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BEYOND RELIGIOUS IDEAS:  
THE LEGACY OF MAX WEBER IN  
CRITICAL THEORY AND CRITICAL RELIGION

In his essay “The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion,”<sup>1</sup> Donald Wiebe heralds a courageous return to the Enlightenment principles which once characterized the “science of religion,” particularly in the nineteenth century. Just a year after he first published the essay (1984), Wiebe co-founded the North American Association for the Study of Religion, helping to inaugurate a branch of religious studies scholarship loosely referred to today as “critical religion.”

Critical religion has maintained that although religious studies separated itself from theology proper as early as the nineteenth century, extra-scientific concerns in the form of latent theological agendas took hold of the academic study of religion, rendering it quasi-confessional. These latent agendas are characterized primarily by the phenomenology of religion, yet Wiebe also sees them extending as widely as the humanities more generally, which has been marred by a general, existential search for meaning at the neglect of the natural sciences.<sup>2</sup>

These sorts of arguments aren’t confined to what I’m here calling “critical religion.” However, critical religion attaches a particularly trenchant edge to its critiques, pressing resolutely for what it understands to be a pure science of religion. For Wiebe and others associated broadly with critical religion, for example Robert Segal, Russell McCutcheon, or Craig Martin, once theological agendas are excised from the academic study of religion, the methodology we are left with, or are free to recover, is that of the natural sciences: empirical, testable, and without conclusions being set in advance by any extra-scientific agendas.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Wiebe, “The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion” in *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999) 141-62.

<sup>2</sup> “[T]he period from 1945 to 1960 not only represented no advance in the development of Religious Studies as an academic or scientific undertaking; it amounted to a retrograde step, in that, like the classics in the colonial curriculum, it defined itself only in terms of a reaffirmation of ‘commitment to civilization,’ thus ‘reaffirming’ its opposition to the sciences.” Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies*, 77.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in the introduction to McCutcheon’s well-known genealogical analysis of Eliade, *Manufacturing Religion*, he suggests that if particular “theories, commitments, and contexts” of religion are non-testable, then they are not viable because they assuredly participate in the ideological project of insulating a sui

The main contention of this essay is that critical religion's argument for "natural science" as the only properly academic approach to religious studies turns on a characterization of a particular nineteenth century distinction, between the "scientific" and the "confessional" that was later called into question beginning with Max Weber at the turn of the twentieth century. The primary Weberian criticism—the rejection of an explanatory, material first principle for religion—coupled with the recovery of "religious thought" as a sphere of analysis was carried into the Frankfurt School in their articulation of the dialectic of enlightenment.

Critical religion, however, has omitted this aspect of the Weberian legacy, instead characterizing Weber as part of the same reductive project of the nineteenth century and, thus, their own project as well, arguing that if a method is non-confessional, it must be empirically reductive and vice versa. The distinction between critical religion and Critical Theory can best be understood by examining how each understands "rationality," which is drawn out in Weber's analysis of the rationalization of religious and economic values. In short, critical religion maintains that there is a universal standard for rationality and truth characterized by natural science, while Critical Theory understands "rationality" to be itself a set of values that puts the Enlightened subject at the center of all claims to knowledge.

The paper shows that whereas critical religion has maintained that the fundamental debate in religious studies is between natural scientific and phenomenological/theological (i.e. confessional) approaches, the critical-theoretical Weberian legacy highlights a more fundamental dichotomy in religious studies between ontological and axiological analyses—that is, between what religion *is* and what it *does*. On these terms, the critique of phenomenology and "theological agendas" can certainly continue as necessary on the ontological side, but such a critique has little to say about an analysis of the ways that religious values have determinant effects on material reality—a central consequence of Weber's work.

Indeed, a materially reductive analysis by definition rejects that possibility altogether. Here, I am rejecting the reductive claim that religious values are always wholly determined and thus explained by material reality.

I begin by laying out how I understand Weber's position before turning to how Weber is taken up in critical religion and critical theory. Both threads depend upon Weber's understanding of *value* and the role values play in sociological analysis, which Weber draws primarily from the Neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert's philosophy of history. Time does not permit a full treatment of Rickert's theory; however, we can see his indebtedness to Rickert clearly from one methodological sentence in Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

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genesis concept of religion from criticism. It is not at all clear, however, how the genealogical, colonial (i.e. political) critique of religion McCutcheon advances is "testable" or what it would even mean to claim that it is. Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 6.

