

In What Ways Do Theological Themes and Ideas Find Expression in Adorno's Dialectic of Enlightenment?

Introduction

‘The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness.’¹ The words of Karl Marx suggest that one turns to religion because the prevailing economic and social realities make it impossible for one to find true happiness in this world. On the one hand religion is the remedy, as it offers consolation by promising true happiness in the next life, and yet on the other hand, for Marx at least, religion deprives one of real happiness because it does not tackle the underlying causes of one’s suffering in this world. Moreover, as Denys Turner notes, Christianity becomes a tool of repression because the Christian ethic of submission causes the dominant classes to ‘encourage the practice of Christianity among those they oppress.’² Whilst this suggests that Marxism takes a rather negative view of Christianity, I would argue that a more complex relationship exists. This is typified by Marx’s claim that religion is ‘the heart of a heartless world, which depicts society in a more negative light than it does religion.’³ Indeed, Marx appears to validate, in a sense, the fact that religion responds to material realities, which suggests that religion, rather than being a disease, is in fact merely a symptom of a disease.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s work is rooted in Marxism, and, during the course of this essay, I will argue that their relationship to theology is, like Marxism’s relationship to religion, a complex one. By focusing on their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I will argue that they present a critique of reason, which shapes Adorno’s critic of materialism. This is significant as Adorno’s conception of materialism not only results in him being suspicious of reductionist attitudes towards religion, but also his criticism of Marxist materialism resonates with theologians concerns with materialism. I will claim that this implies that Adorno’s work is not entirely incompatible with Christian theological ideas and themes, which is why they find expression in his work. However, I will argue that although Adorno’s work differs considerably from Milbank’s response to resolve the complexities materialism. This is because although Adorno’s response, which he terms ‘inverse theology,’ acknowledges the importance of theological themes, it rejects Milbank’s response to the complexities of materialism. As such, I will conclude that although Adorno’s work expresses certain theological ideas and themes, its relationship to theology is complex.

A Critique of The Enlightenment

During the opening of their work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer state that the Enlightenment, ‘in the widest sense’, is an ‘advance of thought’, which seeks to ‘[liberate] human beings from fear and [install] them as masters.’⁴ It aims to do this by ‘[dispelling] myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge.’⁵ In this sense, as Ross Wilson notes, the Enlightenment is a period of intellectual history in which

¹ O’Malley, J., (Eds.), (1977), *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*, p. 131.

² Turner, D., (1991), *Religion: Illusions and Liberation*. p. 321.

³ O’Malley, J., (Eds.), (1977), *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*, p. 131.

⁴ Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 1.

⁵ Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 1.

Europe emerged from the supposed superstition and irrationality of the Middle Ages, and increasingly provided ‘systematic scientific explanations of the universe.’⁶ Indeed, it is any ‘attempt at knowledge that apparently does not have the recourse to mythical or otherwise superstitious explanations.’⁷ As such, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the enlightened thinking denotes ‘any operation of sceptical demythologization.’⁸

It thus becomes apparent that the opposition between myth and reason is central to Adorno and Horkheimer’s thesis. Enlightenment opposes itself to myth in that the former seeks to free humankind from the fear that is inherent in a mythical construction of the world.⁹ For instance, if one hears a noise in the middle of the night, one may try to explain such a noise by attributing it to a monster under the bed, and as a result one may cower under the duvet in fear. On the other hand, one may opt to investigate and on turning on the light discover that a book, which had fallen off a shelf, caused the noise. Whilst the former is a result of a mythical belief in monsters, the latter is a result of one taking rational steps to enlighten oneself about the true source of the noise.¹⁰ Although one may consider a mythical belief in monsters to be irrational, Adorno and Horkheimer do not consider this to be the case. Instead, they consider myths to be inaccurate forms of rational thought, as they ultimately attempt to try and understand, and control, the natural environment.¹¹ As such, ‘myth is already enlightenment’¹² insofar as myths are an ‘attempt at knowledge’:¹³ a belief in monsters is an attempt to explain what caused the noise.

