

Introduction

A Handmaid's Tale

Between Critique and Theology

It is hard to imagine a concept more significant to modern Western thought than that of “critique.” Foucault, for example, argued that there was “in the modern West (dating, roughly, from the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries) a certain manner of thinking, of speaking, likewise of acting, and a certain relation to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, as well as a relation to society, to culture, to others, and all this one might name ‘the critical attitude.’”¹ Particularly in the wake of the Enlightenment, a “critical attitude” became associated with a set of practices and ideas: a method of scientific investigation; a form of understanding social constructs and historical processes; an analysis of the scope and validity of concepts, theories, fields of knowledge, and mental states; an ethical approach; and the basis for optimism about human development.²

Yet, when characterizing critique as a fundamental concept “in the history of Western culture,” Foucault, among others, also likened it to a secular worldview.³ At the heart of the prevailing argument that “critique is, in short, secular” is the notion that the bedrock of a critical approach is human reason, its primary objective being to break free from deduction based on faith—or revelation.⁴ On this basis, secularism appears “as the opposite of religion” and critique is held to be “the opposite of orthodoxy, dogmatism, or fundamentalism.”⁵ In practice, then, critique is conceived of as the torchbearer of secular ideology, signifying a binary opposition between “the secular” and its religious “other,” while comprising the lens through which this “other” is framed and interpreted. Critique thus

represents—in Talal Asad’s compelling words—“the essence of secular heroism,” propelling forward modernity’s promise of human progress driven by rational inquiry and scientific development.⁶

Based on a close reading of selected and previously less discussed writings of four giants of twentieth-century thought—Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), and Hannah Arendt (1906–1975)—this book aims at reversing this understanding of critique. These leading German-Jewish intellectuals played a decisive role in the formation of twentieth-century social sciences, generating or deeply influencing diverse disciplines and scientific traditions (psychoanalysis, critical theory, and political science), with a resounding scholarly impact that is still felt today.⁷ Decidedly secular thinkers, not one of them was in any way religious, nor even sympathetic to religious ways of life. Nonetheless, in bringing these four prominent thinkers together, the book shows how in their writings critique emerges from religious traditions and can in many ways be traced back to them. By drawing on the Enlightenment, they indeed saw critique as epitomizing the “essence of secular heroism,” and this features in their work in two main ways: first, as an analysis of concepts, and second, as a means of interpreting and thus examining social, historical, and political questions so as to offer critical accounts of modernity “that address general human as well as specifically Jewish concerns.”⁸ At the same time, however, critique operates in their work in a way that is conscious of theology (pertaining to matters like transcendence, divine law, revelation, redemption, and God), often finding its expression within a predominantly religious frame of reference. The concept of theology is not identical with a specific academic discipline, with a methodology to substantiate the existence of God, nor is it synonymous with religious practices. It refers, rather, to a range of concepts, terms, and ideas carried over from religious thought, toward which it is always turned. In this sense, Kafka’s remark that theology “was the main resource for our conceptual commitments” is largely applicable to these scholars.⁹ As a resource for constructing new answers to ongoing questions, theology mainly depends on its use and function and resembles to some extent what Hans Blumenberg called a discourse of legitimation (which is not based on any level of accomplishment in making a certain argument or in proving a set of claims, but points to their necessity in responding to an intellectual call in the context of a specific historical exigency).¹⁰ What is emphasized here, then, is not a sociological argument but a conceptual gesture, and this is central to their writings.

This is not to disregard the significant generational, historical, and disciplinary differences between the four selected thinkers. Indeed, these differences are important because they highlight the variety of profound and creative ways in which Jewish and Christian elements are in dialogue with modern conceptualizations of critique in the spotlight of this study.¹¹ I do not aim, however, to demonstrate cross-generational collaborations, nor to provide new data concerning personal or conceptual ties between these scholars (even if some of these ties and cross-references will be duly noted throughout the book). Rather, I highlight the shared dependency of their conceptions of critique on theology and the significance this carries. In particular, I wish to examine selected topics and texts (elaborated more closely below) spanning a century, across different fields of study, for I aim to show how—to use a musical metaphor—we are dealing here with a great intellectual symphony on the critique of a modern secular world, whose overtones have always resonated with religion and theology. Touching upon Jewish and Christian theological traditions, twentieth-century modern and secular critique seems to present a much richer, and perhaps more composite phenomenon than previously assumed.

