

A-Dialogue¹ with Adorno: So, What About the Impossibility of Religious Art Today?

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Thinking men and artists have not infrequently described a sense of being not quite there, of not playing along, a feeling as if they were not themselves at all, but a kind of spectator . . . [T]he spectator's posture expresses doubt that this could be all.²

Background

If we believe that there really is some truth to G.W.F. Hegel's understanding of the dynamic of a dialectic, then we would expect that one thought is superseded by another, is "sublated" into another, and thought keeps evolving into new thoughts. If we also believe Theodor Adorno's revision of the Hegelian dialectic, then such a dynamic process does not happen smoothly but in fits and starts. The particular remnants of what has come before do not disappear but remain distinct from the whole process, so that rather than a complete system or a whole as Hegel proposed, Adorno allows for fragments which are incomplete. Key to any discussion on Adorno is the acknowledgment of his insistence on the fragmentary nature of thought and the inability of concepts to grasp the truth of the whole which they claim they grasp. If, as he contends, philosophy "lives on because the moment to realize it was missed"³ and as a result, "philosophy is obliged to critique itself," then the most we can hope to offer in any philosophical discussion will be a constellation of fragmentary ruminations full of holes, through which we might catch a glimpse of a momentary fragile balance of something which might possibly resemble an insight into truth.

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That established, my own fragmentary ruminations continue to evolve. In December 1996 I defended my Ph.D. dissertation on religion and art, and was asked almost two years later to speak to the same topic at the Mennonite Forum of the 1998 American Academy of Religion annual meeting.⁴ As I review the arguments I defended before the examining committee, I am struck with the central truth of Hegel's theory: thesis is sublated by antithesis and resolved in synthesis; thought – or Spirit, as Hegel referred to it – keeps moving, it is dynamic, and therefore it changes. I am also struck by the truth of Adorno's revision: this is not a smooth or easily categorized process, nor is it by any means complete.

The dissertation focused on Adorno's understanding of the ideological uses and misuses of art.⁵ Theodor W. Adorno was a twentieth-century German philosopher of Jewish descent and a member of the Frankfurt School of philosophers. He focused most of his discussions of the use and misuse of art on politics and art. I gleaned from his understanding and critique of religion, especially in its institutional form, his aesthetic theory, and his limited number of writings on religion and art, what his theories mean in terms of the use of art by religion.⁶ Although Adorno followed in the Hegelian tradition, in many ways he turned Hegel's thought on its head. Adorno's thought followed the dynamic of the dialectic: Hegel's thought as the thesis, Adorno's own disagreements with Hegel as the antithesis, and finally Adorno's own resulting theories as the synthesis. Adorno's result was not a comfortable melding of the several parts of Hegelianism into a complete whole. Indeed, he kept revising his own thought – also fragmentary in nature.

What follows below, is the next step, with Adorno's thought as the thesis (building on Hegel, of course), my bringing together Adorno's thoughts on art, ideology and religion as the antithesis, and finally the resulting conclusions moving away from Adorno as the synthesis. However, the synthesis cannot be said to be complete or finished, for there are distinct fragments of particular earlier argument which refuse to be sublated, and there is sure to be further revision.

The argument of the dissertation began with this statement: Art's "true affinity with religion"⁷ is in its relationship to truth; but art, created and manipulated to be the mouthpiece of religion in its institutional form, becomes a means to the end of maintaining and supporting the institution. That is, art

used as a means to an end is no longer viewed as art, but as something else: a tool. The focus of the argument was on the difference between art which can be considered autonomous and art which is the tool of something outside of itself. And the question asked was: Can art be autonomous and religious? According to Adorno, the answer is: Not anymore, for it either becomes didactic or nostalgic. Two years later, I recognize that a large piece is missing from that logic and the context has changed.

To begin, I will offer definitions of the term “art” as it is used in this paper, with reference to both Hegel and Adorno, and then build on Hegel’s understanding of the dialectical movement of Spirit (also sometimes referred to as “Consciousness”) through history and its manifestations in art, as well as Adorno’s understanding of what art does. To understand why Adorno distrusts the possibility of religious art today, we should briefly examine his thoughts on religion. Although I concede that it may no longer be possible for there to be “religious art” for the reasons he articulated, art can still evoke what is at the heart of religion. So far this agrees with Adorno. For at the heart of religion for him was a critique of the world around it, a prophetic cry which named the unarticulated suffering. Any hope for a world which is “totally other” cannot, however, be articulated directly, Adorno states. Only by focusing on the despair of the world and by maintaining a dialectic with that world through a relentless negative critique might one catch a glimpse of a trace of something other.⁸ He speaks of some intimation of a world without suffering, but will not allow art to begin to take part in any sort of a description thereof. Even a mere evocation is forbidden, for of great importance to him is the Jewish *Bilderverbot* (banning of images) which will not allow the name of God to be spoken, nor any description thereof to be attempted.

Because of this insistence, a great deal of art which through beauty evokes in us a sense of wonder and wakes up within us a sense of something greater than ourselves, causing us to remember our way back to God, all of this is missing, indeed, is not permissible in Adorno’s understanding of art. All that is within art which is awesome and beautiful is not allowed because none of this can ever quite match what it would name. As a result, it dare not be. Such a position is no longer acceptable to me. What I want to argue for is an articulation of that hope which is beyond despair – an articulation which

nevertheless maintains the tension of the dialectic of the beautiful and the ugly within the work of art itself. In fact, to insist that art focus on the ugly and the despair, that art critique the world around it via relentless negativity, already diminishes the tension of the dialectic in art. Such a focus leans so heavily on the side of negativity that in effect it does away with the other side of the tension equation. Adorno does state that all art, by the mere fact that it is art, is already a critique of the world around it because it has moved outside of reality to show forth some aspect of that reality for examination. However, while he insists that art's negativity maintains the tension between the work of art and the world around it, where the tension is diminished is in the work of art itself. There must be a way to allow for art which stirs something of beauty deep within us in ways other than only through the negation of that beauty yet which also remains true to the critique of that beauty. Moving away from Adorno's insistence on negative critique, I am calling for art in which we experience the love and the critique, the joy and the pain, the beauty and the ugly. Even if we cannot quite describe the truth of this tension, we know it. And knowing is perhaps where we must stop.

