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The Sociology of Religion as Critical Theory

Ingo Mörth

It is impossible to understand and describe the critical perspective on religion in its present state without a brief retrospection its roots: the earlier Marxist analysis of religion as a superstructure of society. The basic point of view is, in short, that you have to describe and explain religion with respect to its content and function on account of the social and historical conditions and structures, especially the economical infrastructure and the corresponding structures of power. This basic argument of explanation for religion includes three aspects of a materialistic-critical analysis of religious phenomena:

- (1) religion as ideology, shaped and used by the ruling classes to maintain their power (religion -the opiate of the people) ,
- (2) religion as utopical thinking, developed and modified as reaction against oppressing social structures by the oppressed as "first form of human self-consciousness" and "protest against the real misery" (Marx), and thus legitimating revolutionary action, too, and
- (3) religion as a function of social change.

Marx and Engels themselves elaborated more on (1) and (3) , as well as other early Marxists, like Lenin and Kautsky, whereas aspect (2), the "positive" perspective on religion, was emphasized f. e .by thinkers like Max Adler or Ernst Bloch. Nevertheless this aspect was indicated by Marx and especially Engels, too.

The critical social theory and philosophy of the "Frankfurt School" within German sociology, which will be the central part of our brief description of the critical perspective within contemporary German sociology of religion, analyses religion within the dialectic framework indicated above. But the perspective changed with the general theoretical development in the critical theory towards a "negative dialectic" (Adorno 1966). Unlike Marx for the negative dialectic there is no way of a positive evolution in history, and reason is no possible principle any more, because for Adorno from the beginning of history nothing but the principles of total control have developed. The final stage of this development is reached by the totalitarian fascist state and society, and all elements of the superstructure, including religion, are nothing but the glue of: a bad reality, ideology of the status quo.

Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, who has to be regarded as a "full member" of the "Frankfurt School" , tried to show in their essays, how all the elements of culture are nothing but "ideological glue", reproducing the status quo in the heads of "one-dimensional" people. Marcuse showed in his early study on authority and family (1936), how religion was transformed finally to an ideology of bourgeois society by the development of protestantism (Luther) and especially Calvinism. And for Marcuse religion is nothing but a less and less important part of "affirmative culture" (1937, 1965). Any other aspect of religion, especially its positive, utopical elements, have been neutralized, according to Adorno, that is the specifically religious context, once a "dimension of autonomy" within society, is dissolved, and elements of religion become part of the ideology of a totalitarian society. This is shown by Adorno in his analysis of "The Psychological Technique of M. L. Thomas Radio Addresses" (1934) and some of his contributions to the "Authoritarian Personality" (1950). Other elements of culture, like astrology, have become according to Adorno an ideology of dependence, too (The Stars Down to Earth, 1957).

Somewhat contrary to Adorno's and Marcuse's perspective Max Horkheimer views religion as a possible place of a "dawning consciousness of freedom", as a still possible dimension of autonomy against the total dominance of social forces of control. Religion still holds the impulse of the desire for a better world, and this impulse can be saved by breaking historically accumulated dogmas with ideological character (1969, 1971). Thus Horkheimer distinguishes between "good" religion as a place for human hope and desire, and "bad" religion as ideology of control (1974, p. 92). For Horkheimer religion and critical theory itself converge in the desire for a totally different future.

This emphasis on the positive-utopian aspects of religion is combined with a critical theory of evolution by Jürgen Habermas and Rainer Döbert. These recent representatives of the critical tradition try to include Weber's point of view, who, in short, tried to show how religion is a way of developing human rationality. Habermas wanted to reestablish the critical theory as a practical theory, to overcome the absolute resignation of the negative dialectic (Adorno) as well as the absolute hope of Max Horkheimer, by analysing the conditions of human emancipation. For Habermas the basic condition and principal aim of emancipation can be described as a state of "communication without control", of reasonable discourse (1971).

This can be reached within society by evolutionary learning. Evolutionary learning is only possible by developing a cognitive potential in society, and the view of life and the ethics developed by religion are thus a basic condition for human emancipation (1976). Rainer Döbert (1973) tried to show how religious thinking was from the very beginning of human development on a prerequisite of progress on all stages of evolution, a necessary cognitive potential, that made it possible to institutionalize new social structures under certain social and historical conditions. And the fundamental norms of a universalistic ethic, developed in this process of human evolution, norms and ideas like justice, equality, freedom and truth, are according to Döbert the new evolutionary prerequisites for institutionalizing the new structures of a worldwide society with symmetric structures of communication, unbiased by traditional structures of power. These ideas are a cognitive potential that can be activated in emancipatory action. All other elements of religion are outdated in the evolutionary perspective and slowly eliminated.

The critical tradition within the German sociology of religion can be characterized as an essentially speculative social philosophy without much empirical foundation. Empirical material was gained through a little "detour": The critical Marxist tradition was discussed thoroughly within the big churches during the sixties (the "dialogue" between theologians and Marxists was one widely known aspect of this discussion), and thus produced a generation of critical theologians. These people self-critically analysed structure, organization, ideological ties and political involvement of the Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany by empirical means (see f.e. Spiegel 1974).

Finally it has to be pointed out that the critical dimension becomes an integral part of the general sociology of religion and its theoretical development. The sociology of religion regards itself in theoretical respect more and more as apart of the sociology of knowledge. The analyses of religion within the triangle of ideology, utopia and evolution becomes thus a central aspect of the critical analyses of human knowledge in general.