With these thinkers, then, our view of critical thinking is reversed: contrary to the common separation between critique and its religious “other,” this book traces the connection between them. Thus, despite the secular emphasis on critique, theological concerns lose neither their place nor their influence. In lieu of treating critique as a testament to the disengagement of modern thinking from religion, this book seeks to identify how the works of prominent modern German-Jewish intellectuals, although widely divergent, give expression to the religious sources of secular thought.

This argument is the core of the book. It points to a continual misreading of critique and draws our attention to something both fundamental and yet often unsaid: the mechanism that gives impetus to secular thinking is not secular. Moreover, and however counterintuitive it might seem, I argue that religious modes of critique power critique’s secular distancing from religion. In this sense, modern critique is a form of immanent critique, which does not come from outside of religion to build a new world of ideas, but redeploys those already present within its constellation of theological considerations.

Within this conceptual framework, the book asks several key questions. What does critique mean for each of the thinkers in question? What theological traditions inform each thinker’s thought? And in what ways do

critique and theology interconnect? Each of the four chapters of the book is therefore dedicated to one thinker, focusing either on one particular text or on a selection of works and offering an analysis of how the thinker in question identified manifold interrelations between critique and theology.

Given today's increasing attention to the relation between politics and religion, faith and political action, and the "religious" and the "secular," there is also growing interest in the different ways in which these relationships unfold. Nonetheless, most of the scholarly investigations that underline the intricate links between secularism and religion tend to stop short of thinking about the mechanism of critique itself as being born out of theology.¹² This is also true in relation to the ongoing production of scholarly works dedicated to the role of religion and theology in the writings of twentieth-century German-Jewish thinkers.¹³ The assertion that the "Western academy is still governed by the presumptive secularism of critique" seems to be valid even now.¹⁴ This book's main argument, conversely, seeks to abandon our fixation on the secular character of critique in favor of a much broader and more compound understanding of its relation to theology. If critique is not secular, what does it look like? And what might its modern modes of expression tell us about the world in which we live? Answering these questions is important because it allows us to uncover points of connection between modern secular thought and religious traditions that have been hitherto neglected.

It is for this purpose that I draw upon the concept of a "critique of theology"; not only to present the critical positions of these thinkers regarding religion and theology, but also to capture a critique that is dependent on theology and that surfaces in different forms, within different intellectual disciplines and different sociopolitical contexts of the first and latter halves of the twentieth century. Critique of theology thus differs from the frequently used concept of "political theology." Unlike the focus on the emergence of modern political concepts, I wish to engage somewhat more broadly with what emerges from the interaction between the concepts of critique and theology, which may extend to, but is not limited to, political categories. I also suggest a shift in scholarly attention from the "political theological predicament" (a concept that relates to a modern diagnosis of the relation between politics and theology as much as to its reconstruction) to a "critical theological predicament" (denoting a modern analysis that acknowledges the dependency of critique on theology). A critique of theology, however, is also distinct from "critical theology."¹⁵ Such a connotation usually indicates the manifestations of

critical mechanisms in theological thinking.¹⁶ It thus refers, for example, to religious thinking that makes use of analytical tools or logic-based argumentation to validate God's existence or to formulate principles of faith.¹⁷ My purpose, however, is in many ways diametrically opposite. I wish to bring to light the ways in which theological concepts are manifested in critical thinking. The emphasis is on a modern critique that draws on the theological canon, and the complex interrelations formed as a result.

The Critical Path

I started with a prevailing view of secular critique and its vital role in the Enlightenment. Foucault, for example, suggested that in Kant's philosophy, in particular, we see an interlocking of the two concepts.¹⁸ Kant's philosophical endeavors are indeed regarded as an attempt to secure the notion that critique "is secular." Contesting this particular issue seems to be important at this point because, as suggested above, not only critique but also its relation to theology in the writings of modern Jewish thinkers is intimately linked to the legacy of the Enlightenment, and specifically to Kant's "critical path" (*der kritische Weg*).¹⁹