What is art?

This discussion depends on an understanding of art according to Hegel's theory and Adorno's revision of it. Hegel's theory is based on the premise that with the forward movement of history, Spirit (or Consciousness) is ever evolving. Indeed, it is Spirit's evolution that propels the movement of history. That evolution continues as a dynamic process which Hegel refers to as dialectic, where when each moment of history is fully developed, it gives rise to its own negation, which then leads to the next moment in the dialectical process. The Spirit is a universal abstract which posits itself in a finite particular form – such as an art object – which is to say that it negates itself in its opposite. Only by negating itself as a universal in a particular form, its opposite, does Spirit gain objective existence. The particular form is the opposite of the universal, but at the same time it is a particular aspect of it.

Hegel speaks of the *Geschichtlichkeit der Kunst* or historicity of art. This does not merely imply an art object *qua* historical object, but that art as an historical object is a vehicle of truth at a specific time in history. Throughout history, according to Hegel, art has had a role in humanity's self-understanding

and the orientation of humanity's actions and interpretation of the world. Art arises out of a particular time and place, and is a mediator of truth in that context. The history of art, in Hegel's system, is the history of spirit moving as it strives for the ideal, for the synthesis of content and form. Art in history is the form which the content of Spirit takes on as the most adequate, the most true, to Spirit at that time and in that place. However, these moments of a coming together of Spirit and its form do not last; they dissolve and Spirit moves on. Liberto Santoro explains Hegel in this manner: the moments of art "represent the epochal visions and the profound modes of conceiving reality in different cultures. They are different moments of truth: the different modes through which reality reaches the light of human consciousness along its historical development."⁹

According to Adorno, "[a]rt is not some well demarcated area but a momentary, fragile balance."¹⁰ The key for him is art which is authentic, is autonomous, and maintains its autonomy by insisting on its non-identity with its context. That is, art is different from what is around it and refuses to be ruled by a law external to itself. Yet, art is not created *ex nihilo*. Rather, it is created out of and in response to its social-historical context. Thus, akin to Hegel, art is a creation specific to that context, for it grows out of and responds to a particular context at a particular time and depends for its voice upon the material out of which it is created. Art has a necessary and intimate connection to its context. This is crucial for Adorno, in terms of his view that art is a medium of truth, for it is only from the vantage point of an intimate relation with its social-historical moment that art can critique reality. For Adorno, when art no longer speaks to its context, it is like a theology or a religious institution which has lost touch with the concrete and particular world around it and is no longer relevant to its social-historical moment. In such a case, the possible affinity between art and religion, which Adorno does allow, is lost, for both have lost their relationship with truth – an essential argument in what follows.

For both Adorno and Hegel art and truth are inextricably intertwined with time and place in history. Where Adorno vehemently disagrees with Hegel is in the latter's tendency to systematize art into a seemingly continuous development – one manifestation dissolving into the next via sublation. Adorno argues that the resolution of *Aufhebung* (sublation) – the key to

Hegel's method – is precisely what represses the difference of the particular manifestation, robbing art “of the dialectical vitality it has within its specific social-historical context.”¹¹ Art is what it is because it is something totally other than its social-historical moment, and it maintains a critical dialectical tension not only with its present moment but also with the tradition of art that came before it.

Adorno's understanding of the task of art

Central to Adorno's view is that art critique its social-historical condition and that it do so by negating that condition. Art tears away the veil of illusions which hide the truth of reality and shows the awful truth for what it really is. The truth is the suffering of the world, and art is to be the voice of that suffering – the *Leidensprache*. Adorno believes so strongly that art is to articulate the oppressive conditions of its social context he proposes that “surely it would be better for art to vanish altogether than to forget suffering, which is art's expression and which gives substance to its form. Suffering, not positivity, is the humane content of art.”¹² To be this voice of suffering, “art has to make use of the ugly in order to denounce the world which creates and recreates ugliness in its own image.”¹³ Arguing along the same line, Andreas Mertin, a contemporary German scholar, states that in the world as we know it, a world which “has been abandoned by beauty,” the only appropriate form for art is the ugly, the *nicht mehr schöne Kunst* – an art which is no longer beautiful.¹⁴ Accordingly, for art to be beautiful is the same as saying it is fine for art to ignore suffering; it is in a sense to reclaim the veil which hides the suffering. Art which is beautiful, which is positive, resolves the tension of the dialectic of the difference between reality as it appears under the spell of illusion (pretending all is well) and reality as it really is in its fractured ugly truth. It is seen to serve merely to placate a world already under a placating spell.

Adorno had once stated that to write poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric. He later retracted that statement, acknowledging that it was still necessary to write poetry, not because an ugly world needed beauty but because suffering still needed a voice and art was the most appropriate and most truthful form of that voice. Almost thirty years after his death, suffering has not yet been eradicated from this world. Nevertheless, I differ with

Adorno's insistence that art must be that voice of suffering by portraying only the ugly and negating the world around it; indeed, I disagree that art must only be the voice of suffering. Instead, I suggest that the beautiful is also "the humane content of art" even in a world of suffering, and it is possible that such art is still a voice of truth. While Adorno would have us believe that we can only invoke a world which is totally other than the present in a manner of the *via negativa* – as will become clear – I can no longer limit art to that way of being art. Certainly, as he argues, any articulation of a world which is totally other than what we know will be colored by the context in which the articulation is made and therefore will fall short of being anything totally other. Nevertheless, the "relentless negativity" Adorno insists we adhere to is not the only possibility.

