infatuation with the Jews, account for the growth of nationalism, and elucidate the increasing

47 Theodor Adorno, *Can One Live After Auschwitz*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 13.

diminishment of the genuine and autonomous individual within modern society. But with their limited knowledge of the *Vernichtungslager* (extermination camp) – which they would later learn more about from Eugen Kogon's book *Der ss-Staat* – could they explain Auschwitz in-and-of-itself?⁴⁸ At the time of writing the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the full details of the camps had not yet been disclosed. Nevertheless, it appears that the optimism that Horkheimer and Adorno demonstrated in their ability to explain anti-Semitism in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was stunted when they were confronted with the full reality of Auschwitz's mass catastrophe. The actual conditions of the pathological logic of the lager proved their 1942–1944 theories of anti-Semitism inadequate even if it did confirm their notion that the Enlightenment was engaged in self-destruction.⁴⁹ Unlike their friend and colleague Walter Benjamin, whose direct experiences with fascism led to his own suicide in Portbou, Spain, Horkheimer and Adorno only tangentially experienced the totalizing pain, suffering, and horror that terrorized the Jewish individual under fascism, as they escaped the murderous clutches of fascism by immigrating to America.⁵⁰ Later, when confronted with the reality of Auschwitz itself – the catastrophe of history that Benjamin already anticipated in his *Angelus Novus* – they were impelled to ask a different set of questions: what does Auschwitz ultimately mean? What kind of ramifications does the industrialized production of corpses have on our previously held conceptions of history, theology, theodicy, and metaphysics? We can clearly understand the calculative and technological thought of the fascists, i.e. the logistics; how many Jews could be quartered within a barrack; how many Jews could be gassed and burned within a 24 hour period; how many cattle cars will be needed to deport the entire Hungarian Jewish population to Auschwitz – our positivistic sciences make this kind of knowledge available to us without reflection as to what it means. Their questions were more metaphysical in nature: how is ultimate reality different after Auschwitz with the knowledge that we live in a world where an Auschwitz is possible? As Adorno famously stated: can one really live after Auschwitz?⁵¹ From firsthand accounts, Horkheimer and Adorno eventually became aware of the conditions in the camps, especially through his reading the previously mentioned Eugene

48 Theodor Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 195–196; Eugen Kogon, *Der ss-Staat: Das System der deutschen Konzentrationslager*. München: Wilhelm Heyne Verlag, 2006.

49 Horkheimer and Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvi.

50 Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), 127–148.

51 Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 110–111.

Kogan's *Der ss-Staat*, and only then could they direct their consciousness to 'think[ing through] the last extreme of horror' in order to understand what Auschwitz meant to metaphysics and history.⁵²

In their attempts to imbue some form of ultimate reason and meaningfulness into the catastrophe that was Auschwitz, philosophers and theologians often posit metaphysical claims, both secular and religious, to gleam some kind of conciliation that Auschwitz happened for an understandable reason – a reason that may not be manifestly available to us in all its fullness but is in existence nonetheless. For some Zionists, Auschwitz was clearly a part of God's plan: the Isaac-like human sacrifice that brought about the state of Israel. For other theologians it was a "test theodicy," equivalent to the afflictions inflicted upon Job, to see if the Jews would remain faithful to their 'abusive God.'⁵³ For some philosophers, reading back into Hegel's optimistic metaphysics, it was the violent struggle of absolute spirit working its way through history towards its own self-realization. Adorno, in his *Negative Dialectics* resists all attempts to impart a positive meaning to Auschwitz. He writes,

After Auschwitz, our feeling 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.⁵⁴

In this passage Adorno prepares to defend the idea that Auschwitz is entirely *meaningless* – that we cannot extract any positive meaning out of the suffering of the victims no matter how much the human *need* for meaning impels us to. For Adorno, we cannot articulate such a meaning without re-victimizing the victim in the process – without producing absurd conclusions about their suffering. No construction of a meaningful history within which an active agent, whether it be a divine being or absolute spirit, neither immanent or transcendent, can be taken seriously in light of Auschwitz. In Adorno's *lecture 13 on Metaphysics (July 13, 1965)*, he states,

52 Ibid., 125.

53 David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993; Richard L. Rubenstein. *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992; Schweitzer, *Hating God*, 2011.

54 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 361.