There is, I believe, clear agreement as to the nature of this path. For Kant, the objective of critique is to "purify" concepts of fallacies. In the strict Kantian sense, therefore, critique means a form of analysis of certain content or of an object of study that includes charting its sources (*Quellen*), scope (*Umfang*), and boundaries (*Grenzen*).²⁰ In taking the faculty of reason as its object of study, for example, critique aims to "remove all errors" (*Abstellung aller Irrungen*) in our understanding of this faculty based on "principles" (*Prinzipien*) that are "independent of all experience" (*unabhängig von aller Erfahrung*).²¹ This approach to critique implies the purification (*reinigen*) of "a ground that was completely overgrown."²² These grounds also relate to theological claims and in such a way Kant seems to propose a clear differentiation between the dictate of reason and the guidance of an "other" (*Die Leitung eines Anderen*). True to this approach, and yet also critical of it, Heinrich Heine wrote in the epilogue to his last collection of poems that it is as if "one has to choose between religion and philosophy, between the dogma of the revelation of faith and the ultimate conclusion of systematic thought, between the biblical God and atheism."²³ A century later, Leo Strauss argued that the main choice faced by mankind, which leaves no middle ground, is between "human guidance"

and “divine guidance.” That is: “whether men can acquire knowledge of the good, without which they cannot guide their lives individually and collectively, by the unaided efforts of their reason, or whether they are dependent for that knowledge on divine revelation.”²⁴

Yet, the precise relation between this path of critique and theology appears to be disputed. Paul Franks, for example, makes a clear case not only for the importance of theology to Kant’s epistemology and ethics, but particularly for his affinity to Jewish religious notions such as the “prohibition on representing God” and “the concept of law.”²⁵ Through the Jewish notion of law, according to Franks, “Kant unites epistemology and ethics.”²⁶ In such a way, Kant’s critiques are indeed presented as relating to former theological categories. Specifically within the sphere of moral reason, we can observe that the theological concepts of God—intrinsic and vital to Kant’s critical endeavors—and of an eternal soul (immortality) are postulated, along with free will, as conditions for the possibility of human morality.²⁷ We need theology, says Kant, “for religion, i.e., for the practical—specifically, the moral—use of reason.”²⁸ Here, in our “inner religion” we are obligated by our practical reason as if it were a divine command, and thus: “So far as practical reason has the right to lead us, we will not hold actions to be obligatory because they are God’s commands, but will rather regard them as divine commands because we are internally obligated to them.”²⁹

This reading of Kant may include his discussion of progress in the sphere of metaphysics. Kant posits that after the first, theoretical-dogmatic stage and the second, skeptical stage, comes a third, theological stage with all the a priori cognition that leads to it and makes it necessary.³⁰ Theology here appears (somewhat different from its definition in the *Critique of Judgment*) as knowledge “of the inscrutable determining ground of our willing, which we find, in ourselves alone” and which assumes its final end in “the supreme being above us.”³¹ This notion of theology is applicable “provided that it stays within the bounds of bare reason.”³² But Kant seems to advocate a theology of reason (associated with an ideal “invisible church” of rational morality) even if at odds with a theology of revelation and with the historical church, which he rejects.³³

In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, “old Kant,” as Hans Jonas rather amiably called him, appears to go further still.³⁴ While he articulates a clear structural distinction between the “lower” philosophical faculty (responsible for critical thinking and the pursuit of truth) and the “higher” theological faculty (which Kant associates primarily with biblical theology),

he nevertheless explicitly contemplates the interaction between the two: “We can also grant the theology faculty’s proud claim that the philosophy faculty is its handmaid (*Magd*) though the question remains, whether the servant is the mistress’s torchbearer (*Fackel vorträger*) or trainbearer (*Schleppe nachträger*), provided it is not driven away or silenced.”³⁵

By using the handmaid’s metaphor, Kant reformulates Thomas Aquinas’s assertion about the servitude of philosophy with respect to theology. Kant’s intention, however, was not to subjugate philosophical critique to theology; on the contrary, he attempted to challenge this hierarchy and to liberate critique within what he considered to be an unfavorable political constellation. Nevertheless, Kant’s marvelous, somewhat Promethean imagery affirms the existence of a relation between critique and theology, even if the nature of this interconnection is open for discussion. Indeed, the manner in which the two are related seems to remain unresolved in Kant’s self-coined metaphor. Since the conception of critique as handmaid of theology points to a rather more intricate narrative than the utter separation of the two, we may see in our moral interpretation of religion “an authentic one—that is, one that is given by the God within us (*der Gott in uns*).” It is, then, “only by concepts of *our* reason, in so far as they are pure moral concepts and hence infallible, that we recognize the divinity (*die Göttlichkeit*) of a teaching promulgated to us.”³⁶

