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Editorial Foreword: Dialogue between Critical Theory and Theology

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Translated by Leo Leeb

Did Karl Marx not see institutionalized religion as an ideology, a means of control by the bourgeoisie? Did he not thus turn the process of life upside down into an inverted image as seen in the *camera obscura*?^① Critical theory as a part of Neo-Marxism, actively resists the manifold forms of oppression throughout history. How then could it enter into dialogue with theology as the latter is linked to religion? However, an interesting phenomenon had arisen, in that critical theory was developed before World War II in the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, whose founders were mostly Jews. Several articles of this issue are related to second generation scholars of the Frankfurt School, e.g. Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno and the somewhat marginalized Ernst Bloch, all thinkers of Jewish descent. Here we should also mention Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, György

^① Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970).

Lukács, Erich P. Fromm and others, who shared a common ancestry with Marx; they were all Jews. Even though many of them grew up in secularized or Christianized families, Jewish monotheism and especially the critical spirit of the Hebrew prophets were very much alive in their veins, so that they could maintain sturdy resistance against all kinds of oppression in society.

If we look at the foundational work of critical theory, *Dialectics of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments (Dialektik der Aufklärung: philosophische Fragmente)*, we see that in this work Horkheimer and Adorno thoroughly criticized the dogmatism of Enlightenment rationality and the commodity fetishism of cultural industry. They wanted to look for the cause of the disease and the remedy for the distorted system of modern society. But oppression by the powerful is a ubiquitous phenomenon. How could those who resist it and still live within the system find the plumb line for their criticism? How could liberation find its realization in this world? The answer lies in the practice of “dialectics”, a kind of other-worldly utopian thought, a “negative theology” of Jewish monotheism, even an eschatological messianism that must pervade critical theory to create a transcendent ideal, so that justice and fairness as envisioned by the prophet Amos (Am. 5:24) can be realized on earth. Thus, critical theory as such can even be seen as a kind of “hidden theology” or a secular form of theology. Critical thought and utopian thought are two sides of the same coin just as construction and de(con)struction are two sides of the same coin (paragraph six) according to Heidegger in his *Sein und Zeit (Being and Time)*. Without a vision of the “not yet” (noch nicht) and

the hope of an other-worldly utopia, those who resist the many forms of oppression in their time could lose their sense of urgency. Furthermore, a vision of utopia could prevent the suppressed from becoming another generation of oppressors after their liberation. The reason why Bloch could have a kind of spiritual friendship with the core members of critical theory was that both sides wanted a messianic, eschatological redemption for the suffering masses.

In fact these core members of critical theory had considerable contact with mainstream theologians of the time. Horkheimer had the help of Paul Tillich in becoming professor and the head of the Frankfurt Institute. Tillich, on the other hand, had delved into religious socialism in the 1930's in the hope of discovering elements of faith within Marxist socialism and the prophetic tradition of early Christianity.^① Horkheimer praised Tillich's approach to Christian doctrine as symbolism, because this approach continued the hope of mysticism, namely the union between the human and the divine, the fellowship of the finite with the infinite. Horkheimer once said: "I meant that the symbolism is the necessary form of religion... and its struggle to save religion is actually the struggle of western culture for its realization."^② This seems to show that Horkheimer sought after such a mystical union in his works and at a personal level. As for Tillich, if the union between God and man brought about through

^①Paul Tillich, *The Socialist Decision*, Franklin Sherman trans. (NY: Harper & Row, 1977), 70-71.

^②Max Horkheimer, "Erinnerung an Paul Tillich", *Gesammelte Schriften VII* (Frankfurt am Mainz: Fischer, 1985), 281.

symbolism approaches utopian thought, then the “Protestant principle” he proposed in 1931 can be regarded as a critical rule. It aims to prevent people from absolutizing any relative idea from this world. The force of critique cannot come from any human authority or traditional system, otherwise there is little to prevent it from becoming demonic.^① This hypothesis is not only suited to the critique of religious institutions of our time, it is also very similar to Adorno’s critique of culture and his desire to express salvation through the method of negation. Adorno wrote his thesis to qualify for professorship on Søren A. Kierkegaard in Frankfurt under the direction of Tillich.

Of course, the more direct impact on theologians in this circle came from Bloch. He published a book on a figure of the Reformation as early as 1921, namely *Thomas Münzer as a Theologian of Revolution (Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution)*. But the greatest impact on theology came from Jürgen Moltmann’s discovery of Bloch’s three-volume work *The Principle of Hope (Das Prinzip Hoffnung)*. Moltmann says:

When I was on vacation in Switzerland I read the German version of *The Principle of Hope*. I was deeply moved to the neglect of the beautiful scenery around me. My spontaneous impression was this: “Why has Christian theology neglected its most unique theme of hope?” Bloch had quoted from

^① Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, James L. Adams trans (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1957), 163.

