I mourn the loss of the superstitious belief
[Aberglauben] in a Beyond.¹

Any reader of Max Horkheimer’s multitude of essays and apothegms soon detects a persistent substrate of theology, perhaps summed up best in this comment: ‘What is needed, further, is a knowledge of the theological tradition, for our knowledge of the inextricable meshing of human freedom and its conditionings…have their historical roots in that tradition’.²

Horkheimer may never have had the inclination or the time – in the midst of his often onerous duties of directing the Institute for Critical Theory – to write a book on theology or the Bible like Theodor Adorno, Ernst Bloch, Karl Kautsky, Lucien Goldmann, Michael Löwy, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben or Terry Eagleton, but theology is a persistent theme throughout his work. Often, it prefers to stay in the shadows, peering out every now and then to alert us to its presence. At other times, theology comes into the open, perfectly happy to enter into debate over matters as diverse as early Church councils, neo-Thomism, the council of Trent, Luther,

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Calvin and liberal theology. In the midst of these forays, I am most interested in his observations concerning opposition and accommodation, resistance and compromise within religion.

It is precisely this double theme – between resistance and compromise – that beats most strongly throughout Horkheimer’s reflections on theology. It will reappear in my treatments of E.P. Thompson, G.E.M. de Ste. Croix and Michael Löwy in the next few chapters; their emphases and subject-matter are quite distinct but this basic tension runs throughout their various texts. However, I have begun this book with Horkheimer, since – in the end, at least – he offers one of the most subtle dialectical analyses of that tension. Around it, I have organised a number of other categories concerning religion in Horkheimer’s work. So, under the banner of resistance, we find the ‘longing for the totally other [die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen]’ beyond all temporal arrangements of power (state, economics, church, synagogue, and so on), continual observations on the character and politics of the ‘founder’ of Christianity, the nature of freedom and the individual and then atheism. Each of these points gathers around the argument that any religion worth its salt – although Horkheimer’s prime foci are Christianity and Judaism – will resist any push to be conformed to this world and this age.

Never far away is the other side of the tension, that of betrayal and compromise. Here, we find constant observations on the way theology has all too often entered into dirty little relationships with the state, betraying itself when the longing for the other becomes a longing for the state, when the object of religious commitment and devotion becomes synonymous with the state. A distinctive feature of that analysis is Horkheimer’s criticism of the Zionist expectation that all Jews would, from 1948, identify themselves with the state.

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3 The persistence of these reflections belies the reconstruction – as found in Brittain 2005 and Hughes 2003 – of a late Horkheimer who became disillusioned with Marxism and other dogmatisms, turning to a non-dogmatic form of theology. In this respect, I follow Shaw 1985, who sees a persistence of religious concerns in Horkheimer’s work.


5 This is the title of Horkheimer’s interview with Helmut Gumnior in 1970. See Horkheimer 1985q.