The handmaid’s tale (to play on Kant’s metaphor) could be read as an indicator of what Paul Franks sees as the dependency of Kant’s critique on theological notions. David Sorkin’s argument that “the Enlightenment was not only compatible with religious belief but conducive to it” may then be extended to include one of its central figures.³⁷ What is important to stress here, however, is that this line of reasoning may also encompass the twentieth-century modern Jewish intellectual legacy that is represented in this book. As suggested above, in drawing on the Enlightenment—and specifically on Kant—Freud, Benjamin, Adorno, and Arendt take up two main “secular” forms of critique: first, as a method of analysis, and second as a means of interpreting society, history, and politics. Seyla Benhabib, for example, demonstrated how the first form relates to critique as a rationalistic technique of scientific analysis, while the second applies critique as a kind of uncovering procedure that addresses the “*normative dimension*.”³⁸ A far cry from simple skepticism, critique represents for these scholars these main forms of systematic investigation, based on human reason, beyond the sway of any faith-based deduction. Yet, in taking up, modifying, or developing these forms of critique, these thinkers also demonstrate a

sensitivity not only to the synergy between critique and theology (taking into consideration Jewish religious themes), but also to the importance of preserving, or even, in some cases, rescuing this exchange. They present a critique that is constantly defined by its ongoing dialogue with theological legacies and it is for this reason that the positions they uphold are not in defiance of the Enlightenment inheritance, but rather convey a type of genealogical thinking that does it justice.³⁹

To some extent, this last point also aims to challenge conventional wisdom concerning the critical path taken by each of the four thinkers. Indeed, these highly renowned and influential German-Jewish intellectuals invite particular attention because there appears to be a vibrant debate surrounding their relationships to everything theological. Freud's animosity toward religion, which he regarded as a delusion, is well-known. Equally famous is his self-perception as an "infidel Jew" (*ungläubiger Jude*), which has faced considerable scholarly scrutiny (particularly the element of "infidel"—not least thanks to Peter Gay's biography).⁴⁰ Attempts by scholars such as Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and Eric Santner to offer an alternative view have been widely contested, mostly because Freud was remarkably consistent in his critical stance toward religion.⁴¹ Similarly, Hannah Arendt is regarded by many as the "most secular" thinker of her generation. Peter Gordon, for example, underscores a dissimilarity between Arendt's "non-metaphysical account of the public world" and the common view of her contemporaries, for whom the "political theological predicament" was paramount.⁴² In the same vein, Micha Brumlik distinguishes between modern Jewish thought, which secularizes theological concepts, and Arendt's political (by which he means strictly secular) analysis of the "Jewish fate" (*das jüdische Schicksal*).⁴³ These are but two examples of what may be regarded as the prevalent scholarly view.⁴⁴

Somewhat differently, one may point to contemporary debates surrounding "critical theory" thinkers (a group that includes Benjamin and more prominently features Adorno). The progressive-enlightened-secular project that was associated with critical theory (also appearing as an antidote of sorts to the dangers of political theology) receives more and more attention today in terms of a growing scholarly focus on the theory's embedded theology.⁴⁵ For example, discussions on how best to interpret Benjamin's works reflect profound disagreement regarding the significance he attributes to concepts such as messianism, salvation, divinity, or mysticism.⁴⁶ A trace of the initial dispute between Adorno and Gershom Scholem—"the one a Marxist, the other a Zionist," according

to Arendt's sharp-tongued description—seems to have resonated in every discussion of how to read Benjamin's corpus ever since.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the disagreement between Adorno and Scholem sheds light on the complexity this book wishes to address. On the one hand, Adorno dismissed any extra-philosophical reading of Benjamin as a “sort of cliché” (pertinent to readings of Adorno himself); and in contrast, Scholem placed emphasis on Benjamin's messianic elements and his rootedness in the Jewish canon, which many scholars tended to dismiss.⁴⁸ On the other hand, both scholars agreed that “the ‘transformation’ of Benjamin from his early theological speculation to his later ‘Materialisms’ does not denote the ‘disappearance’ (*Verschwindung*) of the theological categories but rather their concealment (*Verschweigen*).”⁴⁹ One may further argue that this reading of Benjamin should also color interpretations of Adorno, who was himself in search of “religion's critical promise.”⁵⁰ The question that merits attention here seems to relate to the type of relation between such a “promise” and its religious sources, and this question may apply to all four German-Jewish intellectuals at the center of this book.

