American Catholic Arts and Fictions

Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics

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1

Methodological Introduction: Tracing the Transformation of Religion

The purpose of this book is to examine the continuing significance of religion, and specifically Roman Catholicism, as an ideological force within modern American literature, film, and photography. My aim is not to consider Catholicism as a theological entity – except incidentally, insofar as that impinges upon my main theme – but as a residual cultural determinant and one aspect of the social context within which various American artists of this century have been working. Because Catholicism so clearly defines itself within a metaphysical context, we should not make the mistake of ignoring the fact that it functions within particular social contexts as well, contexts that consist of more than simple historical facts about immigration from Europe, or the war between the United States and Mexico, or whatever. The point is that this social and historical framework of Catholicism cannot be apprehended in isolation from the mythology of the supposedly "metaphysical" sphere, because the power of this mythology actually affects action and reaction within the secular world.

The way in which religious ideas can help to determine patterns of thought is clear enough to contemporary students of ancient civilization. It is of no consequence that we no longer believe in the literal "truth" of these old religious mythologies: few classical scholars today believe the pagan deities ever enjoyed a literal existence, throned resplendently on Mount Olympus, but equally few scholars would deny the historical significance and pertinence of religious ideas to ancient Greek tragedy or politics. Much recent literary criticism has sought to recover a cultural matrix for any given writer – assessing James Joyce and W. B. Yeats in the light of Irish political history, for instance, rather than viewing them in the old romantic way as isolated geniuses – and this book is working toward something similar, except that it offers religion rather than politics as the milieu within which modern American authors can be seen to be operating. Sometimes this ideology of Catholicism is explicit, as in the poems of Allen Tate and Robert Lowell, the novels of Walker Percy and J. F. Powers, the films of Alfred Hitchcock and Martin Scorsese. At other times this ideology is concealed and implicit, though still a determining factor, as in the poetry of John Berryman and Frank O'Hara, the novels of Mary McCarthy and Jack Kerouac, the films of John Ford and Robert Altman.

By drawing a parallel with the study of religious conceptions in Greek tragedy, it is not my intention to propose the starkest kind of structuralist approach whereby American works of fiction are seen simply as anthropological rituals sanctifying an archaic central myth. I use the term "fictions" to hold in suspension any putative equation between this cultural Catholicism and a "transcendental signified" or ultimate truth. But I believe the purely naturalistic accounts of religion as false consciousness outlined in various forms by Marx, Freud, Durkheim, and others can also be misleading, insofar as they tend often to underestimate the lingering force of religious ideas, the (often insidious) ways in which religion can affect textual production in some circuitous or unconscious fashion long after the forces of rationality have deconstructed and rejected such an idiom as anachronistic. Before discussing these various theories of religion further, it is worth making clear at the outset that this book is not designed to be a Marxist satire on ignorant irrationality any more than it follows the example of Jesuit intellectuals like Walter J. Ong by heralding the presence of a triumphal Catholic spirit within the lapsed modern world.

We run immediately, of course, into problems of definition. In her 1971 Ewing lectures, *Religion and Literature,* the critic Helen Gardner declared her intention to concentrate on writing with a manifest and overtly religious content. The term "religious sensibility," said Gardner, is "so wide as to be meaningless" and "does not provide a sufficiently firm delimitation of the subject-matter of the poems assembled for comparison."[1] Here Gardner was taking issue with T. S. Eliot's 1935 essay "Religion and Literature," where Eliot had suggested a much broader approach to the problem. Eliot dismissed minor "devotional" poets as being of limited interest and he aspired instead toward a redefinition of the relationship between religion and "major" literature. "I am not concerned here with religious literature," concluded Eliot, "but with the application of our religion to the criticism of any literature." Eliot asserted that François Villon and Charles Baudelaire, "with all their imperfections and delinquencies," are greater Christian poets than Henry Vaughan or George Herbert because the works of Villon and Baudelaire introduce more complex issues and interrogate the uneasy juxtaposition of spiritual and material inclinations within the context of a fragmented modernist environment.[2]

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[1] Helen Gardner, *Religion and Literature* (London: Faber, 1971), pp. 133–4.

