**Epilogue: The World We Live In**

The claim that religion and religiosity have returned to the center stage of society, culture, and politics has been an issue which has concerned scholars over the past two decades. Jürgen Habermas, for instance, who is perceived as representing the “second generation” of the Frankfurt School, was one of the first to suggest that such a return of religion heralds a “post-secular” society, which must “adjust itself to the continued existence of religious communities.”[[1]](#footnote-2) Charles Taylor concluded his book, *A Secular Age*, with the claim, and perhaps for him, the hope, that we are at the beginning of “a new age of religious seeking.”[[2]](#footnote-3) In a similar vein, sociologist Brian Turner pointed out that instead of a version of Weber’s growingly disenchanted secular world, we are witnessing a “religious turn,” which means that “public space has been resecralized insofar that public religions play a major role in political life.”[[3]](#footnote-4) Likewise, philosopher Salvoj Žižek argued that we are witnessing the return, “with a vengeance,” of the theologically repressed, a stance largely shared by Hent de Vries, who brought to the fore what he conceptualized as the “reenchantment, if not outright remythologization,” of the secular-modern world.[[4]](#footnote-5)

These scholars and many others debating what appeared to them as the return of religion, remained, to a large extent, divided as to the nature of the “new era,” its major characteristics, the variety of phenomenon associated with it, or its (more or less) dark materials. Is the issue the return of orthodox and institutionalized religions or the emergence of new spiritual paradigms? Is the phenomenon limited to what Abrams calls “affluent western societies,” that is, the western version of secularized Christianity, or is it relevant, even if in different ways, to additional societies, cultures, and religions? To what extent is it a blurring of boundaries between “the secular” and “the religious,” or the redrawing of these boundaries? How do theological arguments reshape the political contours of conflicts around the world? These are a few examples of issues that remain controversial even today. and which did not disappear during the recent pandemic. Rather, if anything, the relevance of the controversies they involve has increased. Thus, recently Agata Bielik-Robson justifiably noted the existence of different approaches, some even contradictory, related to the “return” of religion and theology to the social and political center of attention.[[5]](#footnote-6)

However, despite the many differences between them, it appears that these approaches share at least one narrative common denominator. They all postulate both the narrative of the waning, or perhaps even disappearance, of religion in the framework of secular-modern life, and its apparent reemergence in recent decades in philosophy, society, and politics. To speak about the “return” of religion, to argue that it constitutes a “reenchantment” of a formerly secular and disenchanted world or to distinguish between secular and “post-secular society” – which ostensibly replaces and succeeds it – means to assume that there is a contradiction between the secular world and its religious “other,” which seems to have faded away from the modern social and political domain only to “magically” reappear.

The presence of theology in the writings of such major and influential modern thinkers, as Freud, Benjamin, Adorno, and Arendt challenges precisely this arc of assumptions and distinctions. Certainly, these modern thinkers are indubitably secular, perhaps the most secular of their time. Nonetheless, their writings reveal four different composites of the secular-modern position containing a treasure of theological terms. In these cases, the relations between the “secular” and the “religious” do not point to contradiction, as one may assume, but rather to what perhaps can be called a secular-religious continuum. It is in the framework of such a continuum that the critical concept relevant to each thinker is expressed. On the one hand, for these thinkers, criticism constitutes the essence of secular heroism. On the other hand, their works, which were explored in this book, point to the broad spectrum of ways in which the analysis of the content, validity, and boundaries of concepts, as well as “critical narratives of modernity,” touch upon Jewish and Christian traditions, corporeal and divine law, mysticism, and negative theology or tripartite theology. To speak of a secular-religious continuum implies that their critique concurrently emerges out of theological traditions and can in many ways be traced back to them. Thus, these thinkers did not only explore religious concepts using the disciplinary tools available to them. Rather, they visited the world of religious thought in an intimate fashion.[[6]](#footnote-7) For them, the criticism of theology is therefore a visitation of criticism in theological domains, even if occasionally – according to Arendt – it is against their better judgment. Indeed, each one of these thinkers articulates a different conception of criticism, relates to a different religious tradition, and expresses the ways in which they intersect differently. Still, in all of these cases, criticism – and especially criticism – does not enable its theological “other” “simply to be reduced, falsified, naturalized, or secularized, once and for all.”[[7]](#footnote-8)