Weber writes of “the spirit of capitalism” that, “If any object can be found to which this term can be applied with any understandable meaning, it can only be an *historical individual*, i.e. a complex of elements associated in historical reality which we unite into a conceptual whole from the standpoint of their cultural significance.”<sup>4</sup> We can unpack this definition of the “historical individual” in order to see what is at stake in Weber’s method.

Following Rickert, Weber sees socio-historical reality as an infinitely complex web of individual phenomena that are themselves infinitely complex. This individuality and complexity entails a *logical* distinction between the ways in which the natural and historical sciences regard individual phenomena: The natural sciences abstract from individuals to form general concepts,<sup>5</sup> while the historical sciences are interested in conceptualizing phenomena in their individuality. Importantly, “individual” for both Weber and Rickert is not limited to material objects.

Any “object” that can be formed into a conceptual whole can be regarded as a historical individual. History is, by definition, composed of unrepeatable, unique individual phenomena; therefore it logically excludes general concept formation as a tool for historical analysis. Historical science, is interested only in these kinds of individuals, which it treats as conceptual wholes Weber calls “historical individuals,” a term drawn from Rickert.

All individuals of experience are *potential* historical individuals, none more complex than any other in their total empirical reality because all individuals of experience are infinitely complex. Because of this infinite complexity, any historical individual is still a conceptual abstraction—it cannot account for the *total* empirical reality from which the concept is constructed,<sup>6</sup> which is why Weber refers to historical individuals as a “complex of elements associated in historical reality.”

Even in identifying an individual, it is still necessary that we highlight the elements that we think generate the clearest picture of it as a conceptual whole while maintaining its unique individuality as much as possible. Weber says that this is accomplished from “the standpoint of cultural significance,” which is to say the cultural significance of the historical individual to the time

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<sup>4</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2002) 13, his emphasis.

<sup>5</sup> “Each leaf on a tree, every lump of sulfur a chemist puts in his retort, is an individual. As such, it can no more be subsumed under a natural scientific concept than any great personality of history. As regards leaves or sulfur, however, we *automatically* conceive the single individuals as nothing more than instances of general concepts. In other words, we pay no attention to what constitutes them as individuals. This is necessary, for only under this condition do we obtain “leaves” or “sulfur” in the sense of natural science. Here we are *interested* only in individuals as generic cases.” Heinrich Rickert, *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science: A Logical Introduction to the Historical Sciences*, ed. and trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 56-7, his emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> Rickert calls the gap between conceptualization and empirical reality a *hiatus irrationalis*. For Rickert, the relation between historical concepts and empirical reality is closer than that between the natural sciences and empirical reality because the former attempts to capture reality as Rickert argues it actually is. Rickert, *The Limits of Concept Formation*, 35.

and place in which it is located. In other words, when we make our choices in sketching out the historical individual, we do so on the basis of *value* – not our own subjective values but those of the culture in question.<sup>7</sup>

In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber sets out to identify those values *and* material conditions, which come together to form “the spirit of capitalism” as a conceptual whole. Here we see the primary way in which Weber may be distinguished from the nineteenth century theorists of religion admired in critical religion: Weber rejects explicitly the reduction of complex cultural phenomena to a single material explanatory principle and yet his analysis is also in no way “confessional.”

In the introduction to the text, Weber distinguishes his project from historical materialist theories, which argue that “religion” as a phenomenon can only be explained in terms of the economic mode of production. Religion, in other words, has no determinative effects on material reality. However, the historical development of capitalism is too complex, Weber thinks, to be explained purely on its own terms. Rather than view society as clouds of epiphenomena that float over the ground of economic production, he sees society as overlapping spheres, each with its own value demands it makes on individuals. These demands have to be rationalized with one another in order to produce a coherent picture of one’s practical activity in the world.

In conceptualizing the spirit of capitalism, Weber identifies a complex nexus of causal elements, both material and ideational, and argues that at the center is a specific religious orientation toward the world, which he calls inner-worldly asceticism, that is the driving explanatory force for his account of the spirit of capitalism. To be sure, Weber does not think this orientation to the world has no material explanation or that material explanations play no part at all in his account of the spirit of capitalism.