“Biblical passages about the exodus and the Messiah” (preface, page 17). But within today’s institutionalized Christianity, how much of the original Christian hope of the kingdom has been preserved? ^①

Today it is common knowledge that this was the inspirational source for Moltmann’s book *Theology of Hope (Theologie der Hoffnung)*, published in 1964, which influenced a whole generation ^②. But we must mention here that after this work on hope, Moltmann turned back to the theme of suffering and wrote *The Crucified God (Der gekreuzigte Gott)*. As an explanation of this title he wrote:

Moving away from Ernest Bloch’s philosophy of hope, I now turn to the questions of “negative dialectic” and the “critical theory” of T. W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, together with the experiences and insights of early dialectical theology and existentialist theology. Unless it apprehends the pain of the negative, Christian hope cannot be realistic and liberating. ^③

Not only was Moltmann interested to enter into dialogue with critical theory and the Marxists of his day, but his identification with the oppressed in his thinking and his works inspired liberation

^① Moltmann ed., Lo Kwun-lam trsl., *Wie ich mich geändert habe?* (Hong Kong, Logos & Pneuma, 2007), 18.

^② Compare Moltmann, Tseng Nien Yueh trsl., *Theologie der Hoffnung* (Hong Kong, Logos & Pneuma, 2007), 1-6.

^③ Moltmann, R. A. Wilson & John Bowden trsl., *The Crucified God* (London, SCM, 1994), 17-18.

theologians in South America, who were deeply influenced by Marxism. Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino and others have kept a long-lasting and congenial dialogue with Moltmann. However, the experience that moved him most powerfully was murder of six Jesuit priests and two women at the University of San Salvador in 1989 when the murderers wanted to silence the courageous voice of Ignacio Ellacuría. As the soldiers moved one of the dead-bodies to the room of Sobrino, they discovered a blood stained book among the carnage ; it was *The Crucified God*.^①

From these events we can get a glimpse of the positive interaction between critical theorists and theologians. The scholar of high esteem among Chinese scholars is Habermas, an outstanding figure in the second generation of critical theoreticians. His early experiences seem to indicate a lack of interest in religion. His *Theory of Communicative Action (Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns)* attempted to establish a “discourse ethics” to replace religious ethics. He demanded that religious language and narratives should withdraw from public discourse. His stance is not hard to understand. Habermas seemed to preconceive religion as a mythical, cosmological and teleological worldview (Weltbild), where God is the absolute center in a dualistic construct. Naturally, this worldview was incompatible with the ideal dialogue between equal partners. Therefore his attitude towards religion was necessarily negative.^②

^① Moltmann, *The Experience of Theological Thought (Shenxue Sixiang de Jingyan)*, Tseng Nien Yueh trans.(Hong Kong, Logos & Pneuma, 2004), 244.

^② confer Cao Weidong, “Habermas: From Negation to Affirmation”, in Chin Ken Pa ed., *Critical Theory and Sino-Christian Theology*(Hong Kong, Logos & Pneuma, 2007), 169-176.

However, the theme article by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza in this edition, “The Church as Foundation for ‘Communicative Ethics’”, points out that the concept of religion of the young Habermas was only directed against pre-modern authoritarian religion. Religion in the modern society has already undergone important transformations. It has detached itself from a mythological worldview and no longer relies on a designated authority. Now it constantly emphasizes the ethical dimension and has become a voice to be reckoned with in the realm of communicative ethics.^①

In light of this, another article in this collection sheds light on our theme. Habermas’ questioning of Michael Thünisens is of particular interest, because the latter pointed out in his *Negative Theology of Time (Negative Theologie der Zeit)* that “if the control of the past led humankind into helplessness and impoverishment, then the liberative action of God made them shake off this helplessness.”^② But Thünisens’ position differs from that of a theologian in that he thinks one can use non-theological means to reach the common goal among theologians. Perhaps it was this attitude which aroused Habermas’ interest. His critique of Thünisens can be seen as a reflection on his former position. According to Habermas’ understanding, Thünisens uses Kierkegaard’s “hope of faith” (*spes fidei*) to refute Hegel’s dialectics with its tendency to override the Other. But this philosophical and rational hope (*docta spes*) in its final analysis still

^① Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Church Community as Basis of ‘Communicative Ethics’”, Chen Weigang trsl., in *Ershiyi Shiji*, 30, 1995, 26-27.

