

Clearing the Ground

As human beings we enter history through our actions which are unrepeatable and the consequences of which we can never completely predict. We can make amends but we can never take back what we do; we can never keep a broken promise and never retrieve good or bad done to others. This fundamental human truth exists at different levels and at different degrees of intensity; thus an act of marriage to a particular person at a particular time is unrepeatable, with significant consequences for those involved, although usually without large historical consequence. A government that goes to war, on the other hand, an action as the result of a number of decisions by a number of people, has considerable historical consequence that could affect thousands of people. The relation of action to history is complex and highly pertinent to the importance of religion in that religions mediate the human encounter with mystery through action and so can affect history. On the one hand we have macro-historical forces operating over large stretches of time – characterized as the *long durée* by the French annales school – in which human persons seem to be of little consequence,¹ while on the other we have subjective human action that impacts upon the world.

The human subject is both the consequence of history, the product of a certain time and space, language and culture, economic and social forces, yet also acts upon history and in some sense stands outside of it. We are both the products of history and its agents. In sociology this is formulated as the problem of which has priority, structure or agency? We are social actors as products of the social system and yet we act upon the social system to change it. My claim that religions express a human will to meaning needs to be located in the broader context of this complex problem. We need to present

an account of the theorizing about religion in macro-historical terms and to locate religious practice in relation to this debate. While I would wish to make claims about religion that holds up across traditions, we first need to be historically sensitive to the conditions of late modernity within which religions continue to flourish. Although we will develop these themes in later chapters, we need to place religion not only in the context of the will to meaning, but in the context of the historical processes that have created our modern condition.

This understanding of religion as a cultural form that mediates the encounter with mystery needs to be located within the history of social theory. It is a claim of social realism in so far as the encounter with mystery is expressed as action and is a claim of religious ontology in so far as it reveals a truth about the nature of our strange world. In its purest or simplest articulation, the will to meaning is the human act itself framed by the imagination; we do things for a reason, which is conceptualized or represented in our minds, and which in turn is based on a pre-cognitive sense of bodily being. Religious actions are framed by a religious imaginaire and the purpose of such acts, the meaning of such acts, is directed towards a transcendent goal even when simultaneously directed towards the world. That is, the ultimate goal of many religions is a salvation or liberation that both transcends the world and is achieved only through and within it. The human encounter with mystery is mediated by action (and so the body) informed by a religious imagination. The Buddhist meditating in the morning along with the Moslem call to prayer are intentional actions driven by distinct imaginaries or ways of conceptualizing the nature of reality and the human place within it. People's actions have been driven by the religions they inhabit which, traditionally, have formed systems of total meaning. Historically, the majority of human beings have made sense of their lives through religions; religions have formed their daily behavior as well as their political actions, and in modernity religious people need to negotiate multiple identities which hold together the religious imagination along with advanced economic, technological, and scientific knowledge. People make meaning, as Hughes reminds us, from the meanings which are available to them.²

The importance of religion lies in the way religious action is a kind of mediation; the form in which people encounter mystery. People interact or dwell within the world through action and so action is also the point of intersection with history. This is not to conflate history with mystery, but clearly they are linked in temporality and the conundrum of time (Augustine's point that we experience time but cannot explain it). We live our lives through time within societies and within religions, and it is this complex relationship between history, society, and religion and the relationship of that complex to the particular subject, to subjective meaning, that will allow us insight into the nature of religion as mediation.

The complex relationship between history, society, and religion has been analyzed in critical sociology since its inception with Comte in the nineteenth century. In the classical sociological terms of Durkheim, religion can be distinguished from society and yet explained by it: religion is social effervescence that functions to bond a community, the glue of the social group. But two other sociological traditions, those of Marx and Weber, have been especially significant in their explanation of and impact on religion. In particular two processes need to be discussed as they impact upon religious action, namely reification and rationalization. Reification is emphasized in a theoretical trajectory beginning with Marx and developing into the Frankfurt School while rationalization is emphasized by Max Weber and Weberian sociology. Traditionally the way these processes have been theorized have been at odds: on the one hand the Marxist trajectory sees religion as the consequence of the social economy and the reification of social and political relationships, on the other hand the Weberian tradition sees religion as directly affecting the social economy through the process of rationalization. The contemporary, global condition of modernity and global capitalism can be seen as the result of these processes. We need therefore to understand the claim that religions mediate the encounter with mystery, firstly in the context of historical process and secondly in the context of subjective meaning.