Adorno's critique of religion

To understand Adorno's argument against religious art, we should note his accusation that religion, throughout its various historical manifestations, legitimated the domineering and oppressive social structures of its social-historical context and used art as a tool to promote those structures. If Christianity can be viewed as "another ideology of social conservatism in the service of the preservation of prevailing social forms,"¹⁵ then the institutional forms of religion may be in many ways no different from other institutions which are "oppressive and exploitative forces."¹⁶ Agreeing with Adorno, Max Horkheimer claims that the Christian church with its official forms of a hierarchy of power has all too often exchanged the truth of its religious ideal – being the voice of the suffering and the oppressed – for pragmatism, as it has come to recognize that maintenance of "its own social position depends on the continued existence of the basic traits of the present system."¹⁷ If the system were to change, established church institutions could lose their positions of authority. Not holding out any hope for change, Adorno and Horkheimer accuse the historical manifestations of the social institution of the Christian religion of being a manipulative force no better than other institutions which are bound to self-sustain along the lines of an established and accepted ideology.¹⁸ According to Adorno's colleague Herbert Marcuse, the "history of idealism is also the history of its coming to terms with the established order"¹⁹; from the perspective of Adorno, the same can be said

of the history of the Christian church. A movement which began as a revolutionary ideal has often adapted itself to the context of the world around it and adopted the forms of that world for its own authoritative structures. Indeed, one cannot deny the fact that “religion has rarely been a positive, liberal force. Religion is not nice; it has been responsible for more death and suffering than any other human activity.”²⁰

Another view of Adorno’s references to religion, however, insists that his “self-consciously non-religious, negative-dialectical writings need to be placed back into the context of their more explicitly theological roots.” Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr. proposes that Adorno’s “anti-systematic project” was “informed heavily by the Jewish negative-theological tradition.”²¹ While Floyd is not alone in this contention²² in light of Adorno’s own insistence on his atheism, references he makes to theology and the negative theology tradition must be taken as metaphorical. When he does speak affirmatively of theology, Adorno does not mean a theology as the worldview of a certain religious community, directed by that community’s aims and authorities. Rather, he refers to what he perceives as the emancipatory impulse which lies at the core of theology. It is, in his estimation, this impulse, the ideals of theology, which remain as theological fragments, uncoupled from the official structures of an established religion. Today these fragments are “put to the test,” as he states in his essay “*Vernunft und Offenbarung*,” not when they remain attached to religious communities and authorities but in the context of the world in which we live, “in the secular and profane.”²³

Adorno and Horkheimer, do, nonetheless, make explicit and significant references to the Jewish *Bilderverbot*, as in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*:

In Jewish religion . . . the bond between name and being is still recognized in the ban on pronouncing the name of God. The disenchanted world of Judaism conciliates magic by negating it in the idea of God. Jewish religion allows no word that would alleviate the despair of all that is mortal. It associates hope only with the prohibition against calling on what is false as God, against invoking the finite as the infinite, lies as truth. The guarantee of salvation lies in the rejection of any belief that would replace it: it is knowledge obtained in the denunciation of illusion.²⁴

They conclude that all that can be said about God, hope, or salvation is what they are not. Any positive attributes are mere illusion, mere lies. As in any reference to theology, it is the ideals of salvation and redemption, the hope for emancipation from the inhumane conditions of this world, which must be understood here. For Adorno and Horkheimer, these terms have thrown off the garments of religion which, as Horkheimer states, “lost its function of expressing the ideal, to the extent that it became the bedfellow of the state.”²⁵

Briefly, the tradition of negative theology asserts that it is rationally inconceivable to speak of God, or of the Absolute, as Adorno often states. Positive theology, on the other hand, maintains that God can be named and that all names and all things, “so far as they are positive,” are attributable to and point to God, to the Absolute, which is “the ground of all being.”²⁶ Negative theology denies this possibility and maintains that all names for God, or for the Absolute, disappear; however, the “existence of God is not in question.”²⁷ Adorno insists on “extreme fidelity” to the ban on images of God and will not even allow for utopian thinking, because all such thinking will be merely based on the present, and “no utopian model is free of the present.”²⁸ And the present is far from utopian. The very utopian telos of Adorno’s critical theory, “the concept of ‘redemption,’” may not be thought of, spoken of, or described concretely because all such thinking, speaking, and describing would be “insufficient means.” Adorno and Horkheimer argue that “the justness of the image” of any possible hope of redemption is preserved precisely in the “faithful pursuit of its prohibition.”²⁹ They refer to this faithful pursuit as “determinate negativity” which, they explain, “rejects the defective ideas of the Absolute.”³⁰ The most that is permitted is to say that utopia will be “categorically totally other than all that has appeared in history to date: it will be free of all domination.”³¹ And the most that art can do is give form to the ugliness and the despair which are the truth of reality now. The marks of hope can only be glimpsed negatively – or in the contradiction of hope. For Adorno, it is no longer possible for religion to show us a glimpse of this hope. Instead, the only possible glimpse is in the subversive negation of present reality as revealed in art.