Fingerprints of a Dynamic Spirit

To make the book's claim accessible, I have selected texts that, to paraphrase Adorno, reveal the “fingerprints” of these thinkers' “dynamic spirit.”⁵¹ Specifically, I focus on Sigmund Freud's work *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*) published in 1905; Walter Benjamin's early writings on youth (*Jugend*), composed between 1910 and 1917; Theodor Adorno's published texts and public lectures on education in the decade spanning 1959–1969; and Hannah Arendt's political writings from the 1960s, in which she developed the concept of tradition. These texts lie to some extent beyond what is considered the “classical writings” of these thinkers. They have thus remained less central in other scholarly investigations, with the additional implication that none of them have, to date, been read alongside one another. Compared to the vast scholarship on Freud's ideas about dreams, sexuality, civilizational discontent, totemism, or Moses and monotheism, his study of jokes—written in parallel to and sometimes simultaneously with his theories on sexuality—has remained relatively marginal. The theme was for a long time mainly regarded as a “Jewish” side issue with limited ties to Freud's psychoanalytic theory or metapsychological views on culture,

society, and history.⁵² Similarly, youth as formulated in Benjamin's early thought, before and during the First World War, has not attracted much scholarly attention.⁵³ In the same vein, interest in the role of education in Adorno's postwar thought has remained minimal in research, even though he repeatedly addressed the topic in a range of published texts and public lectures in the postwar context. This also seems to be true of Arendt's treatment of tradition, which has been understudied in other scholarly works that focus on her political writings from the 1960s, especially when compared to scholarly interest in her philosophical ideas like will, thinking, judgment, and action.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, these texts and issues were selected because they were central to the thought of each of the four intellectuals in their day. Freud, for example, sought to make "contributions to the psychology of religion" in his study of jokes, which he certainly regarded as being much more than a minor "side issue."⁵⁵ Youth was, without doubt, the dominant concept with which Benjamin grappled at the beginning of his career.⁵⁶ Adorno's intellectual position—one could, perhaps, more fairly say self-positioning—in postwar Germany prompted him to seriously reflect on education as a central social and philosophical theme, even if he did so through a wide range of seemingly unrelated public lectures and written texts.⁵⁷ Arendt's political writings, as Dana Villa rightly argued, primarily exemplified her move "from totalitarianism to the tradition" that dominated her thinking at that time.⁵⁸ Thanks to these characteristics, the selected texts and themes (Freud's analysis of jokes, Benjamin's concept of youth, Adorno's interest in education, and Arendt's reading of tradition) not only expand our canon of literature. They lead us to some of these authors' central theoretical concerns—ranging from overarching arguments about history, politics, and society to views on specific matters like freedom, transgression, violence, or evil, and illuminating fundamental topics such as Freud's engagement with law and "lawgiving," Benjamin's social criticism, Adorno's negative dialectics, and Arendt's definition of a modern secular "new order of the world." These writings also show, more importantly, how these central issues bring into relief the relation between critique and theology. They represent different textual "sites" (to use Michel de Certeau's terminology) that may "bring into view" the variety of critiques of theology that the selected theorists produced, including the ways in which they introduced divergent theoretical frameworks (for example, psychoanalysis) into the "Western" concept of critique and to its dialogue with theology.⁵⁹

Chapter 1 demonstrates how Freud defines jokes as a mechanism of social critique and how such a view of jokes is informed by theology.

First, the chapter shows that the common denominator of all jokes (*Witze*, which is for Freud analogous to “wit”) is that they offer social critique. Such a critique, I argue, attests to Freud’s recourse to a broad notion of law. Corresponding to a normative world in which we live, the concept of law for Freud is much broader than just a legal system of rules, and he explicitly highlights its role in Judaism. This ties in with what Eric Santner termed a “new awareness of the theological dimensions of Freudian thought” that relates mainly to the Jewish heritage in which he was raised.⁶⁰ Second, and in building on Freud’s focus on Judaism, I suggest that Freud’s study of jokes points to his critical engagement with the notion of law and lawgiving ascribed by a religious tradition and I examine how Jewish religious modes of critique fuel Freud’s association between social critique and law in his theory of jokes. Discussions on Jewish religious law (*Halakhah*) are presented here as a main resource for Freud’s understanding of critique. I do not argue that Freud was thoroughly familiar with Jewish rabbinic tradition—although he certainly was aware of it. But Freud does attach new, modern meaning to a fundamental dilemma relating to laws and their transgression, as featured in Jewish thought and pertaining to questions of living by the creed. Finally, I underline the dependency of Freud’s concept of critique on this religious tradition and explain how this dependency feeds into Freud’s critique of theology. With respect to this last point, the final section of this chapter explores how in Freud’s case the social critique inherent in joking equates to a secular critique that redeploys the theological concepts on which it is based.