When understanding religions in terms of historical process there has been a general skepticism towards religion: religion is no mediation of mystery but rather an illusion that keeps us bound and trapped in an unjust world. On this view, religion does not develop from within the real but is rather an ideology imposed upon the real that takes us away from it. Ideology in Karl Marx's sense is "false consciousness" that keeps people entrapped within their social conditions. The counter-argument to religion therefore proceeds from a consideration of reification as a feature of the contemporary human condition, to a consideration of how processes of rationalization have contributed to this reification. The counter, counter-argument is that religions offer alternative conceptualizations or antidotes to reification and provide subjective meanings that cannot be reduced to ideology. This is not simply a normative claim about religion but also a methodological claim about how we understand religions, how any "science of religion" needs to proceed.

In clearing the ground for what follows we need then to discuss firstly the idea of reification, that one of our problems is that we turn ideas into things, and secondly rationalization, that reality can be explained in terms of our reasoning about it. Modern sociology has attempted to explain religion in terms of these processes but in so doing it has missed an important point that religions provide subjective meaning through action. Through action religions mediate the human encounter with the mystery and strangeness of the world.

Reification: The Marxist Legacy

Developing from Hegel, Marx identified alienation as the key experience of the individual in relation to the socio-economic processes in which s/he was born and religion as ideology being instrumental in this alienation. For Hegel, alienation was the Spirit departing from itself (from the condition of “being in itself” to the condition of “being for itself”), moving through the historical process, through the stages of art, religion, and philosophy, to its final self-realization as the “in and for itself” at the end of history. Religion in this view is part of the manifestation of the Spirit. Marx famously reversed this idea claiming that religion was not a manifestation of Spirit, an idealist position, but rather a product of matter. Religion, along with ethics and traditional German metaphysics, was a representation of material reality, but a false representation that was mistakenly taken to be real. To overcome alienation we must give up religion as people’s illusory happiness in order to establish the conditions for real happiness, which is to abandon the condition which needs illusions. Some of Marx’s best “sound bites” concern religion: it is “the sigh of the oppressed creature” and “the opium of the people.”³ Religion does not speak from the real but on the contrary is an illusion or ideology that he defined as false consciousness. Indeed, religion is the opiate of the people that gives us succor but in the end keeps us deluded, in slavish thrall to the capitalist industrial machine. This is a familiar story which develops into the twentieth century Marxism of Lukács, Gramsci, Mannheim, and the Frankfurt School.⁴

The Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács developed the thesis that there is a disjunction between experience and social reality that needed to be resolved. In an early work, *The Theory of the Novel*, the self is alienated or estranged from the world and experiences life as fragmented; in its reflecting on the world, the “I” creates an image of itself and sees the world not objectively, but purely as a broken reflection. This “elevation of interiority” fragments the subject and creates a disjunction between self and world.⁵ Lukács identifies the human need for meaning but because he accepts the Marxist critique of religion, this meaning cannot be located in any transcendence and nor can it be found in the current, modern conditions of the subject whose relationship to the world is dissociated.

The retreat into metaphysics cannot give us real meaning because the retreat from the material world is illusory. Drawing not only from Hegel but embedded within a neo-Kantian tradition that has privileged the subject of knowledge, the central problem Lukács deals with is the relation of subjectivity to history or of the human subject to the totality of the social system. The distorted perception and experience we have of the world he called “reification,” the turning something into a thing, which is a form of

alienation and characteristic of the modern social and political life of his time (and arguably still is). Reification, which creates the relationship between subject and object as a primary reality, appears normal to us and has become second nature.⁶ The factory worker who devotes ten or more hours a day selling her labor for a mere pittance, believing this to be her duty and is a regular church goer where she learns respect for the social system of which she is a part and the unchangeable nature of her social relationships, is in thrall to ideology; her human relationships and relationship with the commodity she helps produce are reified. In this view, the modern, industrialized subject lives an inauthentic and tragic life, tragic in so far as she is unable to give meaning to the "fatalistic" laws of nature and unable to overcome the distance between self and world; we live isolated and alienated due to reification.