Religion's patronage of art

In his essay "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today," Adorno argues that the unity between art and religion is irretrievably lost. If indeed there ever was such a unity, it was based on "the whole objective structure of society during certain phases of history" and not the subjective convictions of the artist.³² In fact, the possibility of a unity between religion and art is, he claims, problematic in itself. He calls this unity an "exalted unity" which is largely a romantic projection. This unity would only have been possible during times of the creation of art qua ritual symbols, "which were works of art only accidentally."³³ Even during supposed periods of the unity of religion and art qua art – such as the age of the classical Greeks – it was a repressive unity "largely superimposed upon art."³⁴

In contrast, other scholars argue for an intimate relation between religion and art, claiming that "religion has been an inexhaustible spring of artistic expression."³⁵ But references to this relationship throughout the history of the Christian church, for example, more often than not prove Adorno correct. Indeed, the church has benefited from the illustrative and pedagogical aspects of the arts in spreading the Christian message. Starting in approximately 970 CE European peasants, for instance, unable to comprehend the Latin Mass, were taught the theology of the church through dramatization of biblical stories. Even earlier, paintings, carvings, and sculpture portrayed the message of the Christian faith. As early as the fourth century CE Christian rhetoricians, schooled in the rhetorical tradition of antiquity, established a close relationship between art and literature in their sermons. In their estimation, reference to a work of art brought out the point of the literature more clearly; only the emphasis had now changed to Christian literature and Christian works of art. The goal was, through the use of this familiar rhetorical technique, to win "the heathen listeners to the Christian faith."³⁶ Although Christian rhetoricians did not change the techniques they did modify, through their Christian beliefs and the expression thereof, the general approach to and view of art. The outer forms of art were not changed, but the social function definitely was. "For classical antiquity, works of art had above all an aesthetic meaning, for Christianity, an other-than-aesthetic meaning [*ausseraesthetischen Sinn*]."³⁷ The images are granted no individual value and are all made for one goal only, that of getting across the message of the

church. As such, works of art remain subordinate to their didactic-pragmatic function as dictated by the official church position.

Church patronage of visual artists has significantly declined, especially among the wings of the Christian church established in the sixteenth-century Reformation. This loss of patronage has not meant the death of art, however. As Adorno notes, art has in fact “flourished,”³⁸ freed from the restrictions placed upon it by the authorities of the church who wanted it to “respect the moral censorship and the aesthetic program of the church,” in short, to proclaim the church’s message.³⁹

Christians in the twentieth century have responded in several ways to the distance that has arisen between the church and the development of the arts. Responses of those who maintain the notion that art must proclaim the Christian message are exemplified by the following:

. . . as far as the Church is concerned, there is at least a chance once again that the arts may be used to express Christian ideas, instead of being used exclusively – or nearly so – to present secular humanism in the guise of biblical charades. But if this chance is not to be lost, artists must be employed; and moreover they must be told what the Christian faith is if they do not already know [sic].⁴⁰

The art form of drama, in particular, has been cited as beneficial to the church: “the Christian dramatist’s aim is conversion and . . . the spectator of a Christian drama should go away in the sure and certain hope of the consequences to himself of the historical Resurrection.”⁴¹ But after having gained its autonomy, is this the type of relationship into which art should once again enter?

Horst Schwebel, director of the Marburg (Germany) Institute for contemporary art and the church, firmly believes that “[i]t should become obvious, that [leaders in the church] ought to take seriously art as an autonomous partner, and seek to come into discussion with art and await from art its own autonomous contribution, without – with whatever refined means – forcing it to a position of subordination.”⁴² Members of the church must come to appreciate art not for its ability to “bring to life the content of the sermon, to give a bit of atmosphere to a functional room, to beautify monotone cities, or to communicate political convictions.”⁴³ Andreas Martin, an associate of Schwebel’s, urges caution, however: if one does re-introduce

art into church buildings, one runs the risk of art regressing to a “devotional item and religious kitsch.”⁴⁴ Thus, the other misuse of art leads to art becoming merely a nice piece of nostalgia. The premise argued again and again by the scholars at the Marburg Institute is that autonomous art must remain autonomous even in the contemporary context of the church. Likewise, Adorno in his “Theses Upon Art and Religion Today” maintains that “[a]n artist who still deserves that name should proclaim nothing, not even humanism.”⁴⁵

But, if art is not to proclaim anything, not even humanism, what is the possible relationship between art and religion? Adorno acknowledges that art does have a “true affinity with religion” in its relationship to truth. But in light of his view of what has become of religion, this affinity now only remains between art and the ideals of religion. Any attempt to produce “religious art” in the present context is, in Adorno’s opinion, “nothing but blasphemy.”⁴⁶ Art must therefore carry on as the voice of truth crying out without reference to religion. His reason for saying this is that it is not “through the pronouncement of moral tenets or by bringing about some moral effect – that art partakes of morality, linking it to the ideal of a more humane society.”⁴⁷

All of this leads us, once again, to the *Bilderverbot*. On the one hand, art’s affinity with the ideals of religion, art’s relationship to truth, is quickly nullified in any attempt to put the Absolute into images. To abide by the ban on images means that one dare not subordinate absoluteness to what it is not, for to do so is to trivialize any yearning for the possibility of hope for something other than what we know. At the same time, to subordinate art to the ideological goals of religion, making it into a tool of proselytization on the street corners or requiring it to fulfill a function as the mouthpiece of religion’s message even in the context of the church, is to refuse to acknowledge art’s autonomy. So, following Adorno, how could there be any possibility of religious art today?

I agree with Adorno and his colleague Max Horkheimer, who said that “art, since it became autonomous, has preserved the utopia that evaporated from religion.”⁴⁸ This continues to be true if one insists on referring to the social-historical manifestations of religion in its institutional forms, which have often abandoned the ideals of religion in favor of preserving the institution. These institutions of religion have not been kind to art, but

historically have used it for their own purpose rather than allowing the integrity of art to stand on its own. But if one means the *ideals* of religion, uncoupled from the institutions of religion, one could argue for the increasing possibility of religious art in the present context. However, with Adorno, I would still insist that even in this context one should not attempt to add “spiritual meaning and . . . religious content” to art to make it religious, because such attempts are affected, external decorative additions.⁴⁹

