

*Thinking beyond Secularization:  
Walter Benjamin, the “Religious Turn,”  
and the Poetics of Theory*

Daniel Weidner

For a long time Walter Benjamin was figured as the intellectual in-between: as the sole genius who related different if not conflicting positions and was able to overcome outgrown distinctions and to transgress the boundaries of well-established theories and disciplines. An academic outsider, he became the forerunner of important theoretical innovations of today. Benjamin's work therefore underwent numerous renaissances since the 1950s and maintained its actuality in different contexts and epochs of thought.

But is this still true today? If all these assumptions are to be more than mere rhetoric to foster the claim of intellectual prestige for a past thinker, we have to ask if they are still valid in relation to contemporary theory. I would even stress that we have to ask this question in a twofold way. First, is Benjamin's thought still transgressive in a sense that exceeds his anticipation of radical cultural criticism and media theory? For even if he preceded these movements, they have been quite firmly established by now; thus today Benjamin could hardly be more than a founding father in this context, a past name, a source of authority or of pretensions. If we still believe in the actuality of Benjamin, however, we have to ask if, and in what respect, Benjamin still troubles theory and which kinds of boundaries he still transgresses.

Second, does our current situation bring forth a new reading of Benjamin's writings just as the former renaissances of Benjamin's politics, his mysticism, or his media theory did? According to Benjamin, interpreting a text (as well as translating it) means to put its readability on trial in a specific historical situation; if we accept that, the question of Benjamin's actual contribution to current theoretical debates coincides with the question of how it is possible today to read Benjamin's texts: How do we relate to the distinctions they make, and what sense could we make of the categories they imply?

Thus I believe that the question of the boundaries to transgress is always related to the question of Benjamin's own boundaries. With the latter I mean the distinctions Benjamin draws himself, as well as the demarcations between the different branches or even schools of interpretation that have determined the reading of Benjamin for so long. True, these boundaries have been put into question during the last decades, both the distinction between the early and the late Benjamin and the difference between the materialist and the theologian. Yet these boundaries did exist and they did determine the reading of Benjamin—a fact that would be naive to ignore. Moreover, the fundamental distinctions in Benjamin's oeuvre are not only a result of its interpretation, they are inherent. Especially in Benjamin's early texts, there is a strong gesture of distinguishing things as well as concepts from each other, for instance, "fate" from "character," "myth" from "truth," and so on. However, as a frontier is more than a mere line of distinction but also a site of movement, of interchange, even of going forward, Benjamin's distinctions are not stable but become distorted and displaced in writing and rewriting his texts. Assuming that reading involves making sense out of distinctions, out of performing (and thereby distorting and displacing) the binary codes of language, reading Benjamin refers to these early and fundamental distinctions but indirectly, through Benjamin's own rereading of them in his later texts. Thus reading Benjamin is or should always be a reading of readings. In fact, it is a reading of the reading of the different historical interpretations of Benjamin's reading of his own concepts. Furthermore, it should not be reading for its own sake, not a mere play of interpretations, but should relate to the other aspect of the question posed above: to the boundaries of today's thought. Thus we should be able to read Benjamin in a way that comes up with the complexities of his thought, with the history of its reception, and with the status of current theoretical and political questions. To do so, I reflect briefly on which of the pressing questions of today we could relate Benjamin's reading to before I try to develop step-by-step a mode of reading, taking the short text *Capitalism as Religion* as an example. This text, by describing the mythical and cultic nature of current capitalism, not only is fas-

cinating, as it seems to address questions of highest importance and actuality today, but also reveals the double reference to modernity and to archaic prehistory that is so typical for Benjamin's thought. Moreover, these ideas, motives, and figures of thought are highly condensed in *Capitalism as Religion*, the few pages being the ideal test case for reading in a very literal sense.

### *The Religious Turn*

Obviously, the boundaries of today's theory are multiple. If I am focusing on the boundary of the religious, this is somewhat contingent yet has its reasons, too. We all have experienced religion reentering the theoretical discourse during the past decades. Already in 1999 Hent de Vries stated a turn to religion in philosophy, referring to the works of Emmanuel Levinas, those of Jean-Luc Marion, and especially the later works of Jacques Derrida.<sup>1</sup> In cultural studies in a broader sense, there has been a growing interest in religious phenomena since then, one example among many being New Historicism's "turn to religion," which has been prominently discussed in recent years.<sup>2</sup> An abundance of historical studies stress the dynamic and productive force of religion in historical processes, whereas theoretical approaches reflect on what religion is and how the religious relates to general philosophical and theoretical questions. These no longer conceive of religion as ideology or as part of the superstructure but as an essential force and a theoretical problem of lasting importance even in modernity. They criticize one of the most persistent master narratives of twentieth-century thought: the idea of a progressive "secularization" of the West and a "disenchantment" of the world, according to which religion has been a major integrative force in ancient and medieval times but is now hardly more than a reminiscence or a survival, deserving scant attention apart from the merely antiquarian.