In chapter 2, I present Walter Benjamin’s theory of youth as a form of critique of theology in that it offers social criticism of mystical lore. Here, in contrast to Freud, I do not focus on one main text but on a selection of philosophical writings, essays, fragmented texts and notes written between 1910 and 1917. These include the compositions “Socrates,” “The Metaphysics of Youth,” “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” “The Life of Students”—some of which were published in contemporary periodicals and student journals—as well as “Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*” from 1917, which may be regarded as Benjamin’s last text dealing explicitly with youth. This selection reflects the evolution of Benjamin’s theory of youth, which he developed before and during the First World War.

Following a short overview of the centrality of youth for the young Benjamin, I look at how he presents in these texts “youth” as the divine, eternal, and transcendent element of the human being and how such a theological vocabulary gives expression to Christian mysticism, such as the spirituality of Meister Eckhart. In relating particularly to divine

“nothingness,” central to the mystical tradition, Benjamin articulates youth mystically, evoking the potential for redemption that lies beyond human reach and historical realization, even though it is embedded, he says, in every present moment. I then trace the manner in which Benjamin’s mystical articulation of youth informs his social criticism in these early years. Youth for Benjamin is not only a theological concept but also stands for a critique of social domination. I suggest that such a combination of mysticism and social criticism points to the dependency of his critique on theology. Finally, I examine the manner in which this form of critique that reiterates theological concepts could be considered secular, for Benjamin reframes transcendence within independent human experience of the world. I point to some of the main political implications of this theory, including Benjamin’s explicit rejection of Jewish assimilation and Zionism.

While Freud and Benjamin’s works showcase an interplay between critique and theology at the beginning of the twentieth century, the works of Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt from the 1960s reflect continued interest in this interrelation, decades later, within a different social and political context, which Adorno famously coined “after Auschwitz.”⁶¹ These two intellectuals may have displayed mutual personal antipathy (which they maintained with zeal, for reasons only they could perhaps understand); but they also manifested, each in his or her own way, a shared critical-theological legacy, reflected in a type of thinking that was “adequate to the disaster.”⁶²

Chapter 3 is dedicated to Adorno’s postwar perspectives on education—which he regarded broadly, and somewhat loosely, as the arena for cultivating human beings. Between 1959 and 1969 Adorno’s most evocative reflections on education are apparent, first and foremost, in his public lectures and talks, broadcast mainly (but not exclusively) by the Public Radio services of Hessen (Hessischer Rundfunk), which addressed the wider German audience and dealt, mostly explicitly, with educational themes.⁶³ In his endeavor to address the wider public of the new Federal Republic, Adorno turned rather surprisingly to radio, a medium he himself pejoratively described as the “progressive latecomer of mass culture” and “the voice of the nation” where “a recommendation becomes an order.”⁶⁴ Second, he developed his ideas on education in some of his published works from that time, the most representative of which is his extensive paper *Theorie der Halbbildung*.⁶⁵ Third, in his university lectures that anticipated his *Negative Dialectics* he openly raised questions about the education of the young generation of an emerging Federal Republic.⁶⁶ In

this range of engagements with education (in his popular public lectures, in his writings, or in the classroom) a “radical Adorno”—to use Russell Berman’s words—is at work, one who presents some of his most intimate and fundamental standpoints on contemporary society and politics.

I first explicate how in these postwar addresses on and within the context of education, Adorno explicitly associates critique with metaphysical inquiry. He speaks of the “reconceptualization” of lost theological concepts that is intended to “rescue” them. This, I argue, is what critique of theology means for Adorno: critique both depends on and saves theology, after its disappearance. The chapter then traces Adorno’s detailed attention to the transformation of the modern German cultural and educational tradition of *Bildung* into *Halbbildung* (a term that may be understood to mean “pseudoculture” and “pseudo-education”), which epitomizes for him a distortion of the “rescue” mission of critique. This distortion relates to the “entrapment” of human beings in existing, overwhelmingly oppressive, modern, social and, for Adorno, mechanized conditions, which provide the precondition for Auschwitz. I discuss how Adorno responds to this difficulty by calling for an education for “critical self-reflection,” designed to reengage with the mission of saving theology that is not available anymore. It is this reengagement with a lost object (theology) that enables critique to resist entrapment by liberating the human being *ex machine*, an image that stands for resisting modern mechanisms of domination and control. Especially in the field of education, and because of its specific mission, Adorno seems to articulate critical theory as a critique of theology. I conclude by exploring the relationships between the critical-theological mission of education, negative theology, messianism, and the notion of divine love, explicitly evoked by Adorno in this context.

