

Introduction

Agon Hamza & Frank Ruda

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Today it seems obvious, even self-evident that religion is back at the forefront of political thought. Religious commitment is not simply a peculiar side factor, an epiphenomenon of contemporary socio-political situations; rather, it seems to determine them from within. In such a (historical) situation it may not only seem plausible, but is rather imperative, to again ask the old and often raised question of how to conceive of the relation between politics and religion. Raising the question does come with at least four conceptual options: 1. It may be that religion still stands in the centre of political thought, and practice proper, and hence politics needs to be read as a continuation of religion with other means (previously, “thinkers” like Carl Schmitt defended such a position). If this were true and convincing, the concatenation between religion and politics would in one way or the other delineate a transcendental structure of political thought as such. 2. It may be that religion is the opposite of political practice, such that religious commitments and orientations hinder, block or impede politics from within, and thereby religion would be nothing but an obstacle to politics (proper) (Hegel at least in some sense was a proponent of this). From these two first options follows: 3. It may be that politics needs to embrace, include, or at least integrate, religious commitments and thought as that which either mediates between private and individual life and political collective organisation and practice or as that which is what makes the very stuff that again makes the social bond stick. Religious belief, then, would be precisely the very raw (immaterial) material which makes any social bond, any political thing into a social bond or political thing (Simon Critchley currently advocates a comparable position). Or: 4. Politics to be politics proper needs to, not only take a distance, but exorcise all religious elements from its terrain, simply to remain political and not regress to private modes of believing this or that thing. As unsatisfying these four options may be, this overly abstract schematisation clarifies one thing: raising the question of how to understand the relation between politics and religion, of politics and theology today implies to raise the question of how (collective, individual or anonymous) belief and political practices, organisation(s) are related. And, more precisely, that it is the very relation between politics and religion that needs to be put into the focus of investigation.

That this relation is an intricate one was already clear to Hegel, who claimed in an early, yet rarely read text on “love” that one needs to overcome the assumption that one can simply derive the concept of a political organisation, community, etc. from an unquestioned and

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allegedly self-evident form of religious faith. For Hegel, it were precisely some forms of religious belief that seemed internally consistent and capable to justify and ground a just and free political community, which ultimately proved highly problematic. The problematic outcomes of these belief-systems, if realised politically, not only brings out some implicit and inconsistent presuppositions they nonetheless relied upon (such that one is able to judge the position from the perspective of its outcome, of its consequences), rather it enables the insight into the true problematic assumption that is at stake here: the problem is not only that one gets from a maybe inconsistent religious belief system to an inconsistent political model, the problem is that the belief system is inconsistent and hence religious (any religion, Hegel thinks, is at least in some sense inconsistent, otherwise it would not be religion), precisely because it implies the belief that one could derive a political model from it. The inconsistency thus concerns the assumption that there is, or can be, a relation between religion and politics. It concerns the very idea that one can infer a politics from religion, and thereby presuppose some kind of stable, given relation between the two fields in question.

Hegel's short piece argues as follows: He begins with a problematisation of the relation between the political as much as religious concept of equality and argues that the assumption that there can be an objective equality of believers produces a peculiar kind of paradox. Why? Because if one starts from the idea that one deals with an equality of believers, one starts from an individual perspective, since belief cannot but be the belief of an individual. If one then seeks to generalise and apply the idea of individual belief to more than just one individual, and if one therefore seeks to draw political consequences from what is a formally religious, one assumes that all individuals that are considered to be equal share one, and essentially one only, objective predicate: namely that they believe the way they do. Yet, and this is where Hegel's criticism of this model truly hits ground, such a train of thought defines the equality of all individuals that partake in the political community by an objective trait, a property that all individuals share, namely that they all believe in the same manner. But, if what grounds equality is an objective property all equals share, this means one ultimately speaks of an (Aristotelian concept of) equality of distribution. But, and this is where things get problematic for Hegel, if one argues that belief is in fact objectively equally distributed, because it is shared by all individuals, one encounters a problem, namely a problem of measurability.

How to actually find a measure that may be able to depict if in terms of belief the others are actually equal to me or not? The only way to do this is to do precisely what one does not want to do. One seeks to relate to the others as equal and hence as individuals, precisely because one has to find a measure, one relates to them not as equals but through the mediation of this very measure (which is, and this makes sense worse, not even a measure properly speaking, as it is actually impossible to judge if someone believes in the same way, in the intensity, as I do). That is to say, one relates to them as being equal with regard to a certain possession, they possess the same amount of belief that I take myself to possess. The problem now is that this very possession (i.e. belief) is not a possession (belief is subjective and *not* objective - which is a trivial thing to state). This means that the very idea of measurability is inconsistent from the very beginning. Ultimately, this is Hegel's argument, the attempt to derive a political idea of equality from an idea of individual belief by means of objectifying it and generalizing it ends up with a result which it neither wanted nor was able to avoid: namely that one thereby has to treat all others as if they were objects, and not as individuals and hence not as equals. In the very attempt of realising equality, equality is evacuated and abolished. This is what Max Stirner will later openly embrace. Hegel's claim is that this (deriving political concepts from religious ones) leads to a strange effect, namely to an equality of objects, which ultimately only proves that there is a strange way from religion to capitalism. Hegel's critique is, thus, related to what one may call religion as capitalism (he therein more or less openly follows Martin Luther) and much later Walter Benjamin will argue, repeating and modifying some of Hegel's argument, against capitalism as religion (nowadays again taken up in a modified form by Jean-Pierre Dupuy).