My disagreement with Adorno on the possibility of religious art is based upon my opening premise: Art and religion continue to evolve according to the dynamic of the dialectic. Adorno argued that in a world where the dominant way of being and thinking was no longer influenced by religion, art which is religious is impossible. He stated that if there ever was unity between religion and art, it was “not simply due to [the] subjective convictions and decisions” of the artist, but to the fact that the underlying general theory of the social reality of the time was religious.⁵⁰ The world as Adorno knew it in the mid twentieth-century was one wherein the underlying general theory of the social reality of the time was anything but religious. He knew a world ruled by dictators who exterminated millions for ideological reasons, a world dominated by a “culture industry” which manipulated consumers into passive acceptance of the need to buy and accept the version of the world as portrayed in the American media. In Adorno’s world, a sense of transcendence was totally lacking. In such a world, Adorno rightly argued that “a secular world can scarcely tolerate any sacred art,” for in a social-historical context where religion no longer shapes the order of being, the “prohibition on graven images” of God is even more extensive than it was originally meant.⁵¹

While there may be good reason to contend that the world of the late twentieth century fits the same description, a significant change must be taken into consideration. Just as Adorno pointed to signs in the social-historical world around him, I will indicate signs from the social-historical context within which I speak, in order to argue that the underlying general theory of the present social reality may in large part be increasingly characterized as religious – but uncoupled from religious institutions. Thus, not only is religious art possible today, but it does exist.

And what about now?

If, as Adorno insists, art grows out of its context, then what about art in the present context? Adorno died in 1969. This current discussion is taking place almost thirty years later. Our social-historical context is not the same now as it was then. The most interesting twist of difference is that while religion may be on the wane, spirituality is on the rise. Many people continue to be disillusioned with what they perceive as the strong hand of authority of religious institutions, and they are leaving churches and synagogues in droves because they are no longer finding there what they need. At the same time, there is a general crisis of confidence in modern intellectual, political, scientific, and technological achievements – reason, science, and technology have proven incapable of solving our problems. In the midst of all of this disillusion, many are seeking a power greater than themselves. Adorno would refer to this as merely a desire to believe “because it would be so nice if one could believe again.”⁵² He accused his own contemporaries of returning to the faith of their fathers “not because they were seeking its truth, but rather because they needed orientation for their lives in a world without meaning.”⁵³ The difference between what Adorno saw and what is occurring now is the scale on which it is happening and that most of this seeking is happening at the expense of the church.

I turn once again to Hegel, who theorizes that it is Spirit which influences the movement of the history of art. He applies this same theory to the movement of history and of religion. Just as with the history of art, Spirit influences this movement by incarnating in the most appropriate form for a particular moment. Religion, in Hegel’s scheme, evolves as Spirit incarnates into a particular form appropriate for a particular time and place. As this evolution continues, what came before influences the direction of what comes after. Although within an understanding of the dialectic, each succeeding form negates the one which came before it; negation does not mean it does away with what came before it. In the process of *Aufhebung*, as one moment moves into the next it takes up within it the elements of the previous particular form. However, in agreement with Adorno, this is not a seamless process; rather, particular elements from the past remain in their particularities, and manifestations in the present are often in dialectical tension with the past.

Thus, according to a dialectical understanding of the evolution of history and of the history of religion, the forms religion is taking on now are the most appropriate forms for this time and this place in the history of the evolution of Spirit. It is no wonder that in what has become known as “Spirituality” – however nebulous and undefinable that term may be – at the end of the twentieth century we see remnants of previous incarnations of Spirit, for they are manifestations from the past which have refused to dissipate and fold into new forms. Indeed, while Hegel would have us believe in his *Philosophy of Religion* that Christianity is the epitome of world religions, we see today that not only have other world religions not fallen away, there is instead a resurgence in the practices of other religions. But it is also no wonder that so much of what we see in contemporary Spirituality seems strange, perhaps even bizarre, for these are new forms. Fifty years ago in Adorno’s world, the explosion of a consciousness of Spirituality in the West would have been absurd and totally out of place. Yet now we see signs of spiritual awakening in many unusual places: cutting-edge business magazines have feature articles on spirituality, the religion section in bookstores has grown tremendously – in fact, it is popular now to read and write religious books. In other corners of our social-historical context, we see that some of the most popular television shows and Hollywood movies feature spiritual themes – some to a more nobler extent than others, no doubt. Whether one agrees with it or not, this is not an isolated phenomenon. It may be a phenomenon which many scholars choose to ignore or denigrate, but they do so at the risk of losing touch with their social-historical moment. The question is: Dare we believe Hegel that we are in fact following the prodding of Spirit as it manifests itself in a particular form? Dare we accept the challenge of the dialectic and, while reclaiming aspects of the old, also negate that old and move into a new understanding of what it means to be religious? And if we accept the possibility that the forms in which Spirit is manifest keep evolving, then what does this mean about the possibility of religious art today?

Before tackling these questions, we must first address Adorno’s insistence on art’s relentless negativity. There is no doubt that for Adorno the existence of art is essential; indeed, he believes that the last hope for humanity is art. As the voice of suffering and the desire for what has never-yet-been, art must speak. But is this the only way in which it can speak? In order to avoid the risk of masking an alternative ideology in the construction of a

path towards an imperfect Utopia, Adorno insists that art must concentrate on what it does best: critique what is. Art, as “different from the ungodly reality” of that world “negatively embodies an order of things in which empirical being would have its rightful place.”⁵⁴ When the dialectical tension between art and its context ceases to exist, he insists, it is the end of art; for while negative embodiment of its context is the limit of art, it is this which refuses to allow the dialectic to be resolved. Art rearranges the elements of reality in such a way that we begin to understand the significance of the gap we perceive between what is and what ought to be. We begin to doubt that the inhumane conditions we now know might be all that is possible. “[A]ll art is a yearning and nothing else.”⁵⁵ Adorno insists that now we can only know a possible other world in the negative, that is by saying what it will not be:

In the right condition, as in the Jewish *theologoumenon*, all things would differ only a little from the way they are: but not even the least can be conceived now as it would be then. Despite this, we cannot discuss the intelligible character as hovering abstractly, impotently above things in being: we can talk of it only insofar as it keeps arising in reality, in the guilty context of things as they are, brought about by that context.⁵⁶

But must this yearning be limited to negative embodiment in a guilty context?