Thus, from my perspective, this book’s addressing distinctively different disciplines – psychoanalysis, social and educational thought, and political theory – as well as the range of personal and historical contexts in the first and second halves of the twentieth century of the authors discussed – is not merely an important contribution to the extensive research on the place of theological issues in the intellectual world of German-speaking central Europe between the two world wars.[[8]](#footnote-9) No less importantly, it allows us to cast doubt on the distinction between the aforementioned secular and “post-secular” worlds, and consequently to challenge the division between “criticism” and “postcritique,” which has also attained an increasingly central status in recent years.[[9]](#footnote-10) The argument that can be presented is therefore reversed: it is not only that arguments concerning the disappearance and return of the religious “other” are incorrect, but also that their appearance can only be understood against the background of theology’s central position in the framework of secular criticism and as its origin. The current attention in the research on the place of religion in today’s world can be perceived, therefore, not as a reaction to the “return” of religion, but as evidence of the very structure of criticism in its relation to theology. This is the case as well in regard to the crystallization of the “postcritique” approach, which strives, for example, to “blend analysis and attachment, criticism, and love,” and which can be anchored in the way in which the hermeneutics of suspicion, which was associated with modern criticism, constituted in and of itself a means to enable or rescue non-suspicion.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Even though the scope of the discussion in this book was limited – in terms of the philosophers, historical periods, and texts upon which it focuses – its purpose was indeed a bit more pretentious given that it attempted to reinterpret the complex relations between the secular-modern world and religion. Thus, its aim was to demonstrate that with these scholars’ repeated secular emphasis on critique, religion lost neither its place nor its influence. Religion, one may then argue, has never left the secular theatre. Likewise, within the framework of the discussion in this book, I did not attempt to put forward a normative argument which gives preference to one approach over the other, or to demonstrate which of the criticisms of theology is better established than the others. It appears to me, however, that the reader can sense a certain partiality for the array of complexities, inner tensions, incompatibilities, some contradictions, and certainly the refractions which characterize these thinkers’ discontent in regard to religious traditions – discontent that echoes, perhaps, the implied defiance in Ecclesiastes’s words: “It is good that thou holdest fast to the one and withdrawest not thine hand from the other” (7:18). Particularly prominent in this sense was that the modern thinkers’ criticism of theology was focused on the world in which we live. Certainly, this attention is upon what Horkheimer called the realm of immanence and it emphasizes the secular dimension in their thinking.[[11]](#footnote-12) Still, in all of these cases, secularization does not point, in any simplistic way, to the liberation from religious thinking, but rather to the translation or transformation of theological concepts, often even for the stated purpose of rescuing them.

For Freud, for instance, the critical role of jokes signals what Eric Santner described as the “eternal within the earthly” given that Freud secularizes the religious dilemma concerning violation of the law while immersing it in his discussion on the rules, codes, and social norms that shape the psychology of the individual.[[12]](#footnote-13) These are the “laws and judgements” that criticism preserves both from within and through their defiance. Freud’s focus on the “normative universe” in which we live does not indicate detachment from theology, but rather the way in which he superimposes a psychological argument, which focuses on the individual’s relations with the society, upon religious modes of critique. In this framework, criticism plays a double role: it enables an outburst of opposition to the law, but does so within the terms of the law, in accordance with the idiom of a law that returns upon itself.