To publish an issue of *Crisis and Critique* on "Politics and Theology Today" against this background means for us to emphasise the problematic, peculiar nature of the very relation between religion and politics (today). This is more than just a tautology. We rather thereby seek to emphasise that one should not all too easily accept the idea of a complicated or uncomplicated, problematic or unproblematic derivability of politics from religion or vice versa. One, thus, should not simply accept the assumption that there is a relation between politics and religion. Because one may argue with Hegel (and Benjamin) that as soon as one tries to deduce political practice, action or orientation from religious beliefs or vice versa, the danger lurking in the back is

(maybe surprisingly, maybe unsurprisingly) the danger of capitalism, capitalising the one or the other. This is why the question needs to be raised if there are other options that exceed the idea of a derivability of one of the two terms (religion or politics) from the other? Maybe one even should go as far as to start from the assumption that there is no relation between politics and religion (with the very emphasis on both the “is” and the “no”)?

Against this background it is clear that more apparent, more pressing questions emerge, too, such as: why is it that religion is returning with a vengeance? That is to say, why is religion returning in the age of the alleged destitution of its scope and validity? It seems as if in an age of ideological confusion, in which emancipatory politics has mostly disappeared from the current agenda and from the stratum of thinkability, religion gives meaning to the sufferings and plights of the poor. It seems to be giving hope to the hopeless, and orientation to those who otherwise seems to be lost in disorientation. How are we to understand this? The return of the religious calls for closer examination of what today is conceived as ‘religious fundamentalism.’ The return of religion in the form of fundamentalisms within the age of late global capitalism appears to be a necessary ingredient not only of capitalism but it fundamentalism also seems to be, within this context, the constitutive form religious life will have to turn to (at one point or another). The contradictions between politics and religion in our present situation have reached such a level that it requires a new reconfiguration of these components. This is where philosophy may prove useful. The job of the philosopher is, among other things, to draw lines of demarcations not only between different fields but also within the singular practices as well. In this sense, one should raise the question if fundamentalism is ultimately and conceptually a religious problem? An initial response may be that fundamentalism is that element which always-already sacrifices the authentic religious experience (if there is such a thing!) and thus fundamentalism is not a genuinely religious problem or phenomenon. In fact, it seems rather that fundamentalism renders visible the very lack of religious belief. If the commonsense endorses the idea that fundamentalism is essentially a religious problem, namely a matter of “too much religion”, of a too dogmatic belief-system neglecting the modern worlds as it is, philosophical questioning may bring us to see that fundamentalism rather appears at the point where authentic religious belief is lacking.

Following this, we can go on with another distinction, between

religion and theology, whose dichotomy is certainly not new, given that it can be traced back ever since the appearance of the monotheistic religions. The basic distinction between the two is that theology is the ideological mystification of religion. Religion is a doctrine that is concerned with the internal contradictions in given societies, or other forms of social organisations, questions of equality, et cetera. Authentic religion is the enterprise that always has the place for the excluded, marginalised, the poor, etc. In this sense, religion is, say in Latin America, or can be concerned with, say, pedagogical work with the peasants or with the ‘collective poor’ - a category that on a formal level, seems even broader category than what was analysed by Marx through his concept of the proletariat. Theology on the other hand is an ideological formation that brings about, or exclusively deals, with an abstract and metaphysical notion of humanity. Theology, as an ideological orientation, is concerned with formal totalities, such as ‘humanity’, ‘society,’ et cetera. In this sense, a good example of how fundamentalist movements are grounded in a theological worldview, rather than in an actual religious experience, is ISIS. True, they are anti-capitalist, but for all the wrong reasons: they are anti-modernist, identitarian, and above all, profoundly anti-Western culture, i.e. anti-culture and education, etc. These elements constitute an ideological opposition to capitalism that ultimately may be coined to be nothing but an Fascism with “Islamic” values.

The distinction between religion and theology opens up the space to rethink the consequent distinction between classes and identity, or the Left and Communism. Monotheistic religions are grounded on the universal idea of collectivity without identity (Holy Spirit, Ummah); it includes all particularities (cultural, racial, sexual, and other identities) within itself. In a similar fashion, one can argue that the difference between the Left (which, in itself includes all kinds of orientations) and Communism can be articulated as follows: when one is not a communist, emancipation does have clear borders, and those borders are always national, that is to say, identitarian borders/limits.

All this may lead one to see why the return of religion may in itself not necessarily be a bad thing. Religion devoid of its onto-theological commitments, is in fact the hard and tiring militant work for organising the poor, unemployed (today also the unemployable), and all those who are pushed aside by the relations of production. Yet here even more difficult questions, if one may say so emerge, namely: is it possible to keep militant emancipatory work without a theological worldview which

localises this work in a broader totality, “humanity”, “society”, “History”, etc? Does politics need religion today? Is religion in this sense just another name for emancipatory politics, and might embracing religion lead to a different manner of how to confront the deadlocks of thus far seen communist politics?

The thinkers gathered in the present issue of *Crisis and Critique* raise these questions in their own manner and give a variety of answers to them. Yet what they all share is that the “return of religion” is not simply a fact whose consequences should be administered by state politicians. No, to truly accept the presence of religion here and now, within the domain of politics, cannot but lead to again question their relation and all the alleged evidences (that things could not be other than this) that come with it. Questioning evidence is part of philosophical practice and, therefore, *Crisis and Critique* is proud to have assembled engaged thinkers who do not shy away from the thought that even today the relation between religion and politics is of philosophical relevance.

Agon Hamza / Frank Ruda
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