I would like to propose yet another possibility for art. Adorno focused on art as either autonomous (and therefore a negative critique of its social-historical moment) or as a tool of some ideological leaning. Yet in his work one sees examples of another view, a sense that art is something else. There is a sense that art, which defies description, according to Adorno, also does something which defies description. In many ways, art is a direct knowing of something which cannot be articulated, and the experience of art is also a direct knowing of something which cannot be explained. Art is indeed an “other,” and because it is art it evokes something which is other. But we would not know that other unless we had already glimpsed it. To quote Adorno, we would not “express[] doubt that this could be all,”⁵⁷ unless we had at some point found a trace of something which indicated otherwise. This doubt that what is, really is all, is not based on nothing; for if it were, why then would we despair at what we currently see and wish for something other? Adorno insists that “[g]reyness could not fill us with despair if our minds did

not harbor the concept of different colors, scattered traces of which are not absent from the negative whole.”⁵⁸ But from where do we catch a glimpse? In what do we find a trace of that other?

It is art, which is concrete, that evokes in us something which is not concrete but transcendent. While this evocation of that other, of the Absolute, may be nigh impossible to describe or to put into form, I do not believe the evocation must be limited to its negative. How, for example, can we describe what is evoked upon hearing Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings”? In what way might we begin to give words to that instant where the ever-so-subtle line of body in combination with movement, music, and light creates an exquisite moment in a choreographed dance piece by David Earle? We can’t. We just know it. And yet this is beauty, not a relentless negativity, which evokes that transcendent other.

To begin to indicate what this means for religious art today, I concede that Adorno may be correct in insisting that religious art may be impossible, if by religious art we mean art which seeks to illustrate some religious belief. Certainly in a milieu where the dominant way of thinking no longer accepts the parameters defined by a religious view of the world, religious art would perhaps have little meaning beyond nostalgia, as he suggests. In a secular world, sacred images are mere clichés. And religious art which insists on telling a message or illustrating a point or converting its audience is not art at all, but a tool of something else. In a world where evocations of Spirit is a theme we see in many places, surely it is time once again for art to mediate those evocations. But art’s mediation does not need religious direction or coercion or manipulation. Art is. Art as art which grows out of and responds to its context evokes in us something we cannot put into words.

I cannot agree with Adorno that this response must be limited to a relentlessly negative critique; rather, by holding in tension the beautiful and the ugly of the everyday, the response we see communicated in art brings us in touch with something with which we have lost touch. Plato’s use of the word *anamnesis* is appropriate here, for in art we remember what we once knew but had forgotten – like that longing for something greater than ourselves expressed in so many different if sometimes simplistic ways in our late-twentieth-century western world. It is as if the dialectic of art allows us to step momentarily into a place of light where we suddenly know truth and we know that the darkness out of which art has pulled us is not truth. We

experience it. And we know it. We know it in an instant as if we had always known it but did not know how to speak it.

In refusing to agree that the *via negativa* is the only way, I turn to Maximus of Tyre (ca. AD 125-185):

For the God who is the Father and Creator of all that is, older than the sun, older than the sky, greater than time and eternity and the whole continual flow of nature, is not to be named by any lawgiver, is not to be uttered by any voice, is not to be seen by any eye. But we, being unable to grasp his essence, make use of sounds and names and pictures, of beaten gold and ivory and silver, of plants and rivers, of mountain peaks and torrents, yearning for the knowledge of him and in our weakness naming all that is beautiful in this world after his nature. The same thing happens to those who love others; to them the sweetest sight will be the actual figures of their children, but sweet also will be their memory – they will be happy at [the sight of] a lyre, a little spear, or a chair, perhaps, or a running ground, or anything whatever that wakens the memory of the beloved. Why should I go any further in examining and passing judgment about images? Let all . . . know what is divine; let them know, that is all. If Greeks are stirred to the remembrance of God by the art of Phidias, or the Egyptians by paying worship to animals, or others by a river, or others by fire, I will not quarrel with their differences. Only let them know, let them love, let them remember.⁵⁹

Like Adorno, Maximus of Tyre acknowledges that God cannot be named and that we are unable even to grasp the essence of God. Yet, unlike the insistence on the *via negativa*, Maximus of Tyre allows for the human yearning to express beauty and perfection in some feeble form to stir us to remember God. In our social-historical moment at the end of the twentieth century, a time when so many people are yearning for and many are finding a renewed sense of spirituality as important in their lives – even if it is for lack of a sense of orientation, this does not deny its truthfulness – in such a context, maybe we need to turn from Adorno's mid-century views and allow for a new form of art. Adorno insisted that art must keep changing and artists must constantly invent new forms of art. As one scholar puts it, artists are to create

new forms “in the shadow of the existent.”⁶⁰ In the existing context of today, our approach to art must be different from our approach in the past.

Adorno’s insistence that art not be a tool of something outside itself still ought to remain a warning. Indeed, as soon as artists try to evoke the Spirit of the Divine, they lose their art. It falls flat. It is as if Spirit goes where it wills. I agree with Adorno that religious ideas put on to art are affected external additions. I also agree that the work of art which would express the universal must not grasp after the universal content, and the work which would be religious must not strive to be religious. However, I also insist that art which would critique via the ugly and the painful also falls flat if it does not also express beauty or joy or love. Art which would speak to its social-historical moment must be thoroughly materially mediated in its social-historical context. This means that art which is true to its context must maintain the dialectic of the contradictions of that context. Art which loses sight of one side of the contradiction or the other is no longer truthfully mediated in its context.