To assert that existence or being has a positive meaning constituted within itself and orientated towards the divine principle (if one is to put it like that), would be, like all the principles of truth, beauty and goodness which philosophers have concocted, a pure mockery in face of the victims and the infinitude of their torment.⁵⁵

In light of his claim, any attempt of the theologian to claim Auschwitz as *Deus Vult* (God's will) inevitably articulates a theodicy that is *affirmative* in nature – it endorses the systematic and discriminate targeting of one ethnic group for extermination as being a part of the divine's plan; that the innocent had to suffer and die while the guilty remain alive and prospered. All answers to the theodicy problem remain untenable post-Auschwitz, including Jewish, Christian and Islamic answers. Additionally, any philosophical notion of a *telos* in history makes the same mistake as the theologian. This kind of thought, whether intentionally or unintentionally, advances an affirmative notion that the Jews, and their suffering, have a positive meaning in history, which somehow justifies their extermination. All positive notions of history, that express the notion that historical events happen for a ultimate-purposive reason, display a certain callousness that once again victimizes those already exterminated. Adorno's philosophy finds no metaphysical justification in the suffering of the victim. He continues in his lecture to state,

In the face of the experiences we have had, not only through Auschwitz but through the introduction of torture as a permanent institution and through the atomic bomb – all these things form a kind of coherence, a hellish unity – in face of these experiences the assertion that what is has meaning, and the affirmative character which has been attributed to metaphysics almost without exception, become a mockery; and in face of the victims it becomes downright immoral.⁵⁶

For Adorno, if we feel that we can return post-Auschwitz to any conception of history that has a metaphysical meaning, we are wrong. To think that the world is imbued with meaningfulness, that it's full of purposiveness and guided by absolute spirit or the divine, is to believe that Auschwitz momentarily suspended such trajectory, and then returned to it after the liberation of the dead-not-yet-dead. For Adorno, this is entirely impossible, 'there can be no one, whose organ of experience has not entirely atrophied, for whom

55 Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 101–102.

56 Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 104.

the world *after* Auschwitz, that is, the world in which Auschwitz is possible, is the same world as it was before.⁵⁷ Adorno seems to suggest that the world in which Auschwitz happened, and is still capable of producing another Auschwitz, demonstrates the impossibility of a “return” to a world in which there is some objective meaning. A mind that comprehends Auschwitz for what it is – the death of positive metaphysics – resists all attempts to return to such innocence or naïveté. Auschwitz is the final nail in the coffin of metaphysical positivity, which had already been slowly lowered into its grave by the Enlightenment’s secularization of the lifeworld. Indeed, if we take Adorno’s thought even farther, Auschwitz demonstrated the lie that the world ever had objective meaning. As the advance of Golgotha continues, as the slaughterbench of time provides more corpses piling upon one another, the more Benjamin’s prophetic image of *Angelus Novus*, who sees all of history as the accumulation of catastrophe, reveals to us its prophetic core, that any attempt to rescue meaning in the face of meaningless slaughter is a fanciful and ultimately fruitless endeavor.⁵⁸ For Adorno, any attempt to rescue or resurrect an imminent or transcendent theory of history that posits an intentioned telos, a positive metaphysics, or a meaningful explanation of historical suffering, can only be unmasked as ideology and false consciousness. It may console, but it is delusional. After Auschwitz, Adorno remains suspicious of any thinking that fails to take into account the suffering of the finite individual, the *muselmänner*, and the totality of terror in the extermination camps, as that suffering exposes the ideological nature of all positive metaphysical statements in light of suffering’s ultimate meaninglessness.⁵⁹ Metaphysical assertions that are saturated with meaning only further the subordination and domination of individuals

57 Ibid., 104.

58 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257.

59 “Muselmänner” is a phrase that became part of the extermination camps’ lexicon. It denoted those who were “walking dead,” the “dead-not-yet-dead,” as Primo Levi described them. Outside of humans turned specimens, they were the most original product of Auschwitz. The muselmann figures in our most vivid images of Auschwitz. Those survivors who were propped up before the Allied cameras so that the world could see the unspeakable horror of mass starvation, sadism, and extermination, rarely survived after liberation. Their spirit was broken after being forcibly transformed into a new species: a species utterly devoid of human contact, human empathy, or human meaning – the wholly depraved. The hatred for them by other Jews in the camps inspired Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz to say ‘the Jews... lack solidarity. One would have thought that in a situation such as this they would inevitably help and protect one another. But no, quite the contrary.’ See Rudolf Hoess, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, trans. Constantine FitzGibbon (London, Phoenix Press, 2000), 151.

to a system of complete domination by providing a sense of comfort and false reconciliation. He states,

In view of them, the assertion of a purpose or meaning which is formally embedded in metaphysics is transformed into ideology, that is to say, into an empty solace which at the same time fulfills a very precise function in the world as it is: that of keeping people in line.⁶⁰

In a world where there is clearly no metaphysical meaning to existence, a metaphysics that provides such a sense of purposiveness and ultimate reasoning for disaster, suffering, and catastrophe, does nothing for the individual but reconcile them to the socially manufactured horror and suffering of their lives. Post-Auschwitz, not only are metaphysical claims untrue, their continued announcement creates more potential victims for the pyre, as they prepare the grounds for another Auschwitz: they are illusions that kill.