Nevertheless, for Adorno and Horkheimer, reason goes beyond myth in that the former ‘[reduces] natural phenomena to matter or [...] mere objectivity.’¹⁴ This leads to the ‘disenchantment’ of the world and the ‘domination’ of nature.¹⁵ Enlightened reason thus superseded a mythical way of conceiving the world, which ‘[intellectualised mythologies] in the form of ontological essences.’¹⁶ This occurs as reason forces its object into a rigid schema, based on the tenets of ‘positivism’,¹⁷ which places emphasis on value-neutral facts.¹⁸ By doing so, reason reduces the multitude of natural phenomena to the ‘mere object of enlightened thought about it and manipulation of it.’¹⁹ Furthermore, reason requires the dismissal of any ‘immanent powers or hidden properties’ from nature, such as an inherent divinity, hence ‘essence’ is dismissed as a mystical, subjective fiction.²⁰ For Adorno and Horkheimer, enlightened reason thus strips nature of any inherent meaning: natural phenomena are reduced to matter, or ‘mere objectivity.’²¹

⁶ Wilson, R., (2007), *Theodor Adorno*, p. 11.

⁷ Wilson, R., (2007), *Theodor Adorno*, p. 12.

⁸ Jarvis, S., (1998), *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, p. 25.

⁹ Wilson, R., (2007), *Theodor Adorno*, p. 12.

¹⁰ Wilson, R., (2007), *Theodor Adorno*, p. 13.

¹¹ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 24.

¹² Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xviii.

¹³ Wilson, R., (2007), *Theodor Adorno*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 4, 6.

¹⁵ Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 1, 21.

¹⁶ Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 6.

¹⁷ Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁸ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 28.

¹⁹ Wilson, R., (2007), *Theodor Adorno*, p. 16.

²⁰ Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 3.

²¹ Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 6.

However, in its domination of nature reason is affected by the very domination that it inflicts on nature, Adorno and Horkheimer write: ‘Human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is exerted. Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows the extent that he can manipulate them.’²² What the authors appear to mean by this is that as reason dominates nature it becomes increasingly ‘estranged’ from that which it dominates.²³ Although Adorno and Horkheimer make a distinction between object and subject, they also suggest that the notions of ‘estrangement’ and abstraction are related. Enlightened abstraction is described as being the ‘instrument of the enlightenment’, which ‘stands in the same relationship to its objects as fate, whose concept it eradicates.’²⁴ In this sense ‘enlightenment reverts to mythology,’ as enlightened abstraction treats objects in the same way as a mythical belief in fate.²⁵ As Wilson claims, this is because enlightenment and fate both ‘hold absolute sway over the objects to which they relate.’²⁶ Moreover, enlightened abstraction is connected to the notion of estrangement, as the former presupposes ‘the distance of subject from object.’²⁷

It thus becomes apparent that Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is, in part, a critique of reason, and more generally a critique of enlightenment. I would argue that this is because fear still permeates human life, and as enlightenment seeks to eradicate fear from human life it becomes apparent that it has failed to achieve this end. However, that is not to say that the authors are claiming that reason, or the Enlightenment project, should be abandoned. Instead, I would tend to agree with Wilson, who claims that Adorno and Horkheimer are ‘enemies of the enlightenment for the sake of enlightenment.’²⁸ The authors are suspicious of declarations that claim that enlightenment—the reconciliation of reason and nature— has been achieved.²⁹ As they realise that it is easier make such a declaration than to fulfil the aims of progressive thought and action, the authors seek to ‘re-enable enlightenment to reflect upon itself.’³⁰

The issues outlined in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* runs throughout Adorno’s work, and help to shape his conception of materialism. Indeed, I will now argue that Adorno’s notion of materialism not only make him resistant to reductionist attitudes towards religion, but that his criticism of Marxist materialism resonate with John Milbank’s criticism of the materialist worldview.³¹

²² Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 6.

²³ Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 21.

²⁴ Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 9.

²⁵ Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xviii.

²⁶ Wilson, R., (2007), *Theodor Adorno*, p. 17.