The current renaissance is all the more astonishing, since religion had quite disappeared from the academic agenda in the decades before. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s there had been a lively debate about the "secularization" of modern society, the shift of theory toward deconstruction, discourse analysis, and postcolonialism in the 1980s turned away from religion. The phenomenon of religion and even the concept of secularization did not disappear, however, for all these new approaches still rely on the silent presupposition that

1. See Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

2. See, e.g., Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti, "The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies," *Criticism* 46 (2004): 167–90; Bruce Holsinger, ed., "Literary History and the Religious Turn," special issue, *English Language Notes* 44, no. 1 (2006).

historically, some kind of secularization has taken place.<sup>3</sup> But today, facing a global renaissance of religion's public role—and its increasing influence in the private realm—this assumption seems no longer tenable. Secularization is not enough, religion reenters the discourse of culture and theory, and nary a theoretical approach exists to explain what happens here.

Given this situation, it is well worth going back in time, especially to the first half of the twentieth century, in which the basic conceptions of secularization were developed. The concept has always been more complex than the trivial version of the loss of the sacred seems to imply. We may even say that what reemerges today is the fundamental ambiguity of the idea of secularization, which has been forgotten as long as the process described is considered as self-evident. Thus, if we could better understand the inner structure of the discourse on secularization, we may better understand what religion is today. The essential assumption of my article is that Benjamin's thought could help us in this undertaking.

Actually, the study of Walter Benjamin did not remain untouched by the current renaissance of religion. The emerging discourse of political theology proved fruitful, and it developed promising rereadings of Benjamin. I want to point out the numerous readings of the *Critique of Violence*, the debate about a "messianic without messianism," and the broad debate over the writings of Giorgio Agamben.<sup>4</sup> These discourses are new in the sense that they refer to religion less as an element in Benjamin's work, something to grasp in order to understand what Benjamin means, but the other way round: they refer instead to Benjamin in order to understand what religion is. This entails a second shift in perspective: religion, which hitherto has been situated at the distant edges of everyday experience and modern life, is now conceived as something central and intrinsic to this very experience. Agamben's reading of Paul's letter to the Romans, for example, describes messianism no longer as a strange idea about a distant future, be it religious or profane, but as the structure of the very moment of now.<sup>5</sup>

This fascination with religion is far from unproblematic. At least in some cases, the enthusiasm for the new and seemingly "other" object overrides differentiation, and one prefers to talk of "Christianism" or even "monotheism" as such instead of going into historical detail. Moreover, as with every renaissance

3. See Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), esp. chap. 1.

4. See, for an overview, Hent de Vries, ed., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

5. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary to the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

sance, the turn to religion tends to forget its precursors. To give an example, Agamben's meticulous reading of Romans conceals its references and sources: obviously relying on the categories of dialectical theology, especially Rudolf Bultmann's "presentist eschatology," Agamben does not even mention these discourses. And even in Benjamin studies, there is a large gap between the few texts read and their historical and discursive context, which may be expressed by an indicative fact: in the massive and highly useful *Benjamin Handbook*, edited by Burkhard Lindner, no member of contemporary theology is even mentioned.<sup>6</sup> Among the numerous if not countless readers of Benjamin, only Jacob Taubes was sensible to the affinity of Benjamin's thought with contemporary theology such as Karl Barth's, suggesting that the *Theological-Political Fragment* is "dialectical theology outside the Christian Church."<sup>7</sup>

If this blend of fascination for religion and neglect of its history, including the history of its interpretation, is characteristic for today, then in what respect could the reading of Benjamin prove fruitful? Or could the current situation help us read Benjamin more thoroughly? Again: where are we today? To begin my reading, let me proclaim, at least ironically, the collapse of old dichotomies: socialism and revolution seem to have disappeared, capitalism and religion remain. This very slogan may lead us, as directly as superficially, to one of Benjamin's texts, the small piece *Capitalism as Religion*. At first glance, this short text seems to prefigure the current situation, insofar as it describes capitalism as a religious phenomenon. A closer reading, however, demonstrates that Benjamin's text precisely resists reduction to its keywords and unfolds a constellation of concepts much more complex than expected. The text's seeming "actuality" thus reveals itself less as a direct description of our present time than as a poetic transformation of its understanding.

### ***Capitalism as Religion***

*Capitalism as Religion* is typical for Benjamin's writing and crucial for the development of his interests. Comprising only four pages in print, the text is more a draft than a finished work. The original text contains not only a program to be worked out but also a reading list of works on capitalism and religion, including texts by Georges Sorel, Erich Unger, Gustav Landauer, Max

6. See Burkhard Lindner, ed., *Benjamin-Handbuch* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006).

7. Jacob Taubes, *Die politische Theologie des Paulus* (Munich: Fink, 1993), 104–5. See also Chryssoulas Kambas, "Wider den 'Geist der Zeit': Die antifaschistische Politik Fritz Liebs und Walter Benjamins," in *Der Fürst dieser Welt: Carl Schmitt und die Folgen*, ed. Jacob Taubes (Munich: Schöningh, 1983), 263–91.