Indeed, his account requires an explanation of the ways in which capitalism fit together so well with an orientation to the world that seems utterly opposed to it on the surface, such that the latter has a determinative, real effect on the former.<sup>8</sup> A material account of inner-worldly asceticism is possible, whether we explain the core theological ideas, predestination and calling, or the popular circulation of those ideas. Yet Weber thinks this

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<sup>7</sup> This kind of claim to methodological objectivity is both familiar and problematic; however, time does not permit for a full critique of it. It suffices to say that other figures even in Weber’s generation (e.g. Ernst Troeltsch) argued that the scholar cannot – and should not – bracket his or her own subjective values in performing this kind of cultural analysis.

<sup>8</sup> “Every such attempt at explanation must, recognizing the fundamental importance of the economic factor, above all take account of the economic conditions. But at the same time the opposite correlation must not be left out of consideration. For though the development of economic rationalism is partly dependent on rational technique and law, it is at the same times determined by the ability and disposition of men to adopt certain types of practical rational conduct. When these types have been obstructed by spiritual obstacles, the development of rational economic conduct has also met serious inner resistance. The magical and religious forces, and the ethical ideas of duty based upon them, have in the past always been among the most important formative influences on conduct. In the studies collected here we shall be concerned with these forces.” Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, xxxix.

account is insufficient for explaining *the results* of those ideas, namely their rationalization with capitalism, which produces a new, hyper-efficient and peculiarly frugal form of capitalism. Put differently the material explanation of the religious ideas does not give us the material effects those ideas produce.

This constitutes an explanatory rupture at the site where ideas and values can be regarded as objects that have material effects, which is authorized by a philosophy of history and social theory that regards historical and social phenomena as infinitely complex individuals analyzed as conceptual wholes. I argue that we can best make sense of this by considering the difference between reductive materialist accounts and Weber's account in terms of a distinction between an *ontological* and *axiological* approach to religion. The ontological is an approach to what religion *is*.

In its empirical versions, the ontological approach attempts to explain religion in terms of natural scientific processes, genealogical accounts of power relations, or social processes and functions. In its phenomenological versions, it attempts to construct a general system of religious symbols intended to get at the essential meaning of religion across cultures and times. The axiological, by contrast, is an approach to what religion *does*. It regards religious ideas, beliefs, mental states, and practices as real, not in their essence, but in terms of their effects on material reality. It recognizes that what we call "religious" does have an explanation apart from its religious meaning, but that the religious meaning may have effects apart from its material explanation. Weber's project shows us exactly how this is possible.

Critical religion has recognized arguments for non-reduction drawn from Weber and the tradition of German philosophy of history to which he belongs. However, many of its familiar arguments tend to include reasons why Weber and similar projects are actually reductive, which is intended to reinforce 19<sup>th</sup> century distinctions between scientific and confessional approaches to religion. We can see this most clearly in Robert Segal's 1983 essay, "In Defense of Reductionism." Though over 30 years old, the claims made in this essay echo throughout even the most recent work in critical religion, particularly the refusal to make room for non-reductive approaches and the suspicion that they smuggle in "crypto-theology" to the academic study of religion.<sup>9</sup>

In the essay, Segal makes what is by now a familiar case against the phenomenology of religion and Mircea Eliade in particular, arguing that Eliade is himself reductive in the way that he subsumes all religious experiences and expressions to his own general phenomenological system. Furthermore, this reduction does not stand on anything real – it floats free from the claims of the adherent as well as the historical data, the latter Eliade rejects explicitly.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Donald Wiebe, *The Irony of Theology and the Nature of Religious Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Aaron W. Hughes, *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity: An Inquiry into Disciplinary Apologetics and Self-Deception* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishing, 2016).

It is worth noting that Segal begins his essay pining for the days of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when scholars of religion “were not the least reluctant to understand human beliefs and actions in their own terms rather than his.”<sup>10</sup> On Segal’s view, approaches are either reductive or they are confessional, a distinction captured by this characterization of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is, I think, more or less accurate. This distinction between religious beliefs “in their own terms” and the terms of the scholar stems in part from the emergence of work on religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly large movements such as the quest for the historical Jesus or increased scholarly interest in non-Western “religions” which distinguished themselves from confessional Biblical studies or missions work on the basis of the purity of their academic aims.