Lukács wants to humanize the subject and give meaning to human life, but the historical conditions in which we find ourselves militate against this.⁷ In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) he developed the idea of reification in terms of the analysis of commodities which he saw as "the central, structural problem of capitalist society."⁸ The relationships between people, economic and political, take on the characterization of a thing. In turning social relationships into things they become "fetishized" to use Marx's term. Society as a whole is a totality, an idea that is derived through Marx from Hegel, and the subject tries to grasp or understand this totality but cannot. Instead our tragedy is that we experience estrangement from the social world. The true subject and object of history for Lukács is the proletariat or working class, a realization that dissolves the alienating distinction between subject and object. This collective subject can realize its potential, realize that it itself is both subject and object of historical process and in this realization, enacted in revolutionary acts, finds fulfillment with the dissolution of reification. The classless society will be achieved once the working class is, in a sense, eradicated, which will also be the eradication of reification.

Lukács launches his attack against reification not only in terms of religion but more particularly in terms of philosophy. In "The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought," the second chapter of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács begins with the astute observation that problems of modern philosophy spring from their being grounded in the reified structure of consciousness which has occurred within a specific time and location, namely the history of the West; thus it is futile to find Kant in Plato. The fundamental problem of modern philosophy is that (as Kant had claimed) "it refuses to accept the world as something that has arisen (or e.g. has been created by God) independently of the knowing subject."⁹ This confidence in and justification of human reason displays itself before Kant in, on the one hand, a skepticism that knowledge can be universally valid (Berkeley, Hume) and on the other in an "unlimited confidence" in the ability of philosophy to

apprehend “the true essence of things”¹⁰ (Leibniz, Spinoza). This tendency to abstract or pull reality back to the mind is erroneous for Lukács because it misses the fundamental priority of the material. Linked to the tendency to abstract we have the alienation of the human subject and the reification of social relationships inscribed within a material reality, and Lukács offers an insightful account of the conditions of modernity. Reification therefore affects individuals and groups of individuals who comprise any particular society in both their perception of the world and in their actions: the systemic distortion of reification is perceptual and practical.¹¹

But there are three problems with Lukács’ insightful work. Firstly, his desire to critique the subject–object relationship as a consequence of reification. For Lukács the goal of history is to realize that the real, authentic subject is in fact the working class. But a collectivity cannot be the subject of history. While it is possible to speak about a group will, this is a metaphorical extension of the meaningful sense of will being located within a person; there is no true collective will or collectivity as a centre of consciousness (at least as thematized in mainstream history of the West; there are esoteric traditions that make such a claim).

The proletariat cannot be the subject of history for it cannot contain a singular will; only human persons can act through will governed by the ability to imagine a particular outcome. In this sense persons are free and independent of social structure. Secondly, reification assumes that we can separate religion from society and culture. However, such a separation is a modern phenomenon that has developed in the history of the West with, for example, Locke’s relegation of religion to the private realm in contrast to the operation of governance in the public realm. While many cultures do distinguish between the religious realm and the secular realm (Tibetan Buddhism, for example, has a distinction between the monastic community and laity), many do not; the religious is inseparably combined with the social. Milbank, echoing Troeltsch, makes the point that in some locations it might not be possible to abstract religion from society; in Islam, for example, society has been “inside” the religion and so the social “dissolved into nothingness,”¹² which some might argue is a bad thing. Lastly, for Lukács inwardness is a sign of alienation. Indeed so long as we do not realize the true, collective subject of history we are under the influence of this estrangement. But it could be argued, conversely, that inwardness can be decoupled from alienation and that religious identity is the intensification of inwardness which is simultaneously an intensification of meaning. This is not individuality – we are not back with the Cartesian self – rather it is a kind of subjectivity that is formed through tradition. This kind of religious inwardness is identity through time along with narrative identity that makes a life coherent and explicates the way a life conforms, or otherwise, to tradition. This kind of inwardness, religious traditions claim, brings us into the mystery

of the world and only exists within the world as a mode of the world, again, always expressed in action.

In Honneth's lucid study, reification is not merely an epistemic category mistake nor a morally objectionable act, but a distorted form of praxis.¹³ "Reification," he writes, "signifies a habit of thought, a habitually ossified perspective, which, when taken up by the subject, leads not only to the loss of its capacity for empathetic engagement but also to the world's loss of its qualitatively disclosed character."¹⁴ This form of distorted praxis involves us in perceiving both objects and persons as "things" that we can make profitable: both people and things on this view are reduced to a perception of their usefulness and become mere instruments in the activity of profit.

Honneth re-examines Lukács' thesis and its contemporary relevance, arguing that there are striking affinities between this concept and ideas of John Dewey and Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, objectivity envisaged as the privileging of a neutral, epistemic subject¹⁵ is called into question. The world is given to us prior to conceptualization and our practical relation to the world he characterized as "care": "humans in fact exist in a modus of existential engagement of 'caring', through which they disclose a meaningful world."¹⁶ Honneth gives empirical support for this idea from developmental psychology and presents an argument for "recognition"; prior to conceptualization, prior to "cognition" and the objective or neutral understanding of reality, we have a direct, empathetic engagement with the world and with others, but this engagement is distorted through reification. Honneth's extension of reification to a pathology of intersubjectivity takes it beyond economic determination and places the idea more centrally in the structure of human being, of social ontology; reification is part of the structure of who we are and yet can be counteracted by positive forces within the social order.

These forces, existential care, praxis, and the pre-conceptual engagement before subject and object reification, are fundamental to human being in the world entailed in taking over the perspective of another person.¹⁷ In terms of ontogenetic development, this ability to empathize so fundamental to being human has its genesis in imitation or mimesis of the parent by the child. Recognition, according to Honneth, is therefore prior to cognition, an idea that is shared by Lukács, Dewey, and Heidegger.¹⁸ On this view, forgetfulness of recognition is reification and so recollection is the overcoming of reification, overcoming the neutralization of "empathetic engagement"¹⁹ that has occurred through the socialization processes of modernity.

A different version of fundamentally the same problem is found in Habermas' theory of communicative action, which seeks to overcome distorted communication (which we might read as reification). The natural human condition of empathy is distorted by reification that occurs due to the unjust political-social system in which we are reared. On this view, religion is

an expression of reification and bolsters up injustice. Although religion gives us comfort – like an opiate – it is an illusion, albeit a powerful illusion that contributes to inequality and injustice. Religion is part of the structure of reification. The solidification of social relationships – such that conditions of oppression seem natural – is reinforced through religion, through the ideological superstructure of society. Religion on this account is an ideology that serves to reinforce the illusion of the subject in relation to the world. Through reification our unequal social relationships are solidified, taken to be real, and religion supports this fragmented view of reality.

For Lukács and other Marxists from Karl Mannheim through to Althusser, to repair the modern condition we need to understand how “the inauthentic subject . . . becomes the reified subject of capitalism.”²⁰ We do not need to follow Lukács’ adherence to the Marxist revolutionary dictum which has affected extremely destructive political regimes in the name of achieving utopian harmony, but we can take from him the analysis of reification as a feature of the modern, capitalist economy. But the criticism of religion, or rather of Christianity, as reinforcing reification, while containing some truth in that religion has clearly historically reinforced unequal social conditions, ignores the liberating and transformative dimensions of religion. It is not enough to identify the conditions of reification and through that to anticipate the dissolution of religion; rather, we need to recognize the importance of religious meaning in subjectivity and the importance of transcendent goals that motivate and drive human reality. To understand the process of reification further we need to understand the parallel process of rationalization or instrumental rationality that in fact produces reification.

Rationalization: The Weberian Legacy

A second sociological trajectory distinct from the Marxist is that of Weber. Lukács’ thought was influenced by Max Weber and the idea of reification and can be reconciled with the Weberian analysis of rationalization.²¹ The more the rationalization of life in modernity, the greater the intensity of reification and so the more alienated we become. Without religion there is a process of disenchantment accompanied by nostalgia for a time of religious enchantment when human beings’ place in the cosmos was assured. Rationalization is central to Weber’s philosophy of history which points to the process whereby magical explanations of the world are replaced in favor of scientifically reliable ones. There is an inevitable progress as human beings move from a magical worldview, through religion, to a world governed by reason. For Weber rationalization is a process that occurs in different realms of civilization, in the economic realm, in law, in the military, and in religion, and is integral to the development of civilizations.