^② Michael Thünissen, *Negative Theologie der Zeit* (Frankfurt am Mainz: Suhrkamp, 1991), 370.

needs to be rooted in (Judeo-Christian) eschatology to the point of being intrinsically linked to the mysticism of Judaism and Protestantism.

Ideally, because dialogical reason or communicative freedom must first presume a kind of absolute freedom as the precondition of its existence, it is related to the subject and the “concrete Other” of this world, while being different from its relationship to the ideal “radically Other” (even in the other world). The latter serves as a kind of model to criticize the oppressive situations which alienate the former in our reality. Thus Habermas pointed out in his *Post-metaphysical Thinking* (*Nachmetaphysisches Denken*):

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Seen from the outside, even if the functions by which religion constructs a worldview are diminished, religion still has an irreplaceable function in the communication of daily life and in dealing with extraordinary realities. Therefore post-metaphysical thought and religious practice can coexist on equal footing—not only in the common understanding of things which coexist but are not commonly shared. As long as religious language still retains its function of revelation and semantic contents in this continued coexistence – and these contents cannot be expressed by philosophical terms (so far?) – and if it continues to resist being transformed into an argumentative discourse, then philosophy will not be able to replace or eliminate religion, even if philosophy appears in a

post-metaphysical form.^①

In other words, Habermas thinks that religion should be given a proper place within the discourse of modernity. He even went to so far as to say: “One should not generally negate the hidden veracity of the worldview of religion, and one should not deprive those citizens who have religious faith of their right to take part in the common debate by using religious language.”^②

As to the role, position, approach and form of expression of theological language within the public sphere, Habermas, Thünisens and many other scholars have different opinions. But it is important that this debate has already touched the core of communicative freedom, which is at the heart of critical theory – the dialogue between the self and the Other, and the analysis and remedy of this space of inter-subjectivity. It is no wonder that Horkheimer^③, Adorno^④, Bloch^⑤ and other precursors of critical theory up to Habermas, including those outside the circle such as Emmanuel Levinas, Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek and thinkers who are concerned about society, politics, and ethics, continued without exception to revisit Hegel, Marx, and Kierkegaard’s discussions of the self and the Other, and the common context which they shared (see “The Neighbor and the Other: A Critique of Ethical Violence” for further elaboration).

^① Habermas, *Post-metaphysical Thought*, Cao Weidong trs. (Yilin Publications, 2001, 50.)

^② Habermas, “Vorpolitische Grundlagen des demokratischen Rechtsstaates?” in Zhang Qingxiong & Jason Lam eds., *Jürgen Habermas and Sino-Christian Theology* (Hong Kong, Logos & Pneuma, 34).

^③ *Traditionelle und kritische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Mainz: Fischer, 1970).

^④ Kierkegaard: *Konstruktion des Ästhetischen* (Frankfurt am Mainz: Suhrkamp, 1979).

^⑤ *Subjekt-Objekt, Erläuterungen zu Hegel* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1951).

This debate concerning the self and the Other (both in this and the other world), the reflections and new applications of the thought of Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard and others – have they not always been the concern of mainstream theologians, especially in the so-called circle of dialectical theology, namely Barth, Tillich, Bonhoeffer and others^①, and of contemporaries like Moltmann, Pannenberg^②, Jüngel^③ and Metz^④? The current academic circle in China that has been deeply influenced by dialectical thinking are traditionally steeped in relational ethics. How they will digest, incorporate and transform these debates concerning the discourse of modernity, ethics, society and politics is a huge question yet to be answered. But beyond a doubt, such debate will inspire and influence contemporary Chinese academia, culture, and thought in a major way.

^① For the Chinese discussion of Barth's and Bonhoeffer's dialectical theology, cf. my "The Remains of German Idealism in Barth's Theology and a Possible Solution", in OU Li-jen & Andres S. K. Tang eds., *Karl Barth and Sino-Christian Theology II* (HK: ISCS, 2008), 197-214. Another edition concerning the current situation of Sino-Christian theology, cf. my "A Discussion of the Social Dimension of Sino-Christian Theology: a Response to Zhang Xuefu", forthcoming in the next issue of *Journal for the Study of Christian Culture*.

^② *Basic Problems of Theology* 3 vols.; London: SCM, 1970-72.

^③ *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt*; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1977.

^④ *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft*; Ostfildern: Matthias-Grünwald, 1992.