To close one’s mind to new understandings of art is not to allow one’s understanding to evolve. This denies the crucial core of what dialectical theory is centered on: the dynamic. For if as Spirit continues to move and we are not willing to participate in some way in that movement, then we will stagnate. This does not mean we have to passively allow the sublation into our thinking of everything that comes along, nor does it mean we pretend that evolution is a seamless, painless venture. But to shut ourselves off from even the possibility of encounter and influence leads only to rigid and ossified old ideas.

Where I end up does not, of course, fit very neatly within the limits of Adorno’s philosophy of art. But engaging in the dialectic is not without risk. It is often safer and easier to find an understanding that makes sense and stick with it – the same thing happens with music and art: golden oldies radio stations abound, and in the 1990s thousands of people flock to see exhibitions of Impressionist art painted a century earlier. If Hegel is right that the history of humanity is the history of the evolution of the Spirit, then to try to stop that evolution by resisting the movement seems ludicrous. The old becomes new in new forms and the new eventually becomes old until it too is rejuvenated with the breath of the movement of Spirit.

Notes

¹ “A-Dialogue” in the Latin sense of the prefix “a” and the preposition “a”: “away from.”

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 363.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ Cheryl Nafziger-Leis, “Art . . . Even After Auschwitz: Adorno’s Critical Theory of Art, Religion and Ideology.” Ph.D. Diss., Centre for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto, December 1996.

⁵ The definition of “ideology” in the dissertation followed the argument of Clifford Geertz that while once a neutral term, “‘ideology’ has become thoroughly ideologized,” it has become saturated with polemical connotation. Geertz no longer allows for ideology to be defined as merely “an ordered system of cultural symbols.” [Clifford Geertz, “Ideology As a Cultural System,” in *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 194-6.] Thus, I adopted the use of the term which maintained the sense of its critical conception, one which preserved the negative connotation. I also referred to John Thompson: “To study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination.” John B. Thompson. *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 4. Such a definition coincided with the sense of the term as Adorno used it.

⁶ Currently within the field of the study of religion, the definition of the term “religion” and the premises of the study of religion are hotly debated. As a result, it is incumbent upon scholars not only to provide their working definition of the term but also to clearly establish their approach to the study of religion. While it is not necessary to the argument in this paper to explain the methodology to the study of religion I used (for that, see my dissertation pp. 22-33), I do offer the definition of religion upon which the argument does depend. Again I turn to Clifford Geertz, who defined religion as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in [human beings] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” (Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 90.) Also important to this use of “religion” is that there is no presumption of an essence of religion apart from religion in any of its historical or cultural forms. “Religion is unimaginable apart from the people who practice it in specific contexts.” (Marsha Hewitt, “Liberation Theology and the Emancipation of Religion,” *The Scottish Journal of Theology* XIII.1 (Spring 1992, 22.)) In order to carry out an ideological critique of religion, one must recognize religion as a cultural phenomenon, for otherwise it is “impossible to analyze adequately the admixtures of power and domination that religion harbours and perpetrates.” (Marsha Hewitt, “Ideology Critique, Feminism and the Study of Religion,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (forthcoming).) Note that the way Adorno and Horkheimer use the

term “religion” often connotes the historical institutional structures of religion, while at other times they use the terms “religion” and “theology” interchangeably. The ways in which they use these terms will be understood in the particular context.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “Theses Upon Art and Religion Today,” *Kenyon Review* 7.4 (Autumn 1945), 679.

⁸ Adorno explains that “dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. The right state of things would be free of it: neither a system nor a contradiction.” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 11.) As he speaks of the necessity of maintaining the dialectic, he is dependent upon the term “negative,” which he uses in a deliberate manner to mean: not to get rid of, but to be in contradiction with, or to show forth that contradiction.

⁹ Liberto Santoro, “Hegel’s Aesthetics and ‘the End of Art’,” *Philosophical Studies* (Ireland) 30 (1984): 63.

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 416.

¹¹ James M. Harding, “Historical Dialectics and the Autonomy of Art in Adorno’s *Aesthetische Theorie*,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50.3 (Summer 1992): 192.

¹² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 369.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁴ Andreas Mertin, “Schön, heilig, schrecklich? Marginalien zur Gegenwartskunst,” in Horst Schwebel und Andreas Mertin, eds., *Bilder und ihre Macht: Zum Verhaeltnis von Kunst und christlicher Religion* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1989) 36.

¹⁵ Marsha Hewitt, *Critical Theory of Religion: A Feminist Analysis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 179.

¹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964; second ed. 1991), 47.

¹⁷ Max Horkheimer, “Thoughts on Religion,” *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell et al. (New York: Continuum, 1989), 130.

¹⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer did not bother to delineate between the various denominations and various particular manifestations of the Christian religion. For them “religion” referred most often to Christianity unless a specific reference was made to Judaism, and within Christianity they made no distinction between different denominations – an irony, especially

since both were critical of Hegel's use of universal concepts which allowed no room for particular differences to be manifest.

¹⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 92.

²⁰ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 110.

²¹ Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., "Transcendence in the Light of Redemption: Adorno and the Legacy of Rosenzweig and Benjamin," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXI.3 (Fall 1993), 140. This tradition was mediated to Adorno by Walter Benjamin in their personal correspondence and in Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [trans. John Osborn (London and New York: Verso, 1985), as well as by the Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*, trans. from 1930 edition, William W. Hallo (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.)

²² Rolf Wiggershaus is another. Cf. Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994).

²³ Adorno, "Vernunft und Offenbarung," *Gesammelte Schriften* 10.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 608.