²⁷ Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 9.

²⁸ Wilson, R., (2007), *Theodor Adorno*, p. 23.

²⁹ Wilson, R., (2007), *Theodor Adorno*, p. 23.

³⁰ Wilson, R., (2007), *Theodor Adorno*, p. 24.

³¹ John Milbank is a noted contemporary theologian.

Andorno and Milbank's Critique of Materialism

The concept of demythologization, and the notion that reason can turn into its opposite—‘enlightenment reverts to mythology’— have an influencing affect on Adorno’s criticism of materialism. Simon Jarvis, in his essay ‘Adorno, Marx, Materialism’, articulates this point, he writes: ‘[the problem that] *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [...] sets out is in fact decisive for the whole character of Adorno’s later materialism’, which is preoccupied with ‘[t]he ways in which Materialism, when converted into a method or a worldview, turns into its opposite.’³²

For Adorno Materialism is synonymous with demystification, as it attempts to relieve humankind of deluded beliefs in ‘immaterial entities’, or ‘ideological conceptions of society.’³³ By doing so, however, materialism often turns into its opposite, as its principles are rooted in metaphysical assumptions. For instance, naturalistic explanations regarding human behaviour are often dependent on assumptions about human beings, contemporary society, or even about matter itself, and one’s enquiry of it.³⁴ As Jarvis notes, such a problem has always existed in materialist thought, and can be traced back to the Greek philosopher Democritus. Democritus’s materialism was primarily based on the following principle: ‘[n]othing will come of nothing, and nothing which is can be annihilated.’³⁵ The last part of Democritus’s principle appears to be impregnated with the ‘Eleatic’ and strikingly unmaterialist notion ‘of substance as that which is eternal and can suffer no decay.’³⁶

However, Jarvis goes further and claims that such a difficulty also occurs when materialism is regarded as a method.³⁷ Adorno also appears to share the same criticism, he writes: ‘once the object becomes an object of cognition, its physical side is spiritualized from the outset by translation into epistemology.’³⁸ Adorno is articulating the notion that materialism, once regarded as a method, treats all objects as though they are the same. As a result, an object’s ‘particularity’, and ultimately its ‘concreteness’, or materiality, is ignored, as it is required to ‘fit the mould of a generalised method’.³⁹ As Adorno claims that objects are influenced by material conditions, which can change and shape an object, he does not consider the truth of an object’s material reality to be immediately available to the subject, nor does he consider an object to present itself to the subject in an uncomplicated manner.⁴⁰ As materialism attempts to fit all objects into a generalised method, it is thus blind to this dynamic influence. Consequently, in a similar fashion to reason, although thought that attempts to demystify, or overcome, a certain belief system may achieve its ends, in doing so it may impose a new set of assumptions that are equally mythological and incomplete.⁴¹ It thus becomes apparent that there is a connection between Adorno’s view of materialism, and his dialectic of enlightenment. Indeed, such a view has wider

³² Jarvis, S., (2004), ‘Adorno, Marx, Materialism’, p. 86.

³³ Jarvis, S., (2004), ‘Adorno, Marx, Materialism’, p. 79.

³⁴ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 28.

³⁵ Jarvis, S., (2004), ‘Adorno, Marx, Materialism’, p. 79.

³⁶ Jarvis, S., (2004), ‘Adorno, Marx, Materialism’, p. 79.

³⁷ Jarvis, S., (2004), ‘Adorno, Marx, Materialism’, p. 80.

³⁸ Adorno, T. W. (1966), *Negative Dialectics*, p. 192.

³⁹ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 29.

⁴⁰ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 30.

⁴¹ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 30.

implications for Adorno's work: first, it shapes his views toward religion insofar as it causes him to be resistant towards a simplistic, reductionist outlook on religion;⁴² and secondly, the concerns that he has, which come out of his criticisms of a rigid, positivistic conception of materialism, resonate with the preoccupations of a number of notable contemporary theologians, including John Milbank.⁴³

Milbank, in his essay 'Materialism and Transcendence', is, like Adorno, concerned with challenging a view of human life that claims that the sum total of experience and possibility, and thus reality, is limited to what can be 'observed in present concrete material existence.'⁴⁴ For Milbank, this is because such a claim calls into question the existence of any sort of invisible divine reality, and the valuation of non-quantifiable experiences or values.⁴⁵ Milbank claims that every socialism, including Marxism, requires an account of 'human nature and the role of human beings within the cosmos.'⁴⁶ Without such an account the basis on which to claim that something needs to be liberated, or, in fact, that liberation could be successful at all, becomes unclear.⁴⁷ Moreover, he claims that such an ontology ought to be a materialist one because socialism conceives 'earthly justice' to be bound up with 'material distribution.'⁴⁸ Moreover, as human knowledge and human customs of justice are related to each other, they cannot be distinguished from 'historically arising patterns of production and exchange.'⁴⁹ He notes that since the 1950s the reforming efforts of 'French-influenced *Marxisant* thought' has sought to find an alternative ontology, rooted in 'non-reductive' materialism, that is more adequate than the one posited by Marx and Engels.⁵⁰

Milbank makes a distinction between 'reductive' and 'non-reductive' materialism. Whereas the latter claims that matter is inert, passive and mechanistic, the former 'imagines matter as that which can itself occasion subjectivity and meaning because it is the site for the emergence of a spontaneous and unpredictable energy.'⁵¹ Milbank notes that reductively materialist Marxism is inadequate insofar as it is difficult to reconcile this with 'Marx's absolute valuation of subjects freely reaching their full productive and expressive potential.'⁵² Consequently, Milbank seeks to develop a non-reductive materialism, which views matter as self-transcending. Nevertheless, he takes issues with recent secular attempts to theorise a non-reductive materialist ontology that supports socialist aspirations, such theories ultimately conceive the self-transcending reality of matter in 'etherealized' or 'idealized' terms.⁵³ What is of concern to Milbank is that by treating matter in such an abstract way the 'real material processes' will become by-products of 'logical processes' or the 'magical outcome of

⁴² Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 29.

⁴³ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 31.

⁴⁴ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 31.

⁴⁵ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 31.

⁴⁶ Milbank, J., (2010), 'Materialism and Transcendence', p. 221.

⁴⁷ Haynes, P., (2012), *Immanent Transcendence*, p.154

⁴⁸ Milbank, J., (2010), 'Materialism and Transcendence', p. 222.

⁴⁹ Milbank, J., (2010), 'Materialism and Transcendence', p. 222.

⁵⁰ Milbank, J., (2010), 'Materialism and Transcendence', p. 221.

⁵¹ Milbank, J., (2010), 'Materialism and Transcendence', p. 221.

⁵² Milbank, J., (2010), 'Materialism and Transcendence', p. 221.

⁵³ Milbank, J., (2010), 'Materialism and Transcendence', p. 222.

pure willing.⁵⁴ For Milbank, therefore, such abstract conceptions involve the object being dominated by the subject who is observing it, which resonate with Adorno's criticism of reason.

Adorno's Inverse Theology: A Complex Relationship to Theology

Both Adorno and Milbank's criticism of materialism share similar concerns, which is significant for two reasons: first, Adorno's suspicion of simplistic reductive claims about religion suggest that he is not entirely dismissive of Christianity or its theology; and secondly, Adorno's criticism appears, to some degree, to be compatible with the concerns that Christian theologians have about materialism. I would argue that this implies that Adorno's work is not entirely incompatible with Christian theological ideas and themes, which is why they find expression in his work. However, the different ways in which Milbank and Adorno respond to the complexities of material, suggest that the latter does not consider theology, or indeed any 'fixed metaphysical certainty', to be an adequate response.⁵⁵ By doing so, I will argue that Adorno starts from a wish to end human suffering, and whilst theology has an important role in his work, he formulates the concept of an 'inverse theology', which is neither a positive nor a negative theology.

For Milbank, the only way in which to avert an object from being dominated by a thinking subject, and thus respond to the complexities of materialism, is to 'invoke theology',⁵⁶ by which he means a 'positive and systematic ontology.'⁵⁷ Such an ontology can only be achieved through the adoption of the Christian metanarrative, which traces God's relationship to humankind and His creation of the universe.⁵⁸ According to Milbank, it is the Christian metanarrative that enables an 'ideal materialism' to emerge that 'does not result in the out-and-out triumph of idealism.'⁵⁹ This is because Milbank claims that it is only when materialism is placed inside the Christian metanarrative that philosophy can maintain an ontology that can '[guard] matters incomplete transcendence.' Indeed, Milbank maintains that is only Christian theology that can foster a subjective attitude towards matter that acknowledges its reality.⁶⁰

Conversely, for Adorno, the introduction of a mediating concept cannot resolve the tension between matter and knowledge, nor is seeking a 'fixed metaphysical [...] certainty' an appropriate way to respond to the complexities of materialism, as it merely masks the ambiguous natural and 'internal contradictions' of society.⁶¹ Indeed, Adorno does not start his materialism from a set of metaphysical or methodological commitments.⁶² Instead, he starts from the utopian wish for an end to suffering.⁶³ Consequently, Adorno's philosophy attempts to confront human suffering, and thus the most appropriate respond is to be committed to

⁵⁴ Milbank, J., (2010), 'Materialism and Transcendence', p. 223.

⁵⁵ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 31.

⁵⁶ Milbank, J., (2010), 'Materialism and Transcendence', p. 226.

⁵⁷ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 32.

⁵⁸ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 33.

⁵⁹ Milbank, J., (2010), 'Materialism and Transcendence', p. 229.

⁶⁰ Milbank, J., (2010), 'Materialism and Transcendence', p. 235.

⁶¹ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 31.

⁶² Jarvis, S., (2004), 'Adorno, Marx, Materialism', p. 80.

⁶³ Jarvis, S., (2004), 'Adorno, Marx, Materialism', p. 80.

bringing suffering to an end, by ‘encouraging an attentive sensitivity to social suffering’.⁶⁴ Theology has an important role in achieving this end insofar as he considers theology to be an expression of human suffering itself.⁶⁵ Moreover, Adorno is interested in theological discourse, as he considers it to challenge current social conditions and give expression to a concern for ‘alternative social possibilities.’⁶⁶ As a result, although theological themes are explicitly incorporated into Adorno’s work, the way in which he engages with such themes is distinct. This is because Adorno’s concept of ‘inverse theology’ does not consider contemporary society to pose questions to theology, which are then answered by examining the Christian theological tradition. This methodology assumes that Christianity shapes the answers, which may then be subject to revision in order to reflect contemporary experience.⁶⁷ Instead, Adorno inverts this ‘theory of correlation.’⁶⁸ As such, he considers theological conceptions, such as redemption, justice, the messianic and the banning of images of the divine, to question society, and it is then the job of human beings to construct the answers to these questions, within the context of their own social conditions.⁶⁹ Adorno’s notion of ‘inverse theology’, rather than imposing idealist concepts from the top-down, thus seeks to uncover new insights.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would argue that Adorno’s work has a complex relationship to theology. The critic of reason that is presented in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* not only helped to shape Adorno’s conception of materialism, but it also resonates with certain concerns that theologians have about materialism. Indeed, Milbank shares Adorno’s general criticisms of Marxist materialism, which indicates that Adorno’s work is compatible with certain Christian theological concepts. Adorno’s ‘inverse theology’ acknowledges that theological themes have an important role, as they are an expression of human suffering. Moreover, the theological discourse challenges prevailing social conditions and give expression to a concern for alternative social possibilities. However, it appears that Adorno rejects the way in which some theologians impose idealist concepts from the top-down.

⁶⁴ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 7

⁶⁵ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 7.

⁶⁶ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 7.

⁶⁷ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 7.

⁶⁸ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 7.

⁶⁹ Brittain, C. C., (2010), *Adorno and Theology*, p. 7.

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