

**Catholicism and the Frankfurt School**

**By**

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## Catholicism and Frankfurt School

The starting point of our discourse today is a program that has been repeated several times by the *Eternal Word Television Network* (EWTN). The program dealt with the harm that socialism had supposedly done to Catholicism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning 21<sup>st</sup> century: particularly, *Gramsci* in Italy, the *Fabians* in England, and the *Frankfurt School* in Germany, and in America.<sup>1</sup> The speaker of the program told the audience that the *Frankfurt School*, the *Institute for Social Research*, had been founded by *Lenin*, and that it was responsible for the crisis of Catholicism during and since the *Second Vatican Council*, particularly for thousands of priests and nuns who left their vocation, not to speak of many laypeople who lost their faith and left the Church since the Council in the 1960's.

### *Critical Theory of Religion and Society*

We developed the *Critical Theory of Religion and Society* (CTRS) during the late 1940's and 1950's, moving between the Catholic Theological Faculty of the Johannes Gutenberg Universität in Mainz, on one hand, and Max Horkheimer's and Theodor W. Adorno's Institute for Social Research at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität, in Frankfurt a.M., on the other: both mediated through the left, or critical, or reform Catholic editors, Walter Dirks and Eugen Kogon of the *Frankfurter Hefte*, *Journal for Culture and Politics*.<sup>2</sup> The two pairs of *dioscuri*, the believers and the enlighteners, were friends, but the believers never converted into enlighteners, nor did the enlighteners ever become believers. However, the two pairs of intellectuals respected each other and cooperated with each other. We developed the *Critical Theory of Religion and Society* with the help of Dirks and Kogon out of the *Critical Theory of Society* of Horkheimer and Adorno, of the later so-called *Frankfurt School*. We must admit that all the critical theorists from Horkheimer and Adorno, through Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, to Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, have been concerned with the emancipation of the secularized philosophy from religion up to the present of the post-metaphysical thinking in the post-secular society.<sup>3</sup> But we must also stress that they all reflected on the controversial nature and relevance of religious faith; they were willing to rescue its progressive elements, from the *saving justice* to the *rational freedom*, in the constellation of *revelation* and *autonomous reason*.

### *History of Religions*

Our CTRS, or *Dialectical Religiology*, traced the history of religions from the relative Medieval union of the sacred and the profane, faith and reason, through their modern disunion, toward their possible reunion in the future.<sup>4</sup> We concentrated on the modern antagonism between revelation and autonomous reason with the intent to reconcile them in a new way. We were aware that this antagonism between the religious and the secular, which has continually deepened in the West for the last five-hundred years, also produced splits in the religious communities themselves, between believers who stressed revelation and tradition and negated Modernity, on one hand, and believers who were also open for the modern enlightenment on the other. Likewise, we noticed that the general modern antagonism between the sacred and the profane also opposed to each other enlighteners, who negated religion and wanted it to disappear as fast as possible, on one hand, and enlighteners, who were still open for religion, and wanted to rescue some of its progressive values into Modernity and Post-Modernity on the other.

### *Reform Catholics*

We definitely sided with our CTRS on the side of Walter Dirks and Eugen Kogon, who were open, critical, reform Catholics, and at the same time participated in the bourgeois, Marxist, and also in the Freudian enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> Walter had to go to prison and internal exile for his Christian faith as well as his consequential and very early opposition to National Socialism. As theologian and journalist, Walter suffered much from fascism, together with his wife Marianne and his four children. Kogon was an Austrian Jew, who had converted to Catholicism, followed Thomas Aquinas, and had also become a critical Catholic. He then suffered much for his faith, and his consequent critique of *National Socialism*, particularly for seven years in the concentration camp Buchenwald, near Weimar, Germany's cultural center, where Goethe's Faust was born.