Only later, after further reflection, did a glimmer of redemption arrive on the horizon for metaphysics in the language of the “totally other.” As expressed by Horkheimer,

The appeal to an entirely other (*ein ganz Anderes*) than this world had primarily a social-philosophical impetus. It led finally to a more positive evaluation of certain metaphysical trends, because the empirical ‘whole is the untrue’ (Adorno). The hope that earthly horror does not possess the last word is, to be sure, a non-scientific wish.⁶¹

Even on Horkheimer’s gravestone he had inscribed Psalm 91:2, ‘In you, eternal one, alone I trust.’ But after Auschwitz, did he really mean it?

Ethics after Auschwitz

The overwhelming catastrophe that was Auschwitz endowed it with a certain moral authority, and that authority, rooted in the experience of incomprehensible suffering, has a claim on our thoughts and actions. Hitler himself, according to Adorno, imposes a ‘new categorical imperative’ upon us, that we

60 Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 104.

61 Horkheimer’s forward in Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), xxvi.

'arrange [our] thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.'⁶² Adorno refuses to subject this new imperative to any form of logic as to 'deal discursively with it' would be an 'outrage' that would degenerate into a 'bad infinity.'⁶³ Instead, he believes that this new imperative is rooted in the material, i.e. the sensitivity towards the suffering of the finite individual, and most importantly to bodily experiences of agony, pain, and misery, and not metaphysical speculation. He says, 'it is quite simply the moment of aversion to the inflicting of physical pain on what Brecht once called the torturable body of any person.'⁶⁴ Ethics should direct itself to the reduction of suffering in the world, that one should not contribute to a globe that is already agonizing with *weltschmerz* (world pain), and that society should engage in the task of furthering the goal of a more-reconciled future society which resists the one-dimensionality of the culture industry that integrates the consciousness of the individual into the totalizing system, as well as continues Auschwitz through napalm, torture, ABC wars, genocide, drone strikes, and all other forms of systemic, symbolic and direct violence. Adorno takes seriously Benjamin's notion of the *weak messianic power* that the present generation has to redeem the innocent victims of the past – so that the murderer shall ultimately not triumph over the innocent victim.⁶⁵ The redemption of past suffering, although it will never guarantee autonomous meaning, can only occur when the present generation overcomes the conditions that make Auschwitz possible.

Adorno advances practical suggestions as to how we should direct our thoughts and actions towards the concrete negation of a future Auschwitz: education. He begins his essay *Education after Auschwitz* with this exclamation: 'The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again... every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz.'⁶⁶ Although Adorno believes that the overall structure of society that enabled Auschwitz to happen remains firmly in place, and that the significance of the systematic and industrial murder of millions barely penetrates the consciousness of the individual, we must nevertheless infuse education with the means to combat that structure. Adorno rejects the idea of appealing to 'eternal values' to combat the advancement towards another Auschwitz, as those eternal values have been depleted

62 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 365; Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 116.

63 Ibid., 365; Ibid., 116.

64 Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 116.

65 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 254.

66 Adorno, *Can One Live After Auschwitz*, 19.

of their significance for those already 'prone to commit such atrocities.'⁶⁷ Furthermore, he believes those same "eternal values" that in popular usage are understood to be unequivocally good, too often serve as the ideological legitimation for the evil that perpetuate Auschwitz.⁶⁸ Through their functionalization and abuse, they have lost their essential truth-content. Rather, he believes that since the root of genocide to be in nationalism – the ideology of *blut und boden* that ideologically binds the already atomized masses together – an education thoroughly reformed after Auschwitz must penetrate into the individual's constitution. He says,

One must come to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds, must reveal these mechanisms to them, and strive, by awakening a general awareness of those mechanisms, to prevent people from becoming so again.⁶⁹

