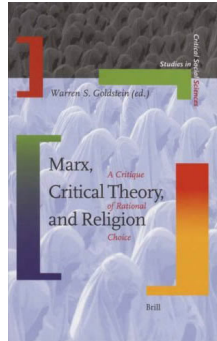


○ **REVIEW OF WARREN S. GOLDSTEIN (ED.),
**MARX, CRITICAL THEORY AND RELIGION: A
 CRITIQUE OF RATIONAL CHOICE****
 (STUDIES IN CRITICAL SOCIAL SCIENCES, VOL. 6. LEIDEN: BRILL, 2006)

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It is always instructive to see how the Bible is treated in other disciplines apart from the small corner of biblical studies. In this collection edited by Warren Goldstein, the discipline in question is sociology, especially the sociology of religion. Volume six in the Brill series, ‘Studies in Critical Social Sciences’, it offers a range of essays linked together by two main features: a commitment to developing the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (or, more properly, the *Institut für Sozialforschung*) for the study of religion and a challenge to the ‘rational choice’ approach to the study of religion that has swamped the sociology of religion in the last decade or so. Indeed, the ‘critical theory of religion’ is the means of challenging the champions of rational choice. This is the context in which we find the essays that deal specifically with the Bible: three essays out of twelve (those by Horkheimer, Goldstein and Lunschow). Even though I will make some critical comments about these essays, it is refreshing to see biblical matters as part of a wider debate.

Before I do engage with the essays directly, there are two prior questions. First, what is ‘rational choice’ theory? Coming out of mathematics and then moving through economics and politics to religion, its basic position is that in a given situation human beings will make a choice based on a cost benefit assessment of the risk involved. Invariably, goes the assumption, we will weigh up the benefits over against the costs and make our choice accordingly. Applied to religion, it means that human beings will opt for the religion that provides, on balance, greater returns. For example, as Rodney Stark has argued, the success of early Christianity was due to the stress on strong commitment, resurrection, life in heaven and community. This more than compensated for the risk of martyrdom and persecution. Indeed, in regard to critics like Rodney Stark, one of the useful features of this volume was to position and critique such rational choice theorists within their own discipline. Stark turns out to be an ideologue who pushes rational choice theory in all eras, whether it is comparing ‘free-market’ Christianity in the USA (favourably) over against ‘state monopoly’ Christianity of Scandinavia (unfavourably), or in assessing the appeal of funda-

mentalism and Pentecostalism, or in seeking for reasons why Christianity ‘triumphed’ in the Roman Empire.

The second question concerns the meaning of ‘critical theory’. In this collection critical theory means not the general collection of approaches nowadays called ‘theory’ (all the way from Derrida to eco-criticism), but specifically the work of the Frankfurt School with its efforts to bring together the various strands such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, Max Weber and Nietzsche. In the hands of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Jürgen Habermas, such critical theory provides the seeds for a full-blown critical theory of religion – something this volume seeks to develop. As a dialectical approach, a critical theory of religion attempts to see various forms of religion – mainstream, marginal, millennial, fundamentalist and so on – as responses to distinct situations. Religion often becomes a way to register protest against trauma, exploitation and marginalisation. For example, fundamentalist Islam may be seen a response to and protest against the economic and political marginalisation of some majority-Muslim states within the current global scheme of capitalism (as the essay by Lauren Langman argues). Politically, critical theory is distinctly on the left, while rational choice theory is very much part of the dominant neo-liberalism of this phase of capitalism.

As for the essays themselves, they range over various topics within such a debate, a few engaging directly with and critiquing rational choice theory and most seeking to develop further the critical theory of religion. In the former category is the essay by Christopher Craig Brittain, ‘From *A Beautiful Mind* to the Beautiful Soul: Rational Choice, Religion, and the Critical Theory of Adorno & Horkheimer’. Brittain offers a useful overview of rational choice (I have borrowed from him in my description above), showing how it works and where it falls short – in the assumption that human beings in every time and place operate in the same way, in the exclusion of many factors when setting up a situation where one case exercises rational choice, in its connections with neo-liberal economic theory. Over against this he makes heavy use of Max Horkheimer (who always had a soft spot for religion) in order to argue that religion is more like the cry of the oppressed creature, giving hope for a better world. I am less enamoured with Michael R. Ott’s ‘The Notion of the Totally “Other” and its Consequence in the Critical Theory of Religion and the Rational Choice Theory of Religion’. Apart from the sense that I was reading a sermon (he is an ordained minister), his criticism is more superficial (rational choice is the commodified expression of the capitalist class) and he says little that Brittain does not say concerning Horkheimer and a critical theory of religion.