### *Critical Theory of Society*

Max Horkheimer, the founder of the *Critical Theory of Society*, came from an assimilated Jewish, bourgeois family, which still prayed Psalm 91 and ate kosher.<sup>6</sup> He combined in his *Critical Theory of*

*Society* with the bourgeois, Marxist, and Freudian enlightenment movements. In 1933, when Adolf Hitler came into power, and his *Frankfurt Institute* was occupied by the SA, Horkheimer had to leave fascist Germany into American exile. Adorno had a Jewish father and a Catholic mother, and was baptized a Catholic, educated a Protestant, and then participated in the bourgeois, Marxist and Freudian enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> He stayed as long as possible in Germany and England, and then followed Horkheimer into exile, not in the socialist Russia, but rather in the liberal America. Together, Horkheimer and Adorno were enlighteners who tried to translate progressive, theological elements mainly from Judaism, the *Religion of Sublimity*, and from Christianity, the *Religion of Freedom*, into the secular discourse of the modern culture experts: e.g. the Mosaic image- and name- prohibition into bourgeois and socialist enlightenment. They tried to reconcile Moses and Jesus, on one hand, and Kant, the greatest enlightener, on the other. They defined religion as *longing for the totally Other than the horror and terror of nature and history; as longing for perfect justice, and as unconditional love, which could not be found in this world; and as the longing that the murderer ought not to triumph over the innocent victim.*

### *Human Suffering*

Thus, the enlighteners Horkheimer and Adorno did certainly did not do any harm to the believers Dirks and Kogon, nor to the faith of any other Jew or Christian, or any other positive religion, as charged by EWTN. Also, the *Frankfurt School* was not founded by Lenin, as the EWTN program said. It was not Eastern Marxist, but rather Western Marxist, if Marxist at all, but also Kantian, Hegelian, Nietzschean, Kierkegaardian, and Freudian. It was in realty founded by the rich Jewish, German-Argentinian, cereal/grain merchant Weil, and his son Felix, and his friends in Frankfurt. Father Weil became rich during World War I, shipping cereal and grain to blockaded and starved out Germany, as well as Europe. Weil was a businessman with a conscience, who wanted to explore the causes of human suffering under capitalism. For this purpose, Weil founded two institutes for social research, one in Frankfurt and one in Moscow. Because of his wealth, the donor Weil very much dictated what was to happen in both institutes. When Kogon, the author of *The SS State*, not Dirks, had any doubts concerning his faith late in his life, then the reason was that he did not like the cruel way how early Christian communism dealt with the fraud of Ananias and Sapphira<sup>8</sup>; or that the Cardinal of Vienna did not help his large family during the seven years he was in the concentration camp Buchenwald; or that the Church did not fulfill the promises it had given during the Second Vatican Council, but rather betrayed them: namely to open up the windows

toward the modern world, and to enter discourse with it, and to learn from it, whatever good it may contain, as he and Dirks learned from and cooperated with Horkheimer and Adorno and their *Frankfurt Institute*. Horkheimer, Adorno, and Jürgen Habermas appeared in the *Frankfurter Hefte*. Dirks edited a book with Adorno in the *Frankfurt Institute*. During the last years of their ownership of the *Frankfurter Hefte*, before they sold it to the Social Democrats, who named it *Neue Gesellschaft*. *Frankfurter Hefte*. Late in their cooperation, Kogon wanted to make a whole issue on the theodicy problem, but Walter resisted. Walter did not want to talk about the theodicy. The theodicy was central to the *Frankfurt School*. However, it was the theodicy problem that shook Kogon's faith at the end, not the Frankfurt School. Admittedly, the theodicy was a central issue also of the CTRS.

### *Berlin Jew*

Also, my friend, Gregory Baum, was not harmed in his faith by the *Frankfurt School*.<sup>9</sup> Gregory was a Berlin Jew, who as a boy had escaped fascist Germany in the last moment before the start of World War II, to England and Canada. Here, he converted first to the Baptist Church and then to the Catholic Church, and even became an Eremite-Augustinian monk and a priest. Gregory did not get into trouble with the Church because of the *Frankfurt School*. We talked much about the *Frankfurt School* up to the point, where Pope Benedict XVI quoted affirmatively Horkheimer and Adorno in his last encyclical letter.<sup>10</sup> Gregory was sympathetic to what I told him, but the dialectical writings of Horkheimer and Adorno were too complicated for him. Negative thinking was not his cup of tea; he was an optimist. Like Walter Dirks, Gregory did not like to talk about the theodicy problem despite of the fact that theology was originally theodicy. Thus, Gregory did not really learn enough from the Frankfurters, or from Kant or Hegel, Schopenhauer or Nietzsche, whom they followed, in order to be bothered by them in his faith. Gregory's difficulties with the Church were more of a practical kind. They started with his rejection of five rules on sexuality newly issued by the Vatican. Thus, he was not allowed any longer to hear confession. In consequence, he left his order and the priesthood, but continued to teach theology in Toronto. He was finally excommunicated not because of any doctrinal issue, but rather because he married without being laicized, after having waited for the Vatican's decision for quite some time. All this had nothing to do with the Frankfurt School. Gregory and I were very different: he being a Jewish boy from Berlin, and I being an Aryan boy from Frankfurt, with very different, even opposite, experiences, and theology, and ethics. But a deep friendship bound us nevertheless together for many years up to his death: often we spoke and wrote

to each other in German.