²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 23. Martin Jay cites an interview which Horkheimer gave in *Der Spiegel*, where he "claimed that Critical Theory's refusal to name the 'other' was derived from the Jewish taboo on naming God or picturing paradise." *Der Spiegel* 5. January, 1970, 24, cited in Jay, *Permanent Exiles*, 280, note 10.

²⁵ Horkheimer, "Thoughts on Religion," 129.

²⁶ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1967), 92.

²⁷ Lothar Stresius, *Theodor W. Adornos negative Dialektik: Eine kritische Rekonstruktion* (Frankfurt am Main and Berne: Peter Lang, 1982), 232. Both Stresius and Tillich (cf. Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, 50ff, 90ff.) indicate the Jewish ban on the image of God as a significant source for the tradition of negative theology. But they also emphasize that the tradition as it has come to be known is "unthinkable" without the influence of platonic and neo-platonic philosophy; the absolute who is both one and beyond any possible being, transcending all that exists, could only ever be known indirectly if at all. (*Ibid.*, 233.)

²⁸ Alo Allkemper, *Rettung und Utopie: Studien zu Adorno* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1981), 10.

²⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 24.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Reinhard Kager, *Herrschaft und Versöhnung: Einführung in das Denken Theodor W. Adornos* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 1988), 43.

³² Adorno, "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today," 677.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 242.

³⁶ Andreas Mertin, "Kunstvoll predigen: Der Umgang mit Kunstwerken in homiletischer Perspektive," chap. in *Bilder und ihre Macht: Zum Verhältnis von Kunst und christlicher Religion*, eds. Horst Schwebel and Andreas Mertin (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1989), 214-5. Mertin gives specific examples of this practice in the history of Christian homiletics. He refers, for example, to Basilus von Caesarea who preached on martyrdom with Christ as the referee, as portrayed in a painting by Barlaam, and to Gregory of Nyssa, who, in a sermon on St. Theodor, shows a painting also on the theme of martyrdom with Christ as the umpire in human form. The work cited here is one of the published works of the Marburg Institute. Mertin was a scholar researching at the Marburg Institute from 1983 until 1994. Horst Schwebel, the Director of the Marburg Institute, states: "Since 220 C.E. church art has been placed in the service of preaching." Horst Schwebel, *Autonome Kunst im Raum der Kirche* (Hamburg: Furcht, 1968), 9.

³⁷ A. Hauser, *Sozialgeschichte der Kunst und Literatur* (Munich, 1983), 133f., in Mertin, "Kunstvoll predigen," 216.

³⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2.

³⁹ Andreas Mertin, "Der allgemeine und der besondere Ikonoklasmus: Bilderstreit als Paradigma christlicher Kunsterfahrung," in Andreas Mertin and Horst Schwebel, *Kirche und moderne Kunst* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenaeum, 1988), 157.

⁴⁰ A.C. Bridge, "Churches, artists and people," *Church Information Board* (1959), 15, cited in F. J. Glendenning, "The Church and the Arts," in Frank Glendenning, ed., *The Church and the Arts* (London: SCM, 1960), 13.

⁴¹ Hugh Ross Williamson, *Christian Drama* (July 1950), (no p. given), cited in *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴² Horst Schwebel, "Öflinger Thesen zur Verteidigung der autonomen Kunst in der Kirche," in Paul Grab, *Unbequeme Kunst – unbequeme Autonomie* (Ofllingen: Edition Diakonieverein Wehr-Ofllingen, 1980), 8. Two exhibitions which the Marburg Institute, under Schwebel's direction, curated and organized, addressed biblical themes: Changing Images of Eve, and *Ecce Homo*. Well-known artists from across Europe entered works in these exhibitions. Although a theme for the exhibition was suggested, Schwebel made it very clear to me that the artists were given free reign in terms of their creations. The idea propelling these exhibitions was to invite contemporary responses to these originally biblically-tainted themes. Nevertheless, Schwebel acknowledges that to suggest a theme – especially a biblical theme – is to walk a fine line between dictating what the artist must do and allowing autonomous expression: "An exhibition on a biblical theme is difficult, because the danger of instrumentalization is always present." (Schwebel, "Kunst im Kontext Kirche," 243.) The works in the exhibitions, however, exemplify the possibility of modern art as critical of the artistic tradition, its social-historical context, and the suggested theme, and its – in this case, Christian – tradition. The theme was suggested to give the exhibition a sense of overall coherency, and as a place from which the artist could start and to which he or she could respond. (Schwebel, personal conversations, September-October, 1995.) For more information, cf. the exhibition catalogs: *Die andere Eva: Wandlungen eines biblischen Frauenbildes*, eds. Horst Schwebel and Heinz-Ulrich Schmidt (Menden: Trapez, 1985); *Ecce Homo: Vom Christusbild zum Menschenbild* eds. Horst Schwebel and Heinz-Ulrich Schmidt (Menden: Trapez, 1987).

⁴³ Schwebel, "Öflinger Thesen," 9.

⁴⁴ Andreas Martin, "Schön, heilig, schrecklich? Marginalien zur Gegenwartskunst," in Schwebel and Martin, *Bilder und ihre Macht*, 44.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Adorno, "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today," 679.

⁴⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 329.

⁴⁸ Max Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et al. (New York: Continuum, Seabury Press, 1974), 275.

⁴⁹ Adorno, "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today," 678.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 677.

⁵¹ Adorno, "Sacred Fragment: Schönberg's *Moses und Aron*," chap. in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London and New York: Verso, 1992), 243.

⁵² Adorno, "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today," 678.

⁵³ Adorno, "Vernunft und Offenbarung," 609.

⁵⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 322.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 397.

⁵⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 147.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 377-8.

⁵⁹ Maximus of Tyre, "Oration," VIII, 10, trans. by Frederick C. Grant, in *Hellenistic Religions* (New York, 1953), 168.

⁶⁰ Personal conversation with Marsha Hewitt, June 1993.