Weber, and Ernst Troeltsch. Written in 1921, *Capitalism as Religion* belongs to the context of Benjamin's early reflections on the relation of myth, art, and religion, while the text also prefigures the later writings on the mythological dimension of modern capitalism later unfolded in the *Arcades Project*. However, the text was not published until 1991 in the sixth volume of the *Collected Works*, the notorious farrago volume containing everything apparently unrelated to the great texts of Benjamin. This is typical for Benjamin's "work," too, which to a large extent is made up of fragments or sketches that were constructed posthumously as a more or less coherent work—a conscious reading of his text must reflect on its fragmentary nature.<sup>8</sup>

How could we read the text now? Considering its brevity, its resemblance to a working paper, and its late and rather hidden publication, *Capitalism as Religion* has entailed quite a bit of interpretation, including the precise contextualization by different articles of Uwe Steiner,<sup>9</sup> a detailed reading in a recent article by Samuel Weber,<sup>10</sup> and an entire volume edited by Dirk Baecker.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, it is not the best text to say something new about Benjamin, but it offers a good opportunity to reflect on the text's reception and readability. Roughly, there are two ways of reading. The first group of interpretations relies primarily on the inspiring title: *Capitalism as Religion*. As Baecker points out, this very title dismantles a major cultural distinction: "If capitalism is a religion it becomes difficult for society to maintain the distinction between 'Geld' and 'Geist,' money and spirit."<sup>12</sup> Thus we could use Benjamin's text as an impulse to develop reflections about the current situation of a world in which this distinction is no longer sharp. Indeed, roughly half of the texts in Baecker's volume put Benjamin's ideas in a dialogue with Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems. Benjamin's text thus depicts a postmodern and even postcapitalist world, which can best be analyzed by the disenchanting view of the Luhmannian observer. Interesting as these reflections may be, they tend not only to become all-too-general observations about the relation of "the economic" and "the religious" but also to lose any connection with Benjamin's

8. See esp. Detlev Schöttker, *Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus: Form und Rezeption der Schriften Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999).

9. See, for an overview of the text and its reception, Uwe Steiner, "Kapitalismus als Religion," in Lindner, *Benjamin-Handbuch*, 167–74.

10. Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's-abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 250–80.

11. Dirk Baecker, ed., *Kapitalismus als Religion* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2003); see also my review of this book in *Weimarer Beiträge* 51 (2005): 306–9.

12. Dirk Baecker, introduction to Baecker, *Kapitalismus als Religion*, 11.

writings, which become mere proof texts for discourses of a totally different orientation.

The other way to deal with Benjamin's text goes in the opposite direction: it relates *Capitalism as Religion* more closely to its context, to other contemporary discourses as well as to Benjamin's other writings. The second half of the contributions to Baecker's volume read the text in this way. As necessary as it is, this approach has two inherent problems. The text's references being vague and inexplicit, its context simply comprehends too much: to refer to anything else that Benjamin has written on religion and capitalism is to refer to almost his entire work. Furthermore, the referred discourses are no less ambiguous than the text they are expected to explain. This entails a certain style of comment, which is all too common in Benjamin studies and the symptom of which is the ubiquity of citations: when referring to Benjamin, one is always tempted to quote him verbatim for the very reason that each paraphrase seems to lose some connotations of what Benjamin actually said. The interpretation consisting of a web of citations, reading or rereading these interpretations is a very strange experience.

To speak personally, when I reread some older studies on Benjamin that were so fascinating some ten years ago, I realized that much of their appeal emerged from the Benjamin citations they collate—as Benjamin says himself with reference to Michelet, a quotation of this author lets us forget the text in which he is quoted. By now, these citations are well known to me, but nonetheless still erratic in their meaning (and probably their fascination is constituted by their erratic nature), so why read one more compilation? Moreover, if the contextualist readings basically become a collation, then, paradoxically enough, they relate to Benjamin as contingently as the other way of reading, the “actualist” one, which asks for direct application of Benjamin's ideas. For citations being essentially ambivalent, the text's argument, which is hardly more than an arrangement of highly ambivalent phrases or half phrases, depends heavily on the viewpoint of the author or collator. If I do not explain what I mean by “dialectics at standstill” but simply use the phrase, its meaning will depend on the context in which I use it. Nor does it become clearer if commented on by other terms no less obscure than itself.