If we examine Feuerbach, Tylor, Durkheim, or Freud, for example, we find a similar distinction being made in order to classify their own work as scientific. What makes them scientific, in their view, is precisely that they are not beholden to confessional explanations of religious phenomena. Segal’s criticism of phenomenology and his argument for reduction against all alternatives mirror this distinction.

First, he characterizes *all* non-reductive approaches as actually reductive in principle. Second, this characterization allows him to place all non-reductive approaches on the same crumbling footing he identifies for the phenomenology of religion and conclude that natural scientific reduction is *the only* method available to any “secular” scholar of religion. Segal argues that the “nonbelieving” scholar can in no way understand or “appreciate” religious ideas on their own terms: “Undeniably, a nonbeliever can appreciate some aspects of a believer’s point of view.

He can probably appreciate the secular functions of religion for the believer—for example, the serenity or the security religion provides. Perhaps he can appreciate as well a secular origin of religion for the believer. The decisive issue is whether he can appreciate *reality* of religion for the believer. For how can he do so except by considering the divine real himself?”<sup>11</sup> On this view, there are two options: completely reject all religious explanations of religious beliefs and actions as false by providing a “secular” reductive explanation, or else *believe them yourself*—and participate in a confessional project.

In addressing non-reductive approaches, Segal focuses primarily on the concept *Verstehen*, which he acknowledges finds its roots in part in Weber’s work.<sup>12</sup> He points out that while *Verstehen* provides a weightier defense of non-reductive approaches by insisting that human beings are better described in terms of *reasons* rather than *causes* (as in natural science), it is still not

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<sup>10</sup> Robert A. Segal, “In Defense of Reductionism,” in *Journal for the American Academy of Religion* 51, no. 1 (Mar. 1983) 97.

<sup>11</sup> Segal, “In Defense of Reductionism,” 109.

<sup>12</sup> Weber’s appeal to “cultural significance” as the basis for selecting the components that make up the spirit of capitalism is an example of *Verstehen*. In short, *Verstehen* emphasizes understanding unfamiliar people, times, and places on their own terms in order to explain their meaning.

obvious that this is sufficient for insisting on the irreducibility of religious ideas.<sup>13</sup>

On my account, however, Weber would *agree* that reasons (ideas) are not sufficient to give a full account of a religious belief or action because he acknowledges they are also shaped by social-material conditions (causes). Weber's methodology in fact raises precisely these same questions with regard to the sufficiency of material causal accounts whose presumed viability is also not self-evident. Segal's analysis assumes that if we are analyzing religious beliefs and practices, our goal is *always* to explain what they are and never what they do.

Segal claims that even if the argument from non-reductionists in support of something like *Verstehen* is useful, it still must reduce the actor's reasons for doing something to a basic universal need (i.e. an orderly world). This need, unless you're Eliade, is *always* "secular." However, in what ways an appeal to "an orderly world" is actually a reduction of religious ideas to something else in Weber's case is not at all clear.

It is true that Weber sees "rationalization" as something that all human beings participate in. Yet it escapes Segal's critique in two ways. First, reasons *for* believing something is different than reasons *why* those beliefs produce particular material phenomena. Second, "an orderly world" is *subordinated* to the demands of the social spheres one takes to be of primary importance.<sup>14</sup> "Rationalization" does not follow any kind of Enlightenment sense of universal rationality. It is completely dependent upon how one views the competing normative demands of society on one's life.

However, on Segal's view, this is unacceptable; individuals do not decide what is rational or irrational. Rationality must be determined by some universal standard, although what this ought to be is never articulated in the essay.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Segal, "In Defense of Reductionism," 104-5.

<sup>14</sup> Weber writes of rationalization, "Now by this term very different things may be understood, as the following discussion will repeatedly show. There is, for example, rationalization of mystical contemplation, that is of an attitude which, viewed from other departments of life, is specifically irrational, just as much as there is rationalizations of economic life, of technique, of scientific research, of military training, of law and administration. Furthermore, each one of these fields may be rationalized in terms of very different ultimate values and ends, and what is rational from one point of view may well be irrational from another. Hence rationalizations of the most varied character have existed in various departments of life and in all areas of culture." Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, xxxviii-xxxix.