Critical self-reflection, thinking against thinking, resistance to identity thought – the total identification of concept and those conceived, must all be nourished, fostered, and taught, beginning at a young age.⁷⁰ Additionally, true individualism, the autonomy of the self that allows for resistance towards the coercive totalizing universal, must be recovered if the individual will have any ability to resist the 'established authorities [when they] once again give them the order.'⁷¹ For Adorno, the autonomy of self is the only social power that has the capacity to resist another nationalist hysteria that would result in another Auschwitz. This autonomy is rooted in the individual's ability to think against the universal, engage in self-reflection and self-critique, and act on conscience and not out of social pressure. He says, 'I think the most important way to confront the danger of a recurrence is to work against the brute predominance of all collectives, to intensify the resistance to it by concentrating on the problem of collectivization.'⁷²

Adorno has no illusions about this struggle against barbarization. He understands that the prevailing trajectory of history is on a path towards such a global calamity, thus making any struggle against this totalizing trend *contra mundi* in essence. Bourgeois coldness, the instrumental rationality that animated the

67 Ibid., 20.

68 Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 171.

69 Adorno, *Can One Live After Auschwitz*, 21.

70 Ibid., 21–22.

71 Ibid., 22.

72 Ibid., 25.

plans, the production, and execution of Auschwitz, and the incestuous ideology of nationalism in service to and in cooperation with capitalism, and the loss of the autonomous individual, are the conditions that were necessary for Auschwitz to occur. Unfortunately, as Adorno understood, they are also the predominant conditions of the world today, and that despite our best efforts, we may 'hardly hinder the renewed growth of desktop murderers.'⁷³ Nevertheless, philosophy, thinking, education, and religion, must all be directed towards the total ban on Auschwitz ever reoccurring. If 'perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream,' not only can we write poetry after Auschwitz, we are impelled to give voice to the suffering through our words and deeds so that more victims of Auschwitz are not created.⁷⁴

Witnessing the Messianic: The Case of the Martyr Walter Benjamin

The core of the Frankfurt School's critical theory of religion can be found in the sensitivity to the suffering of the finite individual who is threatened and plagued by both first and second nature, who is subject to the horror and terror of nature and history, as well as the modern form of exploitation through globalized corporate neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism, neo-imperialism, dictatorship, and class domination. The modern individual is also subject to the growing antagonism between the secular and the religious, the political right and political left, the polarizing politics of capitalism and socialism, as well as the struggle between various religions and non-religious philosophies. The pain of being against the grain of modern society, once acutely felt by Jews in Europe, is now what afflicts the Muslims in the post-secular West. Because of the alienation and suffering caused by the anachronistic tension of recalcitrant faith, the longing for messianic transcendence is strongest among them today. This comprehensive cage of anxiety, tension and despair gives birth to a powerful longing: the longing for the messianic.

The idea of the messianic is born out of the notion that history is catastrophe and the idea that history is catastrophe is rooted in the experience of history as unbearable suffering. This sensitivity towards the horror and terror caused by the slaughterbench of history can be witnessed most profoundly in Walter Benjamin's messianic infused *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940). Written 'with the thoughts of death' ever-present, Benjamin's *Theses* provide momentary glimpses into his thoughts on the catastrophic nature of

73 Ibid., 33.

74 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 362.

human existence.⁷⁵ The intensity of fascism, culminating in the Nuremberg laws, *Kristallnacht*, and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Hitler-Stalin Pact), engulfed his thinking about the nature of history, the role of the historian, the present-day accounting of past victims of history, and the potential for the messianic age. Although Benjamin was deeply influenced by the Marxism of Bertolt Brecht, the last worked he penned was saturated with theological and messianic content that has puzzled many as to why he consistently resurrected theological language that had already lost most of its social relevance in his secular age. Was Benjamin simply following Marx in his translation of religious semantic and semiotic materialism into secular philosophy, or rescuing philosophy in the form of theology? Was he returning to the religious views of his forefathers in light of the historic catastrophe of fascism as so many other hitherto secular Jews had done, or was he bringing the two very different and often antagonistic worlds together in an uneasy synthesis? Were theology, messianism and radical Marxist philosophy engaged in a *détente* in Benjamin's mind and working towards the same liberational goal? If so, can the Muslims of Europe and America today learn something useful from this alliance of theology and philosophy?

The Place for Theology

The debate between scholars of Benjamin's political theology have divided themselves within two different camps, (1) those who interpret Benjamin's theological language symbolically, arguing that Benjamin's religious language should be understood as revolutionary-Marxist language behind the persona of theology, always carrying a "materialistic intent" (Tiedemann, Žižek, Wolin, Boer, etc.), and that Messianism and Marxism are essentially incompatible, and (2) those who interpret Benjamin's theological language as both revolutionary-materialistic and theological (Rabinbach, Jacobson, Buck-Morss).⁷⁶ Battle

75 Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910–1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno. Trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. Adorno stated, "Insight into the objective conditions of that fate [private misfortune] gave him the strength to raise himself above it; the very strength that allowed him in 1940, doubtless with thoughts of death, to formulate the theses 'On the Concept of History.'"