### *Ordination*

When I in the 1950's did not let myself be ordained after a full theological study at the Universities of Mainz and Münster, this also had nothing to do with Horkheimer and Adorno, or the *Frankfurt School*, or any other member of it, but rather with the fact, that the Church did not theologially reflect on the horrible moral catastrophe of having allied itself with fascism through the *Lateran Treaty* with Benito Mussolini and the *Reichskonkordat* with Adolf Hitler, which is still valid today in the German Federal Republic, and through the treaties with other fascist states, e.g. Spain, Portugal and Croatia, because of its fear of and hate against socialism and communism.<sup>11</sup> There was complete silence. There was no real repentance and remorse. Now, after the war, the former fascist clergy was promoted and rewarded while the martyrs against fascism were forgotten: e.g. the fascist Catholic theologian and church historian Joseph Lortz, who could teach freely at the University of Münster and convert students to the NSDAP before and during the National Socialist period, on one hand, and the socialist, Jesuit Alfred Delp, on the other, who as member of the Kreisauer Kreis was charged with high treason, in relation to the Staufenberg assassination attempt of 1944, by Roland Freisler - a convert from communism to Nazism - in his blood-court in Leipzig, and was found guilty, and was sentenced to death by hanging, and was executed in Berlin, Plötzensee, on February 2, 1945, being only 37 years old. Delp, a former student in the Dieburg college, in which I taught, was committed to a *personal socialism*, based on a *theonomous humanism*, despite of the 1931 Papal prohibition against Catholics becoming members of any form of socialism, which has not yet been rescinded up to the present, 2020. This happened two years before the Catholic Adolf Hitler came into power in January 1933, who - not the brothers Strasser or Ernst Röhm - would protect the private ownership of the means of production, and thus the private appropriation of collective surplus labor, and would liquidate all forms of socialism and communism, which, if successful, would abolish all private property of the means of production, of Krupp, Thyssen, Bosch, Opel, etc., and would transform all private appropriation of collective surplus value into a collective one. Catholics, Protestants, fascists and liberals shared the hate and struggle against socialism and communism. While the German prisoners of war were still coming home from the Eastern Front, the Soviet Union, it was completely forgotten that a little more than a decade earlier four million baptized Europeans had engaged in the crusade *Barbarossa* - like the Medieval Crusaders had

marched to *Novgorod*, and Napoleon to Moscow with 800,000 men - had broken into the Soviet Union, and moved to Leningrad, Moscow, and Kiev, and had killed 26 million Russians and 6 million Jews, and had devastated every city, town and village, and that there were thousands of army chaplains marching with them who forgave their sins as they were committed. The Regens of the Priest Seminary of Mainz, Joseph Maria Reuss, had been one of them. He carried the cross and the swastika on his uniform. He witnessed how thousands of Russian children were shot and slaughtered. He fought atheistic communism so fanatically on the back of a tank that he did not even notice how his feet were freezing off in the icy cold Russian winter, and later on had to be operated on without anesthesia. Later, unable to be at the battle front, he served as chaplain in an SS prison in Paris, where he accompanied the prisoners daily to the gallows, or shooting places, and wrote consoling letters to their relatives at home when the executed were German soldiers. After the war, Reuss still did not allow socialist students to enter his seminary. Constantinian Christianity continued under the Adenauer restoration. When in this constellation I was not able to let myself to be ordained, Constantinian Christianity, and not the *Frankfurt School*, was the reason.

