Chapter Eight

Adorno’s Vacillation

Disillusionment at the false abolition of something, be it religion, philosophy or art, can induce a reaction in someone that results in vacillation, if not hesitation.1

So why would I close this book with Adorno? Partly because these stark and dense texts continue to mesmerise me, the promise of an extraordinary sentence that may well turn up on the next page or in the next paragraph (which is often much longer than a page) keeps me reading and rereading. Partly because he provides the logical, rather than temporary, close to the various positions I have explored in this book. Partly because Adorno teases me, offering a hint, a glimmer of hope in the midst of his perpetual ban on saying anything positive about the future – the occasional phrase or sentence where he drops his guard but for a moment. The main reason, however, is that he produces two of the most astounding arguments in his engagement with theology: the notion of theological suspicion and his resolute criticism of the secularisation of theology that he saw everywhere around him. Indeed, the latter has been the staple of nearly every character I have encountered in this book, along with the contemporary recovery of Paul’s political philosophy on the Left. I must also

1 Habermas 1979, p. 43.
admit to a perverse pleasure in reading Adorno’s rigorous texts. In fact, ‘rigorous’ would have to be the most common adjective used of his work, but it is one that my own Calvinist tradition always insisted was the only way to think and write. Sloppy thinking was to be shunned, the practice of intellectual slobs: if God gave you a reasonably well-oiled mind, then you had better use it to the best of your ability.

However, in keeping with the nature of the rest of this book, I want also to subject Adorno’s own engagement with theology and the Bible to critique. For Adorno critics, this engagement is a little like a monolith whose upper reaches are open to the elements and the endless cameras of onlookers, but whose subterranean roots are perhaps known in some way, but best left to the denizens of the underground. Indeed, it is rarely recognised in critical assessments of Adorno that his rigorous philosophical work began in the realm of theology. For it is his study of Kierkegaard, the Habilitationsschrift and first philosophical work, that engages directly with one of the most influential – albeit posthumous – philosophical theologians of the early twentieth century. Yet, despite all the work that has been done on Adorno in the areas of sociology, philosophy, music, German, feminism, ecocriticism, literature and cultural studies, few if any have ventured into Adorno’s engagement with theology, especially the Kierkegaard book. This is both understandable, given Adorno’s subsequent major works, and perplexing, for the absence in critical analysis of this significant dimension of Adorno’s work leaves that criticism halting; as Robert Hullot-Kentor points out, ‘theology is always moving right under the surface of all of Adorno’s writings’. Indeed, his key ideas and motifs were cut and shaped in a profound interaction with theology, specifically the Lutheran theology of Northern Europe. Various deep motifs, especially those of suffer-

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2 Hullot-Kentor is an exception, although his comments are too few, offering hints when I want to read more (see his ‘Foreword’ to his translation of Adorno’s *Kierkegaard*, Hullot-Kentor 1989a, and Hullot-Kentor 1992. As a sample of key works that barely mention theology, see Jameson 1990, and Hohendahl 1995). Of lesser note are the works of Jarvis 1998, and Jay 1984. Of the few critics who have considered the Kierkegaard book, theology is not a major issue. I have benefited, however, from consulting Buck-Morss 1977, pp. 114–21, and Max Pensky’s discussion in Pensky 1993, pp. 140–9, although both give up the task after only the first part of the book – the discussion of the *intérieur*. Buck-Morss admits that she will not follow the ‘full intricacies of Adorno’s argument’ (Buck-Morss 1977, p. 121).

3 Hullot-Kentor 1989b, p. xxi.