76 Rolf Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses 'On the Concept of History'" in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989; Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*. New York: Verso, 2008; Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*. New

lines are drawn over Benjamin's first thesis in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, where he conjures up an image of the symbiotic relationship of a puppet-automaton and a hunchback dwarf (the perennial image of a distorted life). He says,

The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called 'historical materialism' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.⁷⁷

A materialist reading is uncomfortable with Benjamin's image of a "wizened" theology that animates the puppet of historical materialism and the idea that theology is the force that allowed historical materialism to "win all the time." This seems to subordinate historical materialism under the authority and direction of theology, as it is the dwarf that remains in control of the string, which conjures up a feeling of *odium theologicum* among the materialists.⁷⁸ From a conventional Marxist perspective, theology, belonging to the realm of religion as opposed to science, has the function of dulling the consciousness of the masses partly by promising paradise in the hereafter for their quiet acceptance of the current system of domination. The Marxist does not want to wait to be rescued from oppression through death or by a promised Messiah, but rather is committed to actualizing a classless and just society in the present through revolutionary thought and praxis. Religion for many Marxists, as we

York: Columbia University Press, 1982; Roland Boer, *Marxist Criticism of the Bible*. New York: Continuum, 2003; Anson Rabinbach, "Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism" *New German Critique* Winter 1985, Number 34. 78–124; Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Propane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003; Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1991.

77 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 253.

78 'Odium Theologicum' – a feeling of disgust for theology.

stated earlier, is counterrevolutionary. And yet Benjamin positions theology as the grand strategist of historical materialism?

The theological reading suggests that (1) historical materialism has returned to its origins in religion – based on the notion that Marxism has secularized prophetic and messianic religion – especially with its insistence on the principle of equality. In the crisis leading up to 1940, historical materialists like Benjamin understood that the previous Feuerbachian negation of religion also negated its liberational potential – its ability to point to a possibility of life beyond the horror and terror of the already given. This action, stemming from a particular anti-religious reading of Marx's critique of religion, reduced Marxism to the point that it shared in the same *scientistic* qualities as fascism.⁷⁹ (2) Despite the social reality that “God is dead,” theology can once again be an agent of change if rescued by historical materialism. (3) Due to the painful memory of religion and theology's criminal history in Europe, and the fact that its dictates appear absurd and authoritarian in the modern world, theology must hide its “ugliness” in the secular public sphere.

Those opposed to this kind of theological reading suggest that historical materialism ‘enlists’ theology, and therefore historical materialism is in fact the possessor of agency: ‘it is in control.’⁸⁰ For Tiedemann and others, theology serves historical materialism and does the heavy lifting of revolutionary change, but does not possess autonomous authority. In this sense, the messianic moment is not a matter of theology or religion; the Messiah is not the redeemer of the world, but rather the agent of redemption is Marx's revolutionary working class aided by theology. The materialist readers of Benjamin reject the idea that he appropriated traditional Jewish apocalypticism and messianism within his Marxist critique of history; rather they read him as saying that secular historical materialism can cooperate with theology (maybe not the theologian) to win in all their struggles. Nevertheless, historical materialism doesn't resign its revolutionary potential when it enlisted theology, but forms a coalition but keeps itself at the helm. Ultimately *Theses I*, at minimum, reserves a place for theology in the struggle for human emancipation and does not retreat into a dogmatic “scientific” materialism that was characteristic of Soviet Marxism – even ardent materialists such as Tiedemann admit the validity of this interpretation, albeit uneasily.

Although it may make some secular scholars uncomfortable, one cannot deny that Benjamin's theological impulse permeates his work. He says in his *Arcades Project*, ‘my thinking is related to theology as blotting pad is related to

79 Ibid., 259.

80 Tiedemann, *Historical Materialism of Political Messianism*, 190.

ink. It is saturated with it.⁸¹ Although his writing may be saturated with theology, which gives “orthodox Marxists” pause, he nevertheless understands that it must remain hidden behind the face of historical materialism: *hidden behind* the ‘specter that is haunting Europe,’ is wise but ugly theology. In this sense, Benjamin’s philosophy of religion anticipates the post-secular society as both religion and secularity are operate in conjunction with each other just as both are prevalent within the conditions of modern western society. The question is whether or not they can form a mutually acceptable and beneficial alliance in bringing about a more reconciled future society as Benjamin’s philosophy would suggest it could.