Given this situation, how can we read Benjamin today? Even at the risk of being naive, I would like to ask the question more basically: I do not intend to construe the text's meaning but to ask what actually happens when we read the text. Thus I do not repeat Benjamin's explicit argument, why capitalism may or should be conceived as capitalism, but focus on the form and unfolding of these arguments. This means to take “reading” in a very formal sense as the

dealing with signs and their order on the different levels of a text. Such a formal approach may gain some distance toward the text it is reading, a distance more often than not lacking in the interpretation of Benjamin. To do so, it is essential to describe the operation of the text independently of Benjamin's own discourse and to renounce the temptation to interpret Benjamin by himself. Even if the formal analysis is not an end in itself, it may help not only to detect basic features in Benjamin's writing but to embrace the fundamental power of it, which obviously does not consist in an abstract thesis such as "Capitalism is religion." Therefore, instead of doubling the text's semantic message, I focus on the semiotic operations a reader may perform in reading *Capitalism as Religion*. Ignoring the text's details, I discern different problems on its different levels, which I outline as paratext, structure, metaphoricity, allegory, and intertextuality, all of them related to wider discursive and contextual debates.

### *Paratext*

The text's title seems to be a provocative, dynamic, inspiring formula, evoking all kinds of wide-ranging associations about a general relation between the sacred and the economic. Yet, on closer inspection, it is less thetic than our expectation suggests. Grammatically, it is not a statement ("Capitalism is religion"), nor does it have the usual format of a title enumerating the topics ("Capitalism and Religion"). This is not the only ambiguity about the title. Methodologically, the first step in the interpretation of a text is the dry and dusty way to the philological evidence. *Capitalism as Religion* is actually not a separate text but part of Benjamin's notebooks, comprising three handwritten sheets of a rather small size. The manuscript differs in significant ways from the text printed in the *Collected Works*.<sup>13</sup> One part of the original text containing aphorisms on weather and money has been published in the apparatus to *One Way Street* in volume 4, since it is closely related to the aphorism *Tax Consultancy*.<sup>14</sup> Much more astonishing is another philological fact concerning the title: *Capitalism as Religion* appears not on the text's first page but only on the verso side of the last sheet. The width of the upper margin on this page may even suggest that the title was inserted afterward, after the completion of the page or after Benjamin had begun to write it. Moreover, there is enough space to insert the title on the first page, if Benjamin had been interested in doing so. Certainly, there can be many reasons for proceeding in this manner. Perhaps

13. The differences between the manuscript and print versions are documented in the apparatus of this volume; see Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974–89), 6:690–691.

14. See *ibid.*, 4:940–41.

the title just came to his mind while he was writing this text. In any case, the belated title forces us to read the text as a process and to pay greater attention to its performative dimension. The text does not unfold a thesis stated by the title, but on the contrary: the title emerges only in the process of writing. Actually, the beginning of the text *is* a performative gesture: instead of a title that frames, prefigures, and determines the whole argument, the text begins with an instruction, “Im Kapitalismus ist eine Religion zu erblicken”—literally, “Capitalism has to be viewed as a religion”—that is much stronger than the actual English translation (“A religion may be discerned in capitalism”) suggests.<sup>15</sup> The text begins with an instruction, which we follow in that we read.

### **Structure**

A next step could be to look at the text’s structure. In the process of reading, we usually orient ourselves by explicit textual signals such as paragraphs, the outlined logic of argumentation, and all the different techniques of disposition that language and especially textuality hold in store. One should not expect too much in this respect, given the text’s rather sketchy character and also that explicit structure is rarely encountered in Benjamin’s writing. It is all the more noticeable that the second paragraph is structured very decidedly: Benjamin opens it with the statement that “three aspects” of the religious structure of capitalism are to be conceived, and continues first, second, third—and, surprisingly enough, fourth. The first aspect is capitalism’s cultic nature; the second, the permanent endurance of cult; the third, that in capitalism the guilt is not relieved but increased. I remark only in passing, that in all three aspects, capitalism is an extreme position, even an exception: it is “the most extreme religion of Cult that ever existed” (CR, 288), it is the only religion that does not differentiate weekday and holiday (a difference between sacred and profane time one might consider as essential for religion as such), and it is “the first instance of a cult that creates guilt, not atonement” (CR, 288). Capitalism is thus not simply like other religions but like them in a very special way.

Much has been said and could still be said of what Benjamin means by these aspects.<sup>16</sup> But on a more superficial level of structure, it is the fourth level that strikes me most. It appears at the end of the paragraph: “Its fourth feature is that its God must be hidden from it and may be addressed only when his

15. Walter Benjamin, “Kapitalismus als Religion,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:100. For an English translation, see Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 288. Hereafter cited as KR (German) and CR (English).