### *Constantinian Christianity*

Today, EWTN continues this *Constantinian Christianity*, including its anti-socialism and anticommunism, in America and elsewhere. It continually protests against Vatican attempts to have a treaty with Communist China. It imitates the anti-socialism of the conservative, populist *Fox News*, which has far more than its competitors, centrist CNN, and the leftwing MSNBC.<sup>12</sup> 34% of the American adults choose rightwing Fox News in recent years. Rightwing EWTN even shares a contributor with Fox News: The Catholic Raymond Arroyo. Fox News is pure propaganda for the Trump Administration, surpassed only by the *One American News Network*, OANN, or by the right-national website *Breitbart News Network*. With *Fox News*, EWTN supports Trumpism, arguing like the Evangelical Right, e.g. Ryan Helfenbein from the Liberty University, that, concerning the questionable, moral, authoritarian character of President Trump, *God sometimes writes straight with crooked lines*. From the Evangelical Right comes the news that the Chinese communists have produced and sent the Covid-19 pandemic in order to destroy the free capitalist West; that strict measures against the epidemic undermine the American economy; that walls should be built around cities governed by the dirty Democrats, e.g. New York, in order to protect healthy America. Democrats are attacked and demonized, and Trump is defended and deified. Recently, a woman on

an EWTN program glorified the enormous, economic accomplishments of President Trump, particularly for people of color, and the poor. For the upcoming Presidential elections of 2020, preachers of EWTN break the law, as they support the Presbyterian candidate Trump and his Republican Party against the badly Catholic candidate Biden and his Democratic Party, supposedly because the former is against abortion and the latter is for it. EWTN is against abortion, but not against the death penalty, and not against war, e.g. the continual drone assassinations of foreign leaders in other, sovereign airspace, and not against fascism, but always against socialism and communism. Fox News and EWTN seem to follow the rightwing *Info Wars*, according to which the *Deep State*, probably the Federal bureaucracy, uses the fear of the coronavirus in order to open the doors for the left, a New World Order, and Globalization, which is said to destroy America. No matter what happens, the rightwing ecosystem, including Fox News and EWTN, insists on the conviction that the epidemic is a conspiracy against Trump, and therefore rejects the recommendations of the medical experts, at least to some extent, e.g. Anthony Fauci, a famous immunologist, as servants of the *Deep State*. Also, EWTN follows the *instincts* of President Trump as the highest norm of the public sphere, situated between civil society and political state, rather than the *Evangelium*, the *Sermon on the Mount*.

### *Revolutions and Counter-Revolution*

*In the view of the CTRS*, throughout the summer of 2020, three different groups of people have been present in the streets of American cities, including Kalamazoo: two revolutionary and one counterrevolutionary. Members of the far-right *Proud Boys* group and counter-protesters, Antifa, clashed Saturday, August 15, 2020, afternoon, at Arcadia Creek Festival Place in downtown Kalamazoo, resulting in arrests. Assistant Chief Vernon Coakley of the Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety said a few people were arrested, but didn't know exactly how many. None of the fascist *Proud Boys* were arrested, while those protesting against them were. The American civil war was the last bourgeois revolution. Thus, one present group or movement marching through the American cities today demands racial justice for all African American and all people of color, and takes down secular monuments of confederate soldiers, and also religious monuments of missionaries who were connected with the pre-bourgeois feudal enslavement of so-called "Indians," or native people. Besides these people, who complete the bourgeois revolution, marches another group, which initiates a democratic-socialist revolution, and demands economic justice, or class



equality, for all wage laborers, i.e. the collective appropriation of collective surplus value, the resolution of the final social contradiction between private and collective appropriation of collective surplus labor. A third group opposes both revolutionary movements on the American streets, a counterrevolutionary movement of authoritarian populists, of Trumpists, which include the police and the army. Vice President Joseph Biden leads the New Deal, bourgeois, revolutionary group. Senator Bernie Sanders represents the social-democratic, revolutionary group. President Donald Trump leads the conservative revolutionary, or counterrevolutionary movement, opposing all forms of socialism inside and outside the country, with the help of Catholics and Evangelicals, *Fox News* and EWTN. At this moment, the bourgeois and democratic-socialist, revolutionary groups, are allied with each other against the counterrevolutionary white-supremacist Trumpism. The Presidential Election in November 2020 will decide the winning group for the immediate future, in one way or the other.

### *Theodicy*

When Karl Heinz Haag left the Jesuit seminary *St. Georgen* near Frankfurt, and joined Horkheimer and Adorno in their Institute of Social Research, and was promoted and habilitated under them on a thesis, which disproved and demolished the scholastic theodicy, his Jesuit teachers came to the occasion in great friendliness, only asking: *how can we say it better now?*<sup>13</sup> Haag did not let himself be ordained, but he continued to teach and research as a Catholic philosopher and theologian.