A similar dialectic, involving opposing the very thing which they seek to save, is reflected in what can be called the “theology of worldliness” that characterizes philosophers of critical theory.[[13]](#footnote-14) Benjamin’s early theory, for example, highlights the “mysticism of this world,” that is, the reformulation of theological concepts in the framework of social criticism. In this context, the “nothingness” of a purely transcendent god informs the liberation from all social and political enslaving circumstances. Benjamin adopts the mystical concept of a transcendental god in such an absolute manner that it can be, as a result, represented only by the concept of “nothingness.” However, in the final account, Benjamin’s interest lies in the way in which this field anchors the very prospect of social criticism. Benjamin’s early theory in particular can be considered, therefore, an initial experimental field in which he forms the concept of criticism that he will use throughout his life. It cannot be denied that the social criticism proposed by the young Benjamin involves the secularization of theology. However, it speaks, to the same degree, of the taking hold of, that is, the rescuing of the spiritual investment in the world, without which criticism is not possible. Here too, the criticism is immanent – it does not arrive from outside the world of religious concepts with the purpose of being liberated from it, but rather from within the world of religious concepts against which it simultaneously acts.

In my opinion, it is important to understand Adorno’s mid-twentieth century perception of education because it continues this line of thought, and in doing so exposes how critical theory constitutes, at least in the educational context, critical theology. On the one hand, critical self-reflection, which Adorno attributes to education, is focused upon this world because the single objective of criticism is “emancipation from the enslaving social conditions.” In this capacity, the criticism that education is meant to express is distinguished from the withdrawal into “pure inwardness,” which is central to Kierkegaard’s critical theology. On the other hand, such criticism does not constitute a liberation from theology, but rather a model for the reconceptualization of theological concepts, that is, a model which, for Adorno, is the only way left for us to rescue the theology that criticism aims to replace. In particular, Adorno’s critical concept “the nothingness of revelation” (as Gershom Scholem called it) is realized by not being realized. This is once again the secularization of theology and its retention in one. I largely agree with the claim that, for Adorno, religious concepts undergo transformation in the framework of which they are “evacuated of all metaphysical authority.”[[14]](#footnote-15) However, it seems to me that it is no less accurate to say that Adorno’s purpose is to discover in this manner the only possible way to not lose sight of such an authority. When he proposes the “migration in the profane” (*Einwanderung ins Profane*), he is not only suggesting the relinquishing of the godly domain, but also to protect it under the circumstances of its disappearance. This complexity – to relinquish the theological matter for the purpose of rescuing it – defines the critical dimension in education as the only way left for us to hold to the unholdable godly object, which was central also for Benjamin, and which Eliot Wolfson identified with the Jewish messianic “passion for the impossible.”[[15]](#footnote-16)

With regard to focusing on this world, the theological criticism emanating from Arendt’s political writings is perhaps the most unique. Considered the most secular thinker of her time and one who ostensibly had no interest in the theological aroma that shrouded the scholarship and writing of many of her generation, Arendt nonetheless bases both the concept of criticism and of a new order of the world on the Roman theological tradition. But this is also grounds for the claim regarding her uniqueness vis-à-vis her era since she objects to one theological tradition (which centered around a transcendental god and absolute truth), for the purpose of revealing, that is, returning to, another “hidden” theological tradition. This is the hidden theological tradition that is focused, from Arendt’s point of view, on the imminent world and on whose basis she formulates her political concepts relevant to the modern world. This does not mean to say that Arendt has as special interest in pantheism, and, in my opinion, it would be a mistake to assume that she is proposing a modern return to paganism. In my view, Arendt is proposing a distinctive version of her own for the theology of this world, which concerned the contemporary thinking surrounding her, in other words, the way in which the “reconceptualization of theological concepts” constitutes the only way to protect tradition under the circumstance of its complete disappearance.