16. On the mythic and nihilistic moment of this move, see Werner Hamacher, “Schuldgeschichte: Benjamins Skizze ‘Kapitalismus als Religion,’” in Baecker, *Kapitalismus als Religion*, 77–119.

guilt is at its zenith” (CR, 289). First of all, this aspect is strange because it is the fourth one and by this mere fact seems to contradict the explicit disposition of three aspects in the beginning. Surely, this can easily be explained by the nature of a text as a sketch or working paper. As plausible as this may be on the level of Benjamin’s writing, on the level of reading, it has a different, stunning effect. The reader pauses, changes his or her attitude to the text, and continues with “Oh, this is only a sketch” or looks for other “reasons” for this fourth aspect. On the level of reading, the displacement from “three” to “four” is what Michel Riffaterre calls an ungrammaticality, a violation of the text’s grammatical or syntactic norm.<sup>17</sup> Ungrammaticalities urge us to read the text differently than we have done so far. We may, for example, look back and notice that this fourth aspect conforms to the text’s beginning, in which Benjamin states that “we cannot draw close the net in which we are caught” (CR, 288). As Sam Weber has stressed, by this gesture, the text seems to contradict itself, for it denies the very possibility: “In a certain sense, the text will never be written, or at least, never completely.”<sup>18</sup> The hiddenness of the capitalist God obviously points in the same direction: if the capitalist God cannot be revealed, what does the text itself then do? As the belated title—which is indeed a paratextual ungrammaticality, since we expect titles at the beginning—the structural incoherence thus points to the text’s performance.

### *Metaphorics*

Indeed, title and structure may not be the determining elements of this text—or at least they have proven not to be. More important may be its terminology or imagery. The term *Schuld* is at the center of Benjamin’s text, especially of the third and most elaborated aspect of capitalism: the capitalist cult “makes guilt pervasive. Capitalism is probably the first instance of a cult that creates guilt, not atonement” (CR, 288). Therefore capitalism creates a negative dynamic, as Benjamin reinterprets Karl Marx’s concept of accumulation: “The capitalism that refuses to change course becomes socialism by means of the simple and compound interest that are functions of *Schuld* (consider the demonic ambiguity of this word)” (CR, 289). Here, the English translator adds a footnote to declare that *Schuld* means both guilt and debt. However, the homonymy of the term does not operate only in the second case, where Benjamin himself emphasizes its ambiguity; already the cultic creation of a perva-

17. See Michel Riffaterre, *The Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

18. Weber, *Benjamin’s-abilities*, 66.

sive *Schuld* is meant at least as an economic, even monetary, than as a moral term: the accumulation of *Schuld* simply refers to the accumulation of public debts, which Marx has pointed out already as an essential for capitalism: “A people is the richer the more debts it has. The public credit becomes the credo of capital.”<sup>19</sup> In another respect, Friedrich Nietzsche stated in the *Genealogy of Morals* that “the core concept of moral ‘guilt’ has its origin in the very material concept of debt.”<sup>20</sup> Benjamin uses the analogy somehow differently, however, more consciously one could say, or in a more balanced way. Benjamin indeed does not *reduce* guilt to debt or construct a kind of causal relation between both concepts, but he uses the term in its ambiguity. In rhetorical terms, according to Nietzsche, *Schuld* is a metaphor, which denoted literally (and originally) the economic fact of a debt but which has been transferred to the moral sphere. For Benjamin, the term oscillates between both meanings; we may call it a *dual sign*, again according to Riffaterre.<sup>21</sup> This is a sign that refers to different and even contradicting codes like a pun may do, it creates overdetermination, since it can no longer be paraphrased coherently according to either of these codes. For Riffaterre, who follows Roman Jakobson and many others here, dual signs are essential for the text’s poeticity; thus, I would assume, at this point we start to read *Capitalism as Religion* as a poem.

But even this ambiguity is not original to Benjamin. The relation of morals and economy, as strange as it may appear at first sight, is rather typical for the study of culture in early-twentieth-century Germany, the so-called *Kulturwissenschaft*, the German version of “cultural studies.” The ambiguous figure of *Schuld* is nothing less than the reverse of the equally ambiguous term *Wert*, “value,” a fundamental concept for studying culture in the neo-Kantian Heinrich Rickert, in Georg Simmel, Max Weber, and many others. To constitute a new area of study between or beyond natural science and the humanities, they refer to the concept of cultural “values,” yet in a paradoxical way. For the term *value*, with its explicit economic overtones, is used to refer to cultural, even eternal values, which should not have an economic value at all, their paradigm being religious values.<sup>22</sup> Thus the entire discourse on *Kultur* is situated between religion and economics on a conceptual and metaphorical level. From this

19. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* (Berlin: Dietz, 1969), 782.

20. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Zur Genealogie der Moral,” in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed.azzino Montinari and Giorgio Colli, vol. 5 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), 297.