Weber's understanding of religion might be summarily abbreviated as follows. Religion is a key force in the history of civilizations that cannot be reduced merely to social or economic factors but which influences the socio-economic level. The earliest tribal cultures had simple forms of religion characterized by magical practices that sought to manipulate supernatural powers for human benefit. Magical practices came to be replaced by religion characterized as worship, rather than manipulation, of those supernatural powers, the gods. As societies become more complex, with religion we have the formation of ethical rationalization, which develops codes of conduct and laws by which a people might live. Such ethical development is accompanied by the rise of specialists who deal with issues of morals and law, that is, a priesthood. Thus religious "virtuosi" – the monks, priests, renouncers – are concerned with salvation, liberation, or eternal life, while the ordinary population is still concerned with magical manipulation for protection against disease, warding off premature death, abundance of crops, and so on.

Along with the development of ethical social structures we have the development of a bureaucracy and administration linked to the state. We see this most clearly, according to Weber, with Confucianism. Yet we also have individuals from different social groups, particularly outside the mainstream, who criticize and reform the social structure. These are charismatic leaders and prophets who have arisen in all religions. Charisma is a property possessed (or endowed to) certain individuals who have undergone some extreme religious experience brought about, for example, by asceticism. The charismatic prophet both founds a religion and can challenge an established religion when often religious revival or sectarian break-off occurs as a result. In highly centralized, bureaucratized cultures such as China, prophesy is highly controlled, whereas in non-centralized cultures such as biblical culture, prophesy becomes rife. Through history, the doctrine and practices of the charismatic leader undergo a process of rationalization – the routinization of charisma – and in turn become traditional, established institutions. There is then a dialectic between charisma (a property possessed by important individual social actors) and routinization (the process of instrumental reason wherein lies the stability and progress of a society). Perhaps one of the most influential contributions Weber has made to the sociology of religion is his thesis of how the protestant spirit influenced the development of economic practices that became capitalism. With Protestantism, the otherworldly asceticism of the monasteries became a this-worldly asceticism as part of everyday life. Hard work along with an abstemious lifestyle became part of a religious ethos which allowed a surplus of wealth to develop and hence the development of capitalism.

Weber is important to us on a number of accounts. Firstly, in contrast to Lukács who saw the subject of history as the self-conscious proletariat which must be galvanized into action through uncovering the mechanisms of its

own oppression, Weber understood the subject of history to be the individual social actor who has causal priority. While we certainly work in shared communities, these communities are of human persons with intentionality and direction into the world. Rather than the group, it is the individual person that is the agent of action, and meaning must be located primarily in the social actor. Indeed, a long sociological tradition develops from Weber that lays emphasis on the way social meaning is formed for the particular social actor and how religion as a motivating factor within culture is integral to this process.

Talcot Parsons, following in Weber's wake, both privileged individual action as having causal efficacy and held that meaning is public. The sociological tradition stemming from him, which includes Geertz, Berger, Bellah, and Luckmann, along with the French sociologist Hervieu-Léger, shares this view that religion primarily belongs to the individual realm. Secondly, Weber is important in showing the interactions between economies and cultural and religious systems, and in offering comparison in terms of ideal types. This is a brave sociology that flies in the face of both extreme relativism and any crude economic reductionism,²² but a sociology that nevertheless relegates religion to the margins. What is important is the broad unfolding of rationalization that on this view drives history. Religion is certainly important in this formation, but is nevertheless marginalized. This marginalization is typical of sociology which, Milbank argues, "polices" the social order, restricting the scope and importance of religion.²³ In this sense sociology is a thoroughly secularist and, as Richard Roberts observes, modernist enterprise.²⁴

Knowledge and Action

Our discussion so far has established that we can understand western modernity and the effects on the subject of action through the dual processes of reification and rationalization. While instrumental rationality is positive in so far as it facilitates action and social cohesiveness, it is negative in so far as it also produces alienation and reification when persons regard relationships as things. This dual process that underpins the development of modernity has resulted in the sweeping acceleration of modern humanity in the last fifty to a hundred years with the development of technology that enables globalization. While I agree with Oliver Davies' claim that religions offer models of solidarity and cross-cultural cooperation through liberating potentials of technology for the human good,²⁵ we need here to understand the narrower claim that religions mediate the encounter with mystery through constraining human action usually in ways that are considered to be for the betterment of the group or in ways that are conducive to salvation. To return for a

moment to our starting point with the idea of reification: It is far from clear that religion is ideology that operates to reinforce the status quo through the mechanism of reification.

The main problem is that Marxist thinkers such as Lukács identify religion with ideology as the epiphenomenon of the socio-economic base and a commodification of the means and relations of production. While we might agree with Lukács that one of the problems with the western history of philosophy has been its tendency to abstraction and the confusion of what is real with what is thought, along with the tendency to make the object of knowledge conform to the subject, we must part from Lukács in claiming that religion too is reification on the grounds that religions consistently claim to bring us into the world and to speak from within the world. Even in strongly idealist modes, for example Hindu forms of idealism such as Abhinavagupta's monistic Śaivism, religions draw their practitioners into the experienced world, into the bodily habitus as the location of redemption and transformation.

To question whether religion can be exhausted by the idea of reification is not simply to replace a hermeneutics of suspicion with a hermeneutics of faith, it is not a claim about content, but is rather to identify a process whereby religions mediate the encounter with mystery. The revelations of religions, the *Qur'an*, the Hebrew Bible, Buddhist and Hindu scriptures, claim an authority by those who adhere to them that persists through the generations. The claims of these traditions, their content, vary greatly but a pattern can be identified, what we might call a phenomenological structure of tradition, which is constant. I have given a name to the structure, the mediation of mystery, and need here to highlight three processes namely (i) the identification of knowledge and action, (ii) temporal mediation, and (iii) subjective meaning. I shall deal with these in fairly brisk terms here, as the concrete instances will be developed in the following chapters.

- (i) *The Identification of Knowledge and Action.* In religions we have a union or fusion of knowledge and action. Religious actions as moral acts, ritual, and asceticism are forms of cultural knowledge through which practitioners become aware of a world. These knowledge systems are passed through the generations by the imitation of action. Clearly the origin of knowledge-acts is in human intention and the will. In modernity such religious actions interact with technology to produce globalized religions of today. In religion we have dualities of will and action, along with knowledge and action, being overcome or fused without being eradicated. Religions offer a kind of "sublation" or *Aufhebung*, to use Hegel's term, a synthesis of action without the abolition of the parts: will and knowledge combine in movement; the movement of the moral speech act in the promise, for example, or

the movement of the hand in a ritual gesture (see next chapter). Action itself is meaning.

- (ii) *Temporal Mediation.* The self meets the world in intentional act and act is always movement in time. Through religious action practitioners encounter mystery, which is always a temporal encounter; even an ecstatic or extraordinary experience is within time (as William James observed with regard to mystical experience). Temporal mediation refers to a fundamental mode of encountering the world within a religious framework. That is, there is a constellation of events witnessed by a practitioner that is translated into memory including cultural memory and thence through inscription into history. We will examine this constellation with regard to revealed text more closely in Chapter 3, but for now we need simply to note this structure which operates at the micro- and macro-levels of religious encounter. An event, at least a human event, is an action. In the case of religions this is a kind of action that mediates the encounter with mystery, such as taking Holy Communion or a Jain monk practicing asceticism. The act of communion lives in cultural memory and is brought into the present moment through repeated acts of remembrance. These acts of remembrance can enter history both as a point in temporal sequence and as the object of a historiography.

In the religious act, the practitioner simultaneously remembers tradition and recalls the meaning of the act, perhaps as future goal. This understanding is always mediated through signs, symbols, and texts, as Ricoeur has emphasized with regard to self-understanding.²⁶ The religious act embodies a shared memory into which generally one is born and itself bears witness to common or shared knowledge by a community.