It is possible that Arendt’s political writing represents a sort of outlier vis-à-vis the intellectuals and texts reviewed in this book. However, it seems to me that one may propose the opposite, that is, that something in the traditionalism reflected in Arendt’s position, despite and perhaps because of its unique texture, projects, to a large extent, upon the thinking of the others. The polemic on the concept of tradition, on the possibility of distinguishing it from the concept of “conservatism,” as well as its relevance today, invites perhaps a separate task, which exceeds the limits of the present book.[[16]](#footnote-17) Yet, the point that may be made is that the criticism of these thinkers enables what Hans-George Gadamar called “happening of tradition”

(*UberlieferungsgeschehenI*), that is, the “prior condition of understanding” which mediates “between the known of knowledge and the unknown that powers it, in which neither remains unaffected.”[[17]](#footnote-18) This kind of “happening of tradition” nurtures these thinkers’ obligation towards repairing the world as opposed to any possibility of detachment from it or its seclusion.

Is these thinkers’ Jewishness also expressed in the commitment to repair the world? David Biele, for example, has argued that the notion that the purpose of theology was responsibility towards the world is central to the tradition of Jewish thought. It seems that this kind of argument can be relevant also to the focus of these modern thinkers on social and political issues.[[18]](#footnote-19) Indeed, it would be largely accurate to say that for them, Judaism or Jewishness (a term Arendt preferred) “had become hard to parse.”[[19]](#footnote-20) Judith Butler’s question, “what is finally Jewish about Arendt’s thought,” is thus relevant, in different ways, to the other thinkers whose stated attitudes towards Judaism most often ranges between apathy to hostility.[[20]](#footnote-21) Even so, it appears that the difficulty that Butler and others raise is focused on the inaccessibility of content and practices of traditional Judaism to secular thinkers given that neither were a major part of their education, way of life, or formal knowledge that they had acquired (Freud, in this sense, was a bit out of the ordinary). On the other hand, for them, their Jewish identity, which none of them denied, was linked less to such religious content. It was expressed in their critical perspective on the issues they dealt with, including the possibility to “envision a place for Jews in the polity.”[[21]](#footnote-22) This seems significant to me because it can shed some light on the importance of criticism, particularly for these thinkers. For instance, what Paul Franks referred to as “Kant’s appeal to Jewish philosophers” (which according to Franks digressed beyond the domain of the Neo-Kantian school) can perhaps be understood, with minor modification, as the importance of criticism for these philosophers.[[22]](#footnote-23) I do not mean to say that the concept of criticism was relevant only for Jewish thinkers, or for all of the Jewish thinkers of the age. Yet it is possible that for many of them, precisely because for them Judaism was “something created, not given,” it constituted a driving force of critical observation in the world in which they always felt, as Paul Mendes-Flohr so accurately put it, as “cognitive insiders” but “axionormative outsiders.”[[23]](#footnote-24) Calling attention to such a possible connection between Jewish identity and criticism may perhaps explain why Horkheimer claimed that critical theory was for him and for his peers “Judaism undercover,” and why this recognition can be projected upon a wide range of Jewish thinkers of the period.[[24]](#footnote-25)

I argued throughout this work in favor of a radical change in the way in which we think about criticism. I return to this point because it gives rise to such questions as why at all is there a need to separate between critical thought and religion or theology? It is possible that in part the answer is embedded in the refusal to recognize fallibility that may constantly exist behind the veneer of scientific rationality, and in part it is related to the political meanings derived from it. It seems to me, however, that today is precisely the moment when such a transformation is most essential, given our collective responsibility to democracy in times of crisis. At the time and place in which I am writing these lines, the crisis seems particularly acute. Even so, I wish to propose a somewhat different position from that which underlines the contemporary political faultline as one that is ostensibly found between those who “adhere to the principle of secular reason and those who are ready to embrace the temptations of theocracy.”[[25]](#footnote-26)