Messiah, Messianic and the Historian

Benjamin’s three most important works for understanding his philosophy of history and messianism are his *Theologico-Political Fragment* (1921), *The Arcades Project* (1927–1940), and his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940) – the last being the most substantial work on messianism. In these three works, three figures remain at the core of the analysis: The Messiah, the messianic, and the historian. Although all three are often woven together in Benjamin’s analysis, there is enough space between them to see the three as distinct entities or “thought constellations.” Benjamin is most explicit about the role of the Messiah in his *Theologico-Political Fragment*, where he makes clear the role of the Messiah in relation to history, which makes it the most impenetrable to a materialist reading. Benjamin writes,

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.⁸²

For Benjamin, no activity *within* history can claim to be of the Messiah, i.e. it cannot redeem or consummate history, nor can it redeem the dead, and no

81 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 471.

82 Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment” in *Reflections*, 312.

political attempt to bring about a more reconciled society can be legitimized via the “Kingdom of God.” All of this culminates in Benjamin’s political imperative: there can be no theocracy, where the state and religion are identical. The historical entrance of the Messiah, who reveals the *Deus Vult*, is the *end* of history and not the teleological culmination of history. The unredeemed world cannot bring about its own redemption according to Benjamin, who draws this notion from a certain Jewish understanding of the role of the Messiah.⁸³ What history is capable of doing is directing the order of the profane toward human happiness, i.e. the ideal goal of political economy. Nevertheless, he understands history as having a dialectical tension within it between the sacred and the profane,

If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom.⁸⁴

Benjamin isn’t explicit by what he means by “happiness”; whether he has a *eudaimonic* conception in mind or an emotive form of temporary titillation that is prevalent within modern consumer society is not fully disclosed. Neither is he clear on what kind of “profane” society he has in mind: is it a socialist, communist, or capitalist society? If we can assume that Benjamin believes historical materialism is capable of bringing about the conditions for human flourishing (or *actualization* as he preferred),⁸⁵ and therefore true human happiness, then we must assume that historical materialism is the unintentional handmaiden of the Messiah, as its trajectory towards profane happiness “assists” the interjection of the Messiah into human history; the closer history actualizes true human happiness, the closer the messianic age comes into being. But would the opposite of this analysis consequently be equally as true: the worse the world gets is the time least likely for the Messiah to appear? When he is needed most is precisely when he will *not* come? At least in 1920–1921, the traditional notion of a Messiah, as a redeemer who ends history, was not a complete impossibility for Benjamin, even if it was a radically different understanding than can be found in Judaism, who understood the Messiah to

83 Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 10–11.

84 Benjamin, *Theologico-Political Fragment*, 312.

85 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 460.

be more of a temporal figure who delivers the Jewish people from their trials and tribulations. Nevertheless, within Benjamin's philosophy he preserved the idea of a messianic break of history via means that were *outside* of history, something that revolutionary class struggle could not do as it is bound *within* history.

Although the ultimate goal of this fragmentary writing was to warn against the legitimization of human activity via the messianic, the Messiah he speaks of in this fragment is incapable – by definition – of being understood as symbolic language for revolutionary class struggle. At the time of writing, the Messiah and the messianic (as we can interpret later in the *Theses*) are wholly separate concepts. Only *the Messiah* can end history. The end of history cannot be brought out by the triumph of the working class as Marx would have it, or as the working out of absolute spirit as Hegel would have it, for both are *within* history. For Benjamin's 1921 essay, the historical process can only increase the dialectical tension that hastens the appearance of the Messiah (but cannot force it to come – not even the disaster of Auschwitz forced the long awaited Messiah to appear). It is apparent from history that the Jews, in all their agony and desperation, suffer from the same *parousia* (παρουσία) *delay* that Christians have experienced since the death of Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth: the non-appearance of the promised and severely needed Messiah.