- (iii) *Subjective Meaning.* Lastly, the phenomenological structure of mediation involves action as the performance of subjective meaning. An action embodies a mode of thinking (which some call “praxis”) and always involves understanding. Denys Turner puts this well with reference to Merleau-Ponty’s contention that “a praxis is a meaning.” He writes: “Far from it being the case that to engage in a praxis is a performance by rote, repetition without understanding; it is only an understanding of the ‘meaning’ which a praxis incarnates which makes any repetition possible.”²⁷

The particular religious actor, guided by the cosmology of tradition, acts in a particular way – such as taking Communion or meditating – and in so doing expresses the meaning of that act for that time. Action results from intention and is meaningful because not random or arbitrary. The act is religiously meaningful because it mediates the encounter with mystery – each act of

Communion, each call to prayer, each *puja*, repeats in action the memory of tradition. In privileging an existential subjectivity we are emphasizing agency over structure, yet acknowledging that structure informs agency (as structuration theory would have it). Agency is sociological discourse for the problem of freedom in philosophy found either in the moral sense (for Kant) or within thought (for Hegel). Arguably religious subjective meaning entails an idea of freedom which is located neither in autonomy nor within dialectical reason, but in a performed subjectivity, whose intention is to replace its own will with a higher power that transforms it. In the coming pages we will substantially develop this idea of subjective meaning as being formed by tradition and through self-narrations that interface with broader historical processes: tradition is internalized within subjectivity through religious action.

Methodology

Finally we need to examine the methodological point about reification. Some have argued that scholars of religion are themselves complicit in the reification of religion and thereby in the “ideological processes” of domination.²⁸ Such critique itself implicitly, if not explicitly, comes out of a neo-Marxist position that sees religion as an epiphenomenon of other social and historical forces. The general argument is that “religion” as an object of scholarship has been taken to be a real object (i.e. reified) and is an essence that can be studied as something in itself, outside of social and political institutions.

But, the argument goes, this is not the case. Religion has been constructed through a phenomenology of religion that is blind to its own presuppositions without reference to socio-political and geopolitical implications. Scholarship has constructed a mythical essence of religion abstracted from historical location.²⁹ In contrast, the argument goes, as scholars we need to be aware of our presuppositions and rather than trying to identify an essence of religion, examine the socio-political conditions under which certain kinds of discourse (and practice) arise. This has been the argument of genealogical scholarship, particularly by Foucault. On this view the object of the science of religion would dissolve into culture and the politics of representation.

I have some sympathy with this position, but only some. Religions arise only within human history at particular times, in particular societies, and are associated with particular social and political institutions; but the argument is problematic. Firstly it assumes that religion is an epiphenomenon of social and political forces, even to the extreme that the category religion functions to legitimate American political hegemony.³⁰ However, this is to dismiss religion on a priori grounds which have no greater basis than theological claims themselves. On the contrary, we can posit a realist understanding of religion that sees religions as forms of culture that penetrate the world of life

or perhaps more accurately, should not be relegated to the unreal, as sociology has done, but taken seriously as cultural forms that bring us into the strange, but real world. Religion is a different kind of cultural object to other abstractions such as politics or society, although a cultural object necessarily devoid of content. A first-level phenomenology, in which religion shows itself in the ways I have suggested here, gives way to a second-level phenomenological claim about religious action, from mystery or the invisible and that we might call a “religious ontology” (see p. 165). Such a religious ontology is a philosophical rather than a sociological claim and is necessitated by the data of religions. A second-level phenomenology is open to the probability that religions speak from the real.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion the material presented here has been necessarily condensed. Within what we can call the sociological tradition of western thought there are at least three important trajectories: the functionalism of the Durkheim tradition, the Weberian tradition, and the Marxist tradition. Of particular importance is the Marxist thesis about religion as false consciousness or ideology expressed in the process of reification, along with the Weberian thesis about the process of rationalization and the way religion influences the socio-economic base.

We have pointed to some of the limitations of this work and suggested that understanding religion in terms of cultural forms that mediate mystery through action and thereby articulate a religious subjective meaning is a more adequate description. The *how* of mediation is in the action as an expression of the will to meaning, whereas the *place* of mediation is the here and now, wherever that is, and in places of semantic density, the temples, churches, mosques, and synagogues of the religions. Having cleared some of the theoretical ground here, we now need to develop the thesis about the mediation of the encounter with mystery, specifically how this plays out in religious action characterized by the moral act and the ritual act. To do this we will need to consider more sociology in the process.

Notes

1. On a recent history of the annales school, see Burguière, André, *The Annales School: An Intellectual History*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Cornell University Press, 2009).
2. Hughes, Graham, *Worship as Meaning: A Liturgical Theology for Late Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

3. Marx, Karl, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, in Saul K. Padover trans. and ed., *The Essential Karl Marx* (Ontario: Mentor, 1978), pp. 286–88.
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