21. See Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, 86–109.

22. See Daniel Weidner, “Güter und Götter um 1900: Kulturwissenschaft und ‘Werte’ zwischen Ökonomie und Religion,” in *Nachleben der Religionen: Kulturwissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zur Dialektik der Säkularisierung*, ed. Martin Tremml and Daniel Weidner (Munich: Fink, 2007), 55–72.

point of view, Benjamin's later combination of materialism and mysticism is far from uncommon, but rather typical.

By using the term *Schuld* as a dual sign, Benjamin's text reproduces this tension and takes part in the discourse of *Kultur*. But it does so from the reverse and thereby critically, since *Schuld* seems to be the foreclosed aspect of the values the proponents of culture love to talk about. Speaking of *Schuld* instead of *Wert* highlights and *marks* the term's ambiguity: Benjamin does not simply transfer the economic sense of the term into the moral or religious one or vice versa, but leaves it in ambiguity and even makes this ambiguity explicit as "demonic." As every reader of Benjamin knows, this predicate is crucial for his entire work. Especially in his early texts, and more explicitly in his discussions with Scholem, the "demonic" signifies an illegitimate mixing of the different spheres and is therefore essential for the question of the boundaries of his thought. Even later, in *Fate and Character*, he explicitly distinguishes *Schuld* as a demonic term from the religious: "An order, whose sole constitutive concepts are misery and guilt and in which there is no way of liberation, such an order could not be religious."<sup>23</sup> According to Benjamin, *Schuld* is not a genuine religious concept; consequently, capitalism as a religion of guilt would not be a religion at all, but only the demonic appearance of it. But how could the text both speak of capitalism as religion and deny its being a religion? Precisely this is the function of the dual sign, which relates two codes without identifying them. Moreover, this very ambiguity is also inscribed in other features of the text. If we turn back to the beginning of the text at this point of our reading (we may have done this already, for instance, after the ungrammaticality of a fourth aspect), we could reread (and make sense of) a seemingly minor displacement in its performative opening. Benjamin states as the task of the text and to the reader "to discern a religion in capitalism," but in the very same sentence legitimates this task as follows: "Capitalism serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered" (CR, 288). Benjamin thus argues that capitalism should be seen as religion because it serves the needs of the *so-called* religions. The entire text thus takes place between literal and figural religion. The form to reflect this difference between metaphor and reality is allegory, the fourth point I am going to speak about.

### *Allegory*

The metaphorical structure of the text constitutes the basic overdetermination of its structure. But Benjamin goes one step beyond that. The displacement

23. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:174.

from three to four indicates that something happens in the text. For Benjamin, “capitalism as religion” is not a static analogy. It takes place “in the headlong rush of a larger movement.” “A vast sense of guilt that is unable to find relief seizes on the cult, not to atone for this guilt but to make it universal, to hammer it into the conscious mind, so as once and for all to include God in the system of guilt and thereby awaken in him an interest in the process of atonement” (CR, 288). The text that characterizes capitalism as a universal cult also envisions its end. Again far-reaching conclusions could be drawn: one can construe a messianic dynamic that refers to the “weak messianic force” of hope, since it leads “to the point where the universe has been taken over by that despair which is actually its secret *hope*” (CR, 289). We may stress the destructive component of this move, since capitalism is “not the reform of existence but its complete destruction”; one may also relate it to the melancholic nature of this move, since only “the expansion of despair . . . will lead to salvation” (CR, 289). We may relate the text to other Benjaminian texts that elaborate this apocalyptic logic of disclosure, for instance, most explicitly from the notes to *One Way Street*: “By forgetting to disclose its mechanisms, capitalism collapses.”<sup>24</sup> Be this as it may, in respect to the text’s structure, even more important than the envisioned end of capitalism is the appearance of “God” in the text, a moment that is even stressed in the German text in which “Gott selbst” (KR, 101), God himself, acts out at this decisive moment. The syntax shows clearly how God’s appearance is deferred in the first instance—the main clause is already completed, before Benjamin writes of God himself, and the repeated “endlich” (KR, 100–101) of the German text (translated as “once and for all” [CR, 288–89]) suggests that the text has reached its climax here.

That God appears in the text is both consistent and paradoxical. It is consistent, since it takes the equation of capitalism and religion literally: if capitalism is a religion it must have gods as well. It is paradoxical not only because one is somehow astonished: one would not have considered the comparison between capitalism and religion so literal. In other words, we would have expected Benjamin to compare capitalism with religion but not to equate them. Moreover, in the very moment that the parallel is completed, it is interrupted, since God’s appearance will bring capitalism to an end: if it would be possible only to wake God’s interest, if capitalism will become a religion completely—it will be destroyed. God is both the logical consequence of capitalism being religion and its apocalyptic end.

24. *Ibid.*, 4:925.

This figure of thought seems to imply a distinction between “religion” and “God,” since the latter destroys the former. Again, this distinction is not Benjamin’s invention but can easily be ascribed to dialectical theology, whose importance I have stressed above. For Karl Barth and his followers, it is essential to distinguish between “religion” as a sphere of human needs and deeds, a sphere of culture, and “God” who vertically enters and interrupts this sphere. It is this very distinction that dissolves the signifier “God” from the conceptual framework of “religion” in which nineteenth-century thought has banned him, with its connotations of inwardness, conservatism, morals, and the like. At the same time, it brings about a certain ambiguity because from now on, it is always possible, from a dialectical perspective, to conflate “religion” and the “so-called religion,” to speak on different levels at the same time or to shift levels abruptly by a kind of conceptual metalepsis. The very gesture of this distinction thus induces a broad and complex discourse on religion in the inter-war period; it unfolds a “rhetoric of religion” in the literal sense of a figurative language on the sacred, whose strength rested precisely in its “dialectical” consciousness of its own figurativity.

Benjamin’s text does not simply use the distinction of religion and God to perform a new, theological discourse. For God’s appearance in the text has to be linked to the fourth aspect “that the God [of the capitalist religion] must be hidden and may be addressed only when his guilt is at its zenith” (CR, 289). This dialectic of a *deus absconditus* and a *deus relevatus*, well known to Barth, has an important function in Benjamin’s text, as I have already shown. For the text leaves it undecided if it reveals this God or, rather, hides him; actually, it does not spell out the name of this god. Does the text represent capitalism or not? It should be clear by now that the talk of “capitalism as religion” is not a mere analogy, that it would be all too easy to say that Benjamin speaks about capitalism, albeit metaphorically—as if we could take his statements half-seriously. In effect, the text lingers between the all-too-literal representation of its “thesis” and its basic negation, the most essential being the *movement* between those poles. This movement could be circumscribed by the notion of allegory, both in the basic rhetorical sense of a *metaphora continua* and in the specific Benjaminian understanding of a form of expression that exhibits its own figurativity. Benjamin’s text presents the logic of the formula of “capitalism as religion” while destroying or deconstructing it.

### ***Intertextuality***

Ambiguity in performance is peculiar to poetry. In a poetic text, the meaning of common language is displaced and transformed to constitute a self-

reflective unit of language. Benjamin's text does this, but it does more and different things at the same time. It is more than a play on words but at least theoretical poetry: what it displaces and transforms is not only everyday language but theoretical discourses. The transformation of the text does not start from zero but refers to things we already know, most explicitly by using proper names such as Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx. The mere act of mentioning these names places a text in a certain context, and I must quickly take into account what this could mean for a reading.

The most crucial of these names seems to be Weber: already in the second sentence, Benjamin states as the aim of the text the "proof of the religious structure of capitalism, not merely, as Weber believes, as a formation conditioned by religion, but as an essential religious phenomenon" (CR, 288). During the next pages Weber is not mentioned explicitly, but his *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion* appears on the reading list, which constitutes the text's middle part. And it is not unimportant that the notebook's last page, which actually bears the title, explicitly refers to its beginning: "The Christianity of the Reformation period did not favor the growth of capitalism; instead it transformed itself into capitalism" (CR, 290). Thus, from the very beginning, Benjamin states that he has something in mind that differs from Weber's account, and this hint is important for the following reading of the text and gives its argument a context that makes it easier to understand. The intertextual references relate the text to certain historical phenomena as the relation of Puritanism to capitalism, and links it to a certain narrative. For the present reading, it would neither be necessary to assume that Benjamin had studied Weber in depth—seeing the reading list, this is rather improbable—nor that we read Weber very closely, for the Weber thesis was as common among his contemporaries as it is now.

Benjamin's signals are obvious, and more than one reader has followed them. It is common to take these references as statements, as a criticism of Weber, and—since this is a standard procedure in intellectual history—to claim that Benjamin has "overcome" or "transcended" Weber by these sentences. To give only one of the most balanced examples, Uwe Steiner argues that Benjamin does follow Weber's categorical framework: "But he retranslates Weber's discourse of the 'inescapable fate' back into the religious plain text out of which it had developed according to Weber's own discourse."<sup>25</sup>

25. Uwe Steiner, "Kapitalismus als Religion: Anmerkungen zu einem Fragment Walter Benjamins," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 72 (1998): 151–52.

This does simplify Weber's position, however: if Benjamin seems to imply that Weber has conceived the relation of Protestantism and capitalism merely as a historical one, he would reduce Weber's argument, which relies on structural similarities as well as on a complex narrative. Yet Benjamin's argument has a historical aspect as well and turns to historical questions especially on its last pages. One may argue—as I have done on another occasion—that all discourses on secularization tend to combine these two lines of argumentation, a historical and a structural one, and that Weber's text is paradigmatic for all discourses on secularization precisely because of this combination.<sup>26</sup> If this is true and if Weber's text forms the matrix of all discourses on secularization, it is hardly possible to “transcend” it, as Benjamin is supposed to have done; even to criticize it would simply mean to stand outside the paradigm. But maybe we should consider Benjamin's text less as criticism of Weber than as a *use* of him. The Weber thesis functions as what Riffaterre calls the “hypogram” of a text: a cultural cliché that we use to understand the world as well as to understand texts in our first, mimetic reading as descriptions of the world.<sup>27</sup> We read Benjamin's text as a text on modern capitalism basically because we see him referring to the Weber thesis we all know. We do so, unless we confront ungrammaticalities that prompt a second reading on the semiotic level—and this is what I basically try to do here—in which we discover that Benjamin does not take the Weber thesis at face value but as the object of a poetic experiment on its meaning.

This poetic and thus ambiguous relation of Benjamin toward Weber is inscribed in the text by a central image at the end of the text's first part: “Capitalism has developed as a parasite of Christianity in the West (this must be shown not just in the case of Calvinism, but in the other orthodox Christian churches), until it reached the point where Christianity's history is essentially that of its parasite—that is to say, of capitalism” (CR, 289). The parasite denotes a relation of capitalism and religion that is precisely between identity and difference. It “belongs” to its host, but not “organically,” since it both maintains its host and brings it to an end. It lingers in between a historical and a structural relation, for the nourishing host does more than simply to “favor” the parasite's growth, but is less than “transformed” into the parasite. To turn the screw further, we may even conceive the parasite as a figure of the text itself that acts as a parasite on the Weber thesis. Actually, as I have tried

26. See Daniel Weidner, “Zur Rhetorik der Säkularisierung,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 78 (2004): 95–132.

27. Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, esp. 23–32.

to show, Benjamin's text lives on Weber's discourse, for it could hardly be understood in itself without its intertextual references, as even the phrase on the parasite quoted above amply demonstrates. And these references are in turn less present in the explicit devices of Benjamin's texts as in his imagery and rhetoric.

From this stems an important task for Benjamin studies. Of course, Benjamin's thought has been contextualized historically by numerous if not innumerable studies. As wide and elaborated as these efforts might be, a major part of them focuses on the explicit references Benjamin gives in his texts. These readings do not only severely underrate the importance of historical context for Benjamin but ascribe to Benjamin a unique or exceptional position: he is the one who could not be classified, the one and only who does not share the prejudices of his time. To me, this sounds too good to be true. Discourses are too mighty to be "overcome" by a singular statement, no matter how original it is. To embed Benjamin more deeply into his historical context, it is essential to shift the focus from explicit statements to rhetoric, both in relation to contemporary discourse and to his own texts. As far as religion is concerned, as I already mentioned, there is an elaborated, complex, and highly metaphorical discourse on religion in the first half of the twentieth century, and its importance for Benjamin has hardly been taken into account. Not only do Weber and his followers contribute to this discourse, so do the exponents of dialectical as well as of liberal theology, not only the numerous historians of religion but the founders of cultural studies such as Georg Simmel, Aby Warburg, and Ernst Cassirer. They not only try to reformulate what the religious might be but thereby reframe the basic questions about history, philosophy, and culture.

This brings me back to the beginning of my article, and thus to my conclusion. As I said, today we face a religious turn in the humanities, and even a renaissance of religion in Europe—a notion that may sound strange in the United States, where religion never disappeared. As the previous turns, the religious turn does not consist in a new theory, but in a question. We do not know what religion actually is, we only know that it has been ignored for too long. Thus the turn is also a turning back in terms of history—a turn back toward the time of oblivion as well as to the epoch before, when religion still played a key role in theory—a turn toward the religious discourses of the interwar period. Benjamin is not only an exponent of these discourses; he even poetically condenses what is implicitly negotiated there. If we may have a too simple understanding of what secularization actually meant and what it means today, the reading of *Capitalism as Religion* discloses this term's ambiguities, complexities, and even abysses. Many other examples could be added, in which

Benjamin deals with the hidden and implicit meaning of contemporary discourses, for instance, religion and arts, religion and history, or politics. To read *The Task of the Translator*, the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, or *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility* results in the insight that what religion meant in these contexts is far more complex than we assumed. Benjamin's texts may function as a set of critical similes that allow us to reflect on our own blind spots concerning religion, which becomes more and more important today, given the rising importance of religion in theoretical and even public discourse. And these texts do so because of their poetical and rhetorical quality. If the "turn" of the current religious turn is basically a rhetorical operation as well, a trope in the original sense, the reading of Benjamin allows us to redirect our attention toward textuality, both the textuality of the discourses he addresses or implies, and the textuality of his own writings. For, to put it the other way round, if we read these texts, the understanding of what "religion" means in them and how Benjamin refers to religious and theological categories is a major obstacle—but an obstacle that provokes a rereading and thus better understanding of Benjamin as well.