<sup>15</sup> For example in his critique of Wittgensteinian understandings of nonreduction, Segal has the following analysis: "Truth for [Wittgensteinians] means internal coherence, not correspondence to external reality. In asserting that an actor's beliefs are true they are asserting simply that all would-be criticisms of his beliefs reflect merely the critic's own beliefs. Only internal, not external, criticism is permissible. [...] The utility of the Wittgensteinian position for nonreductionism aside, there are at least as many objections to it as to the concept of *Verstehen* in general. It has been argued not only, as with *Verstehen* generally, that acceptance of the actor's own account of his behavior is unnecessary, insufficient, and untestable but also that his account is subject to being proved false, irrational, or unintelligible." Note Segal's negative characterization of internal coherence in contrast to a correspondence

Segal's claim that "an orderly life" represents a principle to which religious ideas are reduced, exposes an assumption that runs throughout the paper which is characteristic of much work in critical religion: that there is a universal standard of rationality, truth, and intelligibility which serves as a measuring stick for competing explanations.

If we treat religious claims as such, phenomenological systematic abstractions of those claims, or non-reductive explanations of their meaning as attempting to *rationaly* explain what religion *is in truth*, then, Segal argues, there is no contest. Natural science gives us the most rational explanation for them.

It is here, by way of conclusion, that we turn to Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* where we find a different response to Weber. In their analysis of the concept of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Enlightenment is not a clean break from religious thought and action. Myth is already Enlightenment, and Enlightenment falls back into myth.

This structure parallels Weber's analysis of the spirit of capitalism, where the secular spirit is prefigured by the Protestant ethic, which remains inscribed in the secular even after the teleological, salvific concerns fall away.<sup>16</sup> To put this in terms of the discussion above, the "rational" and the "irrational" cannot be separated out from one another in the way Segal would like because what he identifies as "irrational" is already embedded in the rational.

This is latent in the way he places "untrue" accounts—we might even say *mythological* accounts of religion—on the same plane as natural scientific explanations. The assumption is that all accounts try to do what natural sciences does best.

If we read Horkheimer and Adorno into this move, however, we see that the point Segal is trying to get across fails to attend to the dialectical structure between the two poles he has set in contrast. Horkheimer and Adorno would agree that all such explanations are *explanations*. But that they are actually not of a fundamentally different kind is a detriment for Segal's argument, not the benefit he tries to make it out to be.

Horkheimer and Adorno write, "The straightforward assumption of enlightened thinking that what today is ideology may once have been truth is too uncritical: the newest ideologies are a mere reprise of the oldest, which

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theory of truth an "external" criteria for evaluation. The implication is that the actor's account can be proved false, irrational, or intelligible if it doesn't meet an external standard of truth, rationality, or intelligibility.

<sup>16</sup> We see this, for example, in Horkheimer and Adorno's characterization of enlightenment as the reduction of all qualities to abstract, calculable quantities: "Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion; modern positivism consigns it to poetry. Unity remains the watchword from Parmenides to Russell. All gods and qualities must be destroyed." Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunselin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002) 4-5.



long antedate those hitherto known.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, Segal’s insistence that even religious accounts of religious ideas are explanations on the same level as scientific explanations doesn’t simply demonstrate the inadequacy of the former. It also shows that scientific explanation is prefigured by the religious and inextricable from it.

Horkheimer and Adorno demonstrate this through their analysis of *The Odyssey*. In their interpretation, they show how human mastery over nature is what allows Odysseus, the stand in for humanity, to chart the rational basis for civilization, by submitting mythology to his cunning.

*The Odyssey* reveals the true logic of sacrificial rites in ancient cultures: Human beings attempting to master nature for the first time. On this reading, instrumental reason is *civilizing* reason. This analysis of rationalization parallels Weber’s argument, but extends the dominance of instrumental reason much further back in time. Thus, instrumental reason is not set in contrast to myth; rather the two are co-constitutive.

In this parallel, I want to emphasize a single concluding point of comparison between the two, namely that *reason itself* is susceptible to collapse. We see this in one very specific context with Weber, where the rationality of capitalism is rendered *hyper-rational*, or hyper-calculated, by a supposedly “non-rational” force, religion, to the point where Weber says that from the outside, it actually appears completely *irrational*.

In Horkheimer and Adorno, Enlightenment more generally folds in on itself to the point where what was once understood as a force of liberation through the dominion of nature has actually become a force for the domination of humanity. For both Weber and the Frankfurt School, understanding the structure of religious thought simply *is* understanding the structure of rational thought. We cannot draw a sharp distinction between the two.

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<sup>17</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 42.