Benjamin's notion of the Messiah is one that ushers in the *utopian* element of messianism as well as the violent destruction of the world as it is: the 'hell' of the 'status quo.'⁸⁶ The Messiah breaks into history through the gates of time, destroys the world characterized by the *aristocratic law of nature*, and ushers in a total reconciliation of the historical antagonisms that have plagued human and natural existence – the wolf will lie down with the lamb and eat straw like an ox.⁸⁷ Yet Benjamin's Messiah is not *restorative* and *nationalistic* in the traditional Jewish sense, i.e. restoration of the Kingdom of David in Israel, but rather takes the form of a universal *apocatastasis* (ἀποκατάστασις – restoration of primordial conditions) – he is *tikkun olam* (world healing). Whether or not Benjamin, through the influence of Scholem, truly believed in a figure such as the Messiah is not truly possible to ascertain from his enigmatic writings. Nevertheless, the importance of the *Messiah* in his early writings seems to suggest that there remained a *longing* for a Messiah-like figure – one that would ultimately redeem a historically unredeemable world. This 'longing,' according to

86 Ibid., 473.

87 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 264; Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 17; Isiah, 65:25.

Horkheimer, 'unites all men so that the horrible events, the injustice of history so far would not be permitted to be the final, ultimate fate of the victims...'⁸⁸

In Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, he once again preserves the idea of the figure of the Messiah as separate from the *messianic*, speaking of the later in terms of the "we," i.e. historical materialists historians, whose messianic purpose it is to 'brush history against the grain.'⁸⁹ The importance of the historian can be seen in Benjamin's most striking image: Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*. In attempting to unravel the meaning of Benjamin's theses on the Angel of History, many interpreters fail to notice that the painting serves as the image for Benjamin's conception of the *historical materialist historian*. Benjamin is not making a theological claim but rather is constructing a dialectical image that discloses to those influenced by historical materialism the importance of seeing *history as catastrophe*. He writes,

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁹⁰

Those that see history as 'one single catastrophe' are those who have adopted the historical materialists conception of history (like the angel of history); they are those that see the catastrophic within the 'cultural treasures' before them; they honor the agony of those who toil – whose blood and tears are the precondition of modern 'progress'; they remember the suffering of those who built the skyscrapers, the castles, the bridges, those who have suffered alienated

88 Max Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926–1931 & 1950–1969*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 239.

89 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257. One must note that Benjamin himself never describes any historical entity as the Messiah, not even the revolutionary working class.

90 *Ibid.*, 257. My emphasis.

labor and exploitation, those who have fought the wars started by others and for the benefit of others, etc. They are those who have suffered throughout history so that the few can have the spoils of life. They cannot rejoice in the triumphs of culture as they alone see the destruction that those triumphs are built upon. Like the angel of history, they see disaster where others see beauty; they see pain where others see joy; they see suffering where others see accomplishments; they see all of history as a monad of catastrophe where others see an unstoppable linearity of progress. Expressing this insight, Benjamin says, 'there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.'⁹¹ It is the historical materialist who can see clearly the barbarism of history – the cross in the rose (to reverse Hegel). Furthermore, it is the role of the historical materialist historian to look back into history to give voice to the suffering of the victims of history – as proleptic solidarity with the innocent victims of history is the *weak messianic power* that the present generation has against the possibility that the murderer shall not ultimately triumph over the innocent victim. In the face of the Messiah's absence, that is all the living can do to rescue the dead. This future oriented remembrance of past victims allows the critical historian to reveal the 'depository of historical knowledge' that is embedded in the existence of those who have been relegated to the ditch of history. The present generation must be motivated by the past injustices done unto the 'enslaved ancestors,' which Benjamin understands as its 'greatest strength' in the face of fascism.⁹² In remembering the dead and giving voice to their suffering, the critical historian prevents history from becoming a 'tool of the ruling classes' as the triumph of the victors is denied the ability to silence or functionalize the memory of their victims.⁹³ Conversely, in the hands of the historical materialist, history becomes the grand inquisitor of the victors and not its triumphal creation. This historical materialist approach to history aids in the bringing about a 'real state of emergency' that 'will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism,' as the real state of emergency is predicated on the full accounting of human suffering.⁹⁴ According to Benjamin's dialectical image, a storm that *we* [historical materialists] call progress is brewing, either in the form of the Messiah's breaking of the eternal cycle of suffering, or the final *messianic* triumph of the working class which is its own form of breaking the historical cycle of man's domination over man.