Eliot's approach undoubtedly carries more risks, but it is ultimately more satisfactory than Gardner's. Whereas Gardner saw religion as functioning within a highly limited and demarcated area, Eliot viewed the concept of religion as more widely pervasive, part of the consciousness of some writers who had rejected its more explicit premises. Indeed, in his 1939 treatise, *The Idea of a Christian Society,* Eliot expanded on this notion of religion as an unconscious habit to posit the idea of a "community of Christians" whose allegiance to that system of religious belief would depend upon routine and instinctive patterns of behavior rather than any conscious act of will. Although their political positions could hardly be more distinct, Eliot's nostalgia for a spontaneous, unreflective allegiance to Christendom has something in common with that of more recent social theorists like the French Marxist Louis Althusser, who insisted upon the material nature of ideology, the ways in which ideology is not merely a specific category or false chimera, but instead functions as a latent force which radically affects human perceptions and operations within a social environment. Rather than seeing power as residing in the more overt manifestations of political control – the church, the family, the law, and so on – Althusser declared that the more profound implications of ideological control were to be found in a person's unconscious activities, his or her mode of implicit thought and behavior within everyday life. For Althusser, more could be inferred about the sinister ubiquity of ideology from shopping expeditions than from government elections: "Ideology never says, 'I am ideological,'" asserted Althusser, instead it "hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects," ordaining their ways of life by its overarching, all-encompassing, but intangible structure.[3] Through this process of interpellation, said Althusser, the human subject is necessarily constituted as a "subject" of the larger ideological matrix. Althusser played with this double meaning of "subject" so as to imply the symbiotic quality of such cultural operations, the way a relatively autonomous human subject is at the same time interpellated within (under the "subjection" of) a dominant ideology.

The Marxist Althusser was of course antipathetic toward these dominant social categories while Eliot was friendly toward the Christian religion, but both men postulated an intimate and labyrinthine relationship between the individual human person and the cultural system he or she was necessarily part of. It is, though, significant that Althusser was himself an ideological product of Catholic France: indeed, Althusser stated that he saw the church as a "duplicate mirror-structure of ideology," the paradigm whose form was being imitated by the modern secular state. As Althusser pointed out, the crucifix was a ubiquitous image in eighteenth-century France, even for those who did not meditate consciously upon its meaning.[4] Significant also is the fact that the English historian E. P. Thompson, in his savage attack on Althusser in *The Poverty of Theory,* ridiculed Althusser's notions of the interpellation of individuals within corporate systems as an idealistic "theology" which takes no account of "humanism" or "empiricism." Thompson's view was that Althusser was too easily inclined to incorporate human beings within facile "systems and subsystems," viewing them as "*träger* or vectors of ulterior structural determinations" rather than as actual people engaged in the process of making their own history.[5] Like Helen Gardner, the humanistic Thompson preferred to stress the free will and rational consciousness of individual people; like T. S. Eliot, the structuralist Althusser preferred to stress unconscious allegiance to a predetermined group.

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[2] T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," in *Selected Essays,* 3rd ed. (London: Faber, 1951), pp. 389, 391.

[3] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays,* trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), pp. 162–4.

The relative merits of these two positions are no concern of ours here. This kind of argument has been going on for many centuries and is in many ways a reconstruction of that eternal argument between Aquinas and Luther, Catholicism and Nonconformism, the organization and the individual. When he was appointed to a chair of history at Oxford in 1984, Norman Stone was asked which topics he would choose if he could give only three lectures in his field, and Stone's second choice was: "the history of religion – the fantastic tenacity of religious attitudes, the way in which what purport, nowadays, to be straightforward political or social or even technological responses often go back to the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation."[6] Still, to recognize the historical specificity of Althusser's discourse, the way it is located within a particular social context, is not to annul its significance. Instead it renders that discourse provisional, valid within its own cultural terms, but not adequate as an ultimate solution to the problem of history or ideology. In the same way, to relocate "Catholic" discourses within specific cultural frameworks will be one of the aims of this book: deprived of their idealist and universalist inclinations, Catholic fictions will nevertheless be granted a particular and historical existence as one form of discourse as valid, within its own terms, as any other. To deconstruct the signs of the cross is not to destroy them, but to hold in doubt the pertinence of their claim to a conclusive "reality" of the signified. While not claiming Catholic ideas are "true" in either a theological or a sociological sense, we can nevertheless analyze the internal consistency of Catholic culture and its power to shape thought in the world.

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[4] Althusser, "Ideology," p. 168.

[5] E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1978), pp. 267, 194–6.

[6] Miriam Gross, "A New Turning for Mr. Stone," *Times* (London), 6 Oct. 1984, p. 8.