Another sustained critique of rational choice is one of the three essays on matters relating to biblical studies - George Lundskow, ‘The Concept of Choice in the Rise of Christianity: A Critique of Rational-Choice Theory’. Lundskow focuses on Rodney Stark’s use of rational choice to offer another angle on the rise of early Christianity. Apart from methodological problems (universality of human rationality and the use of mathematical and economic models to study religion), Lundskow usefully points to Stark’s glib (mis-)use of empirical data. Thus, over against the image of a knock-down victory of Christianity in the 4th and 5th centuries, when ‘paganism’ showed its vulnerable belly and people chose Christianity because it gave better returns on the religious market, Lundskow points to the long co-existence of Christian and ‘pagan’ forms of religion and then the gradual absorption by Christianity of a host of such ‘pagan’ features.

The remaining essays follow various paths in developing a critical theory of religion. Some reconsider Marx, such as Andrew M. McKinnon in his essay, 'Opium as Dialectics of Religion: Metaphor, Expression and Protest', where there is a brilliant section on the sense of 'opium' in Marx's time (vital medicine and emerging problem), or William Clare Roberts's 'The Origin of Political Economy and the Descent of Marx', which overdoes the attempt to see the structure of Marx's *Capital* in terms of Dante's *Inferno*. Others attempt to apply critical theory to elements of current religious belief and practice, such as the study of thanatology in Kenneth G. MacKendrick's 'Intersubjectivity and Religious Language: Toward a Critique of Regressive Trends in Thanatology', or the ethnomethodological¹ study of the worship of two Assemblies of God churches in Detroit in 'Speaking in Tongues: A Dialectic of Faith and Practice' by Bonnie Wright and Anne Warfield Rawls, or in a more standard sociological essay with discussions of method, presentation of data (in tables) and then analysis, the effort to move beyond the critical *theory* of religion in order to see how it works out in empirical sociological research in 'Operationalizing the Critical Theory of Religion' by David Gay, Warren S. Goldstein and Anna Campbell Buck, or the attempt to interpret the rise of fundamentalist Islam as a response to the perceived failure of Muslim-majority states to be influential in global politics and economics in Lauren Langman's 'From the Caliphate to the *Shahedim*: Toward a Critical Theory of Islam'.

However, I want to say a little more about the three remaining essays. There is a piece by the grandfather of critical studies of religion, Rudolph Siebert, called 'Toward a Dialectical Sociology of Religion: A Critique of Positivism and Clerico-Fascism'. It reminds me of the 1980s, for that is when I read some of Siebert's work. His style and content is largely the same: ponderous sentences that glide over complexities, assuming that Adorno and Horkheimer had a distinct critical theory of religion based on the idea of the 'imageless entirely other'. This is highly problematic: there are some hints and undeveloped statements in their work, but certainly no comprehensive theory. The essay becomes more interesting with the use of Adorno's critique of fascism and its supporters to attack what he calls 'clerico-fascism', i.e. the fundamentalism of the likes of Pat Robertson.

There is also a short translation of Max Horkheimer's 'Psalm 91', which is more of a homily by a man who began to rediscover his Jewish roots as he came closer to the grave. It is the Psalm that his mother loved, and a verse appears on Max Horkheimer's own tombstone. Here, on a very personal level, Horkheimer restates the Marxist point that religion is the cry of the oppressed creature, but he goes much further to seek comfort in the statements of the psalm concerning God's care for the oppressed. When I first read this essay I wondered what such a homily was doing in this collection, apart from the obvious of being from Horkheimer. On further thought, I realised that it performs a function that may well be unintended: it shows how undeveloped Horkheimer's position actually was. Some basic insights are there, but it really needs some serious further work.

Finally, the editor, Warren S. Goldstein, has his own essay, called 'Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity: A Critical/Dialectical Conflict Approach to Biblical History'. Given my interest in these matters, not least in the figures Goldstein relies upon (Karl Kautsky, Ernst Bloch and Max Weber) I expected much. Let me put it this way: it is a good survey of how the literature of the Bible constantly tells stories of conflict. The problem comes when Goldstein connects this with the social reality 'behind' the text. It is not just that he takes the text as a 'rational paraphrase'

(I borrow this term from Niels Peter Lemche) of that social reality, but that he relies on Kautsky, Bloch and Weber for his information. Now, they are all fascinating studies, more for the questions and perspectives they raise, for the groundbreaking efforts they represent, even for the mistakes they made, but one must tread very carefully when dealing with their historical reconstructions. It is easy to say to someone from another field that they have not read enough in biblical studies (or any other discipline they might care to branch into), but in this case at least one or two more recent studies would have helped to show up the limits of Kautsky and company.

All in all, perhaps because of its shortcomings it is a fascinating collection, a snapshot of one side of an ongoing debate in a discipline from which biblical studies has drawn on many occasions. What I find encouraging is that most of the contributors are younger researchers who want to retool that broad field of Marxism for the study of religion. My sense is that this is happening across many more disciplines, and that can't be a bad thing.

As is appropriate for the end of a book review, I should comment that the book's bibliography is collated at the end and it has a very useful and full index.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ethnomethodology studies the ways participants make their actions recognisable to one another as actions to which meaning, belief and value can be assigned.