### *Hope*

Jürgen Moltmann did not lose his Lutheran faith when he became the student of the old Marxist Ernst Bloch, who was initially close to the *Frankfurt School*, and influenced it greatly from the start particularly in matters of religion.<sup>14</sup> Bloch enlightened young Moltmann about the utopian and revolutionary elements in Christianity. Moltmann's Christian *theology of hope* would never have come into existence without Bloch's Marxist *philosophy of hope*.

### *Political Theology*

Johannes Baptist Metz did not lose his faith or his friendship with Karl Rahner when he began to

learn from Bloch, as well as from Horkheimer and Adorno, and from Walter Benjamin and Jürgen Habermas.<sup>15</sup> Without the *Frankfurt School*, Baptist would not have been able to develop his *new political theology* on the side of the working class, against the fascist, political theology of Carl Schmitt, Adolf Hitler's jurist and political theologian, on the side of the bourgeoisie, and to contribute to the development of the Latin American *liberation theology*. Also, Baptist students' Helmut Peukert and Edmund Arens remained members of the Catholic Church, despite of the Vatican's opposition to the *new political theology* and *liberation theology*.

### *Liberal Theology*

Also, Hans Küng's difficulties with the Church did not come about because of the *Frankfurt School*.<sup>16</sup> In December 1978, Hans was forbidden by the Vatican to teach Catholic theology because of his attitude toward the *Infallibility Dogma* of Vatican I. This critical attitude Hans did not need to learn from the *Frankfurters*. For Hans, Horkheimer and Adorno and all the other critical theorists were simply *atheists*, or *agnostics*, with whom he could not make common cause. There was no cooperation between Küng's *Ecumenical Institute* in Tübingen and Horkheimer's *Institute for Social Research*. Karl Rahner criticized Küng and did not support him, not because he was influenced by the *Frankfurt School*, but rather because he was supposedly too close to Protestant liberalism. Hans was rather inclined toward a tamed capitalism than to the humanistic or democratic socialism of the *Frankfurters*, which did however not prevent him from talking with German Social Democratic politicians sometimes. Among his real friends, however, were the retired President of the German banking system, and the owners of Coca-Cola, as most generous donors for his *Ecumenical Institute* in Tübingen.

### *Post-Metaphysical Thinking*

There are many more examples that the *Frankfurt School* had no destructive effect on religion in general, and on Christianity in particular. The *Critical Theory of Society* rather makes the believer self-critical, and precisely thereby helps him to be honest, and thus to become a better believer, and thus to survive in the post-secular world, and even to become a disturbing factor, good trouble, and to resist its being locked up completely in its finite immanence.<sup>17</sup> In his last masterpiece on faith and reason, the post-metaphysical thinker, Jürgen Habermas, has summed up the open, secular,

enlightenment position of the *Critical Theory of Religion* and the *Frankfurt School* toward religion from its very start in Horkheimer's work, *L'île heureuse*, to the present, Habermas's *Also a History of Philosophy: The Occidental Constellation of Faith and Knowledge*, and *Rational Freedom: Traces of the Discourse about Faith and Knowledge*, which summary the critical Catholic theologian Edmund Arens has affirmed.<sup>18</sup> According to Habermas, secular Modernity has turned away from religion and theology with good reasons. However, reason would itself waste away and become emotionally and intellectually stunted with the disappearance of every thought that transcends what is in the world in its totality. The defense and protection against this entropy was a point of contact between the *Critical Theory of Society* and post-metaphysical thinking in general, on one hand, and the religious consciousness, on the other, as long as the latter incarnated itself in the liturgical praxis of a community, and as long as it thereby asserted itself as a present form of the *objective spirit*. Why not the absolute Spirit, the CTRS must ask?<sup>19</sup> Why this reduction? In the critical theorist Habermas's view, the rite claimed, nevertheless, to establish the connection with a Power, which broke out of the Transcendence into the finite world. As long as the religious experience could still lean on and base itself on this liturgical praxis of the representation of a strong Transcendence, it remained a *thorn in the flesh* of Modernity, or even Post-Modernity, which yielded to the suction, the vortex, the maelstrom toward a being entirely without Transcendence. So long the religious experience also kept open for the secular reason the question, if there existed still unsatisfied, semantic contents, which waited for a translation from the sacred into the profane dimension.

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