This type of rather rigid dichotomic division was recently expressed by Peter Gordon, who, in his latest book separates between religious logic seemingly based on dominance and control and the secular-critical logic devoted to rejecting such “fantasies.” Naturally, one cannot diminish the importance of Gordon’s attempt to oppose the “pathologies” from which we suffer today, at the center of which, so it seems, is the constant, disturbing, and certainly dangerous, departure from the values identified with liberal democracy. In this regard as well, one can assume that the social reality in the post-Corona era will only continue to intensify these processes around the world. At the same time, it appears to me that this way of thinking, which distinguishes in dichotomic terms between a worthy secular approach and dangerous religious logic, suffers from a “secularist” bias – in Abrams’s terms – which aims to continue to justify the former hegemony over the latter in the public space in the framework of which only “translated,” i.e. secular, contributions may pass as relevant.[[26]](#footnote-27) Not only does this approach remain deeply suspect towards all things related to the religion external to it, but it also insists that theological concepts have meaning only when they are fully dissolved within their secular “translation.” It is unclear, therefore, how it is possible to evade the way in which such a dichotomic approach also holds the “fantasy” of the dominance and control of one tradition over another, and sketches once again, even if against its will, the conflictual lines between them.

The problem with such bias, from my viewpoint, is not grounded only in the fact that the joining of the “adherents of a religion” to the public sphere cannot, in any case, leave the “preexisting” secular discursive structure intact, as Talal Asad has demonstrated.[[27]](#footnote-28) The problem also does not only lie in the claim that it is only a western secularist point of view which transforms religion into a “closed set of ideals and values” and which therefore perceives it as “antithetical to democracy.”[[28]](#footnote-29) More than these, it relates to the fact that the binary division between the “secular” and the “religious” upon which it leans does not correlate with the richness, complexity, and perhaps even fluidity, of the secular spectrum. This spectrum contains these because of its ongoing relationship with its inherent religious origins, and with the new forms of dialogue with these sources that it can offer, especially “in our present moment of political crisis around the world.”[[29]](#footnote-30)

Therefore, the distinction which to me seems more fruitful is not between the secular and the religious positions, but a somewhat different one – between those who continue to dogmatically hold on to this dichotomy (whether it be on one side of the fence or the other) and those who reject these types of divisions in an attempt to point to the existence of a wide secular-religious spectrum as part of secular self-perception. This, it seems to me, is the conclusion derived from critical theory. Especially in Adorno, one can see how secularization, which is the denial of the possibility to maintain the absolute of religion, is important because it constitutes the only way to rescue it. Here there is certainly decisive opposition to any form of messianic realization in the world whose aim, however, is not to end messianism in the world, but rather to resuscitate it. *Nota bene*: there is no doubt that Adorno’s criticism negates any positive theological meaning, but at the same time, this negation is important only because it is the only way to continue to hold on to this possibility. We are dealing here, therefore, with an act of amalgamation which does not set criticism against the theological traditions that nurture it, but rather one that generates between them a sort of covenant “in time of need.”[[30]](#footnote-31)

Is it possible, then, that instead of the darkness descending upon us from forms of fundamentalist religiosity on the one hand, and an increasing critical loathing towards any religious matter, on the other, to choose an alternative which acknowledges the tension, in other words, the continuum, between criticism and theology? I am not particularly optimistic regarding the realization of this possibility in the world in which we live today. I do however dare to say that it is precisely the acknowledgment of the existence of this type of continuum which may invite a fruitful discussion (as opposed to opposition, mutual hostility, a demand for hegemony on part of one side over the other, or violent struggle) between traditions of thought and world views, which, just like in Kant’s *Handmaid’s Tale*, will carry the torch one before the other, or hold onto the train of a friend’s dress, and in any case, will not demand exclusivity for themselves in the world of human beings.

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26. Habermas, “Notes,” 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Talal Asad, *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. See: Asad, *Formations,* 2; James Arthur, Liam Gearon, & Alan Sears, *Education, Politics and Religion: Reconciling the Civil and the Sacred in Education.* London & New York: Routledge, 2010, 98. See also the point made in: Ayman. K. Agbaria, & Muhanad Mustafa, "The case of Palestinian civil society in Israel: Islam, civil society and educational activism,” *Critical Studies in Education*, 55.1 (2014): 44-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Gordon, *Migrants,* 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Bielik-Robson, “The Post-Secular,” 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)