91 Ibid., 256.

92 Ibid., 260.

93 Ibid., 255.

94 Ibid., 257.

Benjamin's Critique of Progress: Witnessing History as Barbarity

'This storm is what *we* call progress' is the key phrase in Benjamin's theses on the *Angelus Novus*. Benjamin wants to contrast the historical materialist conception of progress to that of the Enlightenment's conception of progress as shared by liberals, social democrats, German idealists, vulgar-Marxists, and all others who see history in a linear fashion that is imbued with optimism concerning the perfectibility of man and society. What 'we' call progress is not the same as what 'they' conceptualize as progress, he says,

historical materialism... has annihilated within itself the idea of progress. Just here, historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself sharply from bourgeois habits of thought. Its founding concept is not progress but actualization.⁹⁵

For Benjamin, the belief in the Enlightenment's notion of progress has a heavy price. The Enlightenment posited the ideal that mankind and human society could be perfected through the mastery of the self and nature; that humanity could become the masters of their own fate; that we could bring about a society that is rooted in *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* within the bounds of the given: bourgeois capitalism; that it would produce an abundance of material goods beyond the realm of necessity; that industrial and technological advancements would increase the efficiency of the means of production, thus leading to a life lived more abundantly; that scientific knowledge would replace religious dogmas and provide better conditions for human flourishing. "Progress" was synonymous with *inevitability*, or what Benjamin described as 'something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course.'⁹⁶ Yet Benjamin is aware that the 'technological progress' of humanity, the 'advance in men's ability and knowledge,' is not identical with man's moral advancement, or his actualization, or his ability to think and act in universally humanistic ways.⁹⁷ Technological advancements, i.e. instrumental rationality, had advanced beyond communicative rationality. Human "progress" had not brought about a more reconciled world, but a world gone mad (irrational ends) with better tools of destruction (rational means). What Benjamin rightly deems "progress," in the

95 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 460.

96 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 260.

97 *Ibid.*, 260.

messianic sense, is the ‘first revolutionary measure taken’ against such an optimistic world.⁹⁸

The spirit of Benjamin’s critique of progress can be seen most clearly in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – which was deeply influenced by Benjamin’s work – where the light of critique is shined upon the dark side of the Enlightenment’s “progress.” The Hegelian optimism that history is inherently on a trajectory towards its own resolution; that all events in history dialectically propel it towards a progressive final outcome; that the horror and terror of Golgotha serves a meaningful teleological end, cannot be maintained in light of the catastrophic 20th century – which is but the latest layer of historical debris piling skyward. In light of the perennial suffering of the oppressed, history seems more akin to Nietzsche’s *eternal return*: a never-ending cycle of misery that lead to no resolution or reconciliation.⁹⁹ For Benjamin, if true progress can exist, it is within the historians’ memory of the victims of ‘progress’ and the absolute cessation of such ‘destructive’ progress via the ‘storm that is blowing from Paradise.’ What remains to be determined is whether or not the Messiah or the messianic power of the working class is the true agent behind the storm or even if a storm is truly brewing. If we follow Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse’s pessimistic analysis of the diminished potential for revolutionary change via the working class, then the messianic power of the working class has already been abandoned in theory because it was absorbed into the prevailing system of domination by socially modified capitalism and nationalism. Consequently, WWI and WWII demonstrated that capitalism and nationalism have the power to subdue and neutralize the messianic qualities of the working class. If the materialist interpretation of Benjamin’s philosophy prevails, then his political messianism plays very little if any role in Critical Theory today. What does remain is his method of translating religious semantic and semiotic material into critical social philosophy within the tradition of Critical Theory.¹⁰⁰

If we remain loyal to the apocalyptic conception of the Messiah, then, as before, the world suffers from the pain of delay – the non-appearance of the Messiah. The *weltschmerz* (world pain) of the unredeemed world continues unabated through history as neither the Messiah nor the messianic revolutionary working classes have ended the continual slaughterbench. All that has come is the consolation of the historical materialist historian, whose calling it is to remind us of the victims of history who continue to press their claim

98 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 474.

99 Ibid., 115–119.

100 Adorno, “Reason and Revelation” in *Critical Models*, 136–137.

upon us, for it is he that 'invites the dead to the table.'¹⁰¹ History, from the perspective of Benjamin, cannot redeem itself. That which transcends the given is not born within the given; that which makes past suffering meaningful cannot have as its genesis the same history that created the suffering. Redemption, if there ever can be such a thing, can only break the history created by man and nature – it must come from outside of the conditions of the given. Benjamin's hopefulness that such a time-continuum-stopping event could occur is among the most distinguishing elements of his theological-oriented form of historical materialism. Only through the eyes of the messianic, or through that which has the power and authority to redeem, was he given any form of hope about the future. For him, it was the only available option left when surrounded by history that appeared to him in its most honest form: a single event of catastrophe. The theological element in his thought, which cured him of the idealist's optimism, also forced him to witness the barbaric absurdity of history, simultaneously rescuing him from the despair through messianic hope.

101 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 254; *Arcades Project*, 481.