Following this discussion, chapter 4 underlines Arendt’s critique of modernity that is rooted in the Roman religious tradition. Perhaps somewhat of an outlier for the discussion in this book, Arendt nonetheless makes a unique contribution to the relation between critique and theology in her political writings from the 1960s.⁶⁷ Typically made up of different chapters approaching an array of theoretical issues alongside “mundane” topics (some of which were published in the press beforehand), these writings notably include *On Revolution*, *Men in Dark Times*, *On Violence*, *Crises of the Republic*, and *Between Past and Future*.⁶⁸ The latter is central to this chapter because it contains much of Arendt’s unfinished project on “Marx and the Great Traditions” and represented in her view “the best of her books.”⁶⁹

I first explore how Arendt defines tradition as a Roman religious concept, pertaining to the intergenerational transference of a sacred testament originating in a mythical past. As such, tradition is based on the Roman tripartite theology (constituting a three-part division between political theology, physical or philosophical theology, and mythical theology). Here, I suggest, Arendt's discussion draws mainly on her 1928 study of Saint Augustine's concept of love, to which she returned in her meticulous editing of its various English translations, a project she never completed.⁷⁰ Thus, it is the Roman tripartite theological tradition that, according to Arendt, Augustine absorbed into his Christian order of love, even if this was "against his wishes." Augustine is relevant to the attempt to understand the "crisis" of modernity because his reasoning represents a "fundamental chord which sounds in its endless modulations through the whole history of Western thought."⁷¹ I then show that Arendt evokes this particular engagement with Augustine's theology as a basis for her critical analysis of modernity, with its "break" in tradition (namely the "disappearance" of the Roman religious tradition). I demonstrate the extent to which Arendt constructs a unique form of immanent critique in which Roman "traditional concepts" provide the foundation not only for her argument regarding what modernity has lost, but more profoundly for her critical analysis of this loss. For Arendt, as for Adorno, the task of criticism is to conceptualize theological concepts after their final disappearance, and this, I argue, means that critique, yet again, is shown to be dependent on theology. Next, I suggest that this type of critique of theology enables us to gain new insights into Arendt's support of a modern *novus ordo seclorum* (which Arendt translates as "a new order of the world"). A new and secular order not only relates to the ongoing erosion of Christian dogma in public life, but also, and somewhat antithetically, to a political return to the Roman religious tradition (as in, for example, the context of modern revolutions). I conclude by illustrating how such an argument—connecting Arendt's understanding of secularization and her reference to theology—may also be extended to explain her famous shift from her early discussion of "radical" (or "demonic") evil to her later preference for the "banality" of evil. The latter represents an understanding of evil in "secular settings" that are born, however, out of her theological considerations.

The book concludes with an epilogue that weaves together the four different critiques of theology. Anchored in Jewish and Christian traditions, worldly and divine law, mysticism, negative theology, and tripartite

theology, these thinkers' critical redeployment of theology is specifically designed to engage with "the world in which we live." Extrapolating from these specific cases, I reflect on the predominant image of the secular separation from theology, contesting in this way recent claims regarding the so-called "return" of religion to a formerly "disenchanted" secular society. I also ask whether the desire to dissociate critical investigations from religion may suggest a refusal to acknowledge the fallibility that may exist behind the veneer of scientific rationality, partly because of the political meanings derived from it. I argue throughout the book, however, in favor of transforming the way we think about criticism in general. I go on to suggest that such a transformation is most essential today, given our collective responsibility to democracy in times of political crisis, which includes, one may argue, a dangerous narrowing down of the options that are available to us socially as well as politically. Indeed, in rethinking the relation between critique and theology we may find an opening up of a fruitful dialogue between modern secular thinking and religious traditions, a dialogue that represents, perhaps, our own "demand of the day" in a growingly intolerant and partisan world.