Chapter 3

Bilderverbot and Utopia

God without Image – Other World Unannounced

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For many philosophers and theologians, Theodor Adorno’s invoking of theological concepts in his Negative Dialectics and others works engenders some confusion. The theologian would ask, why would an atheist philosopher, rooted in Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, continually deploy theological language such as “messianic,” “redemption,” and “bilderverbot,” to such a degree that some could accuse him of being a crypto-theologian? On the other side, the secular philosopher is just as puzzled. He asks, “has not religion and theology already been abandoned due to its inability to defend its claims against the Enlightenment?” “Has not the metaphysics of religion been already so discredited that to reintroduce them back into philosophy is to commit a crime against reason; has not religion been responsible for so much death and destruction that we should leave it in the past?” Looking at the history of absurd theological obscurantism and the suffering that theological disputes bore, it is sensible to ask why this atheist philosopher would want to resurrect certain theological categories in a secular age and in a secular philosophy. However, Adorno is insistent that the transcendent and prophetic semantic and semiotic qualities of the theological must be rescued from religion itself, and further transformed, reoriented, and reintroduced within philosophy. Only critical philosophy, and more specifically non-identity forming dialectical philosophy, has the capacity to wield such potent and historically bagged language without the threat of artificially creating a new totalizing system of thought that furthers the suffering of the subject, or delivers him back to his master through positive (status-quo affirming) religion. In doing so, Adorno inculcates a critical philosophical dimension to old theological concepts; imbuing them with a new prophetic – dialectical spirit.

In this chapter, I examine what I understand to be the core theological concept that gives substantive meaning to Adorno’s Negative Dialectics and his philosophy of suffering; that is the notion of bilderverbot, or the theological ban of images. I claim that the essence of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and specifically the core of Adorno’s philosophy is the sensitivity toward the suffering of the finite individual in the unjust and violent world of history. Equally important to Adorno’s concern for suffering is the imperative
that he identifies as having been “imposed by Hitler” to direct our “thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen” (Adorno 1999:365). Adorno’s conception of bilderverbot takes on a more radicalized meaning than what it is generally understood to convey within the Jewish tradition.1 His radicalized conception of the image ban assists Adorno’s understanding of the events of the Shoah (Holocaust, Tremendum), and is directed against the re-occurrence of Auschwitz in any form to anybody. I will attempt to elevate and highlight the notion of bilderverbot to the position that I believe it deserves; as a key concept in understanding the theological element in Adorno’s dialectical and utopian thought.

The secondary aim of this essay is to elucidate the political, economic, and social ramifications of the philosophical deployment and radicalization of the concept of bilderverbot in the Frankfurt School’s vision (or non-vision) of utopia. By determinately negating the original Jewish conception of bilderverbot and therefore preserving and extending the concept beyond its original and sole theological meaning, Adorno and the Frankfurt School clarify the inherent double negativity of bilderverbot as well as the concept of utopia. It is with its connection to utopia, as the “totally other society,” as the bilderverbot expresses the “totally otherness” of the divine, that connects the Frankfurt School’s notion of utopia to the ban on any positive articulation of the divine. By translating the theological category of bilderverbot into the social category of utopia, they aid in making clear the nature of “that which doesn’t exist,” i.e. utopian absence of positivity, and by inference, “that which ought to exist” without delivering any positive articulation of what that utopian society would look like. It is my goal to concretely connect Adorno’s theological – bilderverbot language/concept, to his utopian thought about the possibilities of world transformation.

The Ugly Hunchback of Historical Materialism

Walter Benjamin, Adorno’s friend and teacher, and in many ways the one that most influenced Adorno’s theological thinking, wrote in his Theses of the Philosophy of History that theology is so ugly within secular society that it has wizened up and now must “keep out of sight.”2 However, Benjamin claims that

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1 This is also true for the Islamic tradition.
2 See Walter Benjamin, 2007:253. Many have argued since Benjamin articulated this thesis that the opposite is in fact true for the contemporary: that historical materialism is so ugly that it must disguise itself within theology, or that philosophy itself, which has become exhausted.