The ways in which religion continues to be a powerful ideological force are often especially evident to minority groups within any given society. In France, it is no coincidence that two of the great postwar protesters against mythology and icon were raised as part of the small Protestant minority of that country. The films of Jean-Luc Godard, born in Paris into a French-Swiss Protestant family, insist upon the arbitrary and artificially constructed nature of visual signs: the relevance of Godard's maxim "Ce n'est pas une image juste, c'est juste une image" (it's not a just image, it's just an image) should be seen as not confined merely to the cinema world, for it is also an implicit comment upon the wider realms of "official" French culture, toward whose institutionalized tableaux the film director takes an iconoclastic attitude. Godard himself lived in Switzerland as a youth and, according to John Kriedl, his films retain a "Genevan" style of "austere protest," a "puritanic" idiom that is "at once envious of the moral license and theatrical excesses of its loosely Catholic neighbor, France, and distrustful of it."[7] The other famous Protestant demystifier was Roland Barthes, who again took an ironic stance toward dominant French mythologies and who in his last work, *Camera Lucida,* directly associated his own attitude toward photography with a specific religious heritage: "Although growing up in a religion-without-images where the Mother is not worshipped (Protestantism) but doubtless formed culturally by Catholic art, when I confronted the Winter Garden Photograph [of my mother] I gave myself up to the Image, to the Image-Repertoire."[8] Being caught between two religious cultures, Barthes is able to gain some critical perspective upon the idiosyncrasies he perceives within each of them. American Catholic writers and artists find themselves, of course, in a similar minority position within the United States.

Despite all this, it is still not easy to discuss religion within a contemporary cultural context. Few readers would fail to recognize how the rituals of Catholicism influence not only the works of "believers" like

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[7] Colin MacCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics* (London: British Film Institute-Macmillan, 1980), p. 111; John Kriedl, *Jean-Luc Godard* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 25.

[8] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 75.

François Mauriac or Graham Greene but also those of declared nonbelievers, as they do the poems of Baudelaire, the plays of Genet, the novels of James Joyce, the films of Luis Buñuel. But these traces of Catholicism are often thought of as a regressive and relatively uninteresting phenomenon by comparison with the more avant-garde elements in these texts: Joyce's linguistic experiments, Buñuel's black satire, and so on. George A. Panichan has written of how the attempt to speak about literature within a framework of religion has customarily been unwelcome within the modern academic world because it is to reveal a "metaphysical... predisposition that, in a strictly intellectual sense, was completely unacceptable." The idea here is that academic study of literature and culture is, per se, a rationalistic enterprise, with no room for the mumbo jumbo of spiritual belief. It was in this rationalist light that F. R. Leavis, in *The Common Pursuit,* declared literary criticism and Christian ideologies should henceforth be seen as mutually incompatible. William Empson, in *Milton's God,* similarly abhorred the attempts of amateur theologians like C. S. Lewis to circumscribe Milton's artistic genius by rebuking the epic poet when he erred on a point of Christian dogma. The dichotomy here is between rationalism on the one hand and religious sensibility on the other, a dichotomy Panichan in fact perpetuates by his final invective against "the deconstructionist invaders" and his proposition instead of the need for some "transfiguring visionary power... the moral and spiritual acceptation that must ultimately govern a 'theory of literature.'"[9]

However, such a dichotomy is, I believe, unwelcome and in the end false. If Norman Stone is correct in his assertion that contemporary political arguments can be traced back to religious traditions implicit within societies for hundreds of years, then it follows that a recognition of the ways in which this residual religious force operates is crucial for an understanding of the complexity of modern literature and indeed the modern world. It is not my intention to denigrate Panichan's "transfiguring visionary power"; indeed, it is not my intention to denigrate any particular ideological position. But the most significant aspect of religion in terms of contemporary cultural studies lies in its continuing influence, often unconscious, upon the secular and material world. This unsatisfactory binary opposition between intellectual skepticism on the one hand and nonintellectual belief on the other fails to comprehend the motives and actions of vast numbers of people, including writers and artists, who are not "believers" in any orthodox theological sense. The fact that analysis of any religious sensibility must involve a study of nonbelief as well as of belief has too often been overlooked; as Clifford Geertz put it: "If the anthropological study of religious commitment is underdeveloped, the anthropological study of religious non-commitment is nonexistent." Geertz's 1966 essay, "Religion as a Cultural System," is in fact one of the clearest theoretical statements of how religious thought, recast within demystified forms, becomes an active agent within the secular world:

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[9] George A. Panichan, "Literature and Religion: A Revelatory Critical Confluence," *Studies in the Literary Imagination,* 18, no. 1 (1985), 3, 9–10.

> It seems to me that it is best to begin any approach to this issue with frank recognition that religious belief involves not a Baconian induction from everyday experience – for then we should all be agnostics – but rather a prior acceptance of authority which transforms that experience. . . . Religious concepts spread beyond their specifically metaphysical contexts to provide a framework of general ideas in terms of which a wide range of experience – intellectual, emotional, moral – can be given meaningful forms. . . . In the doctrine of original sin is embedded also a recommended attitude toward life, a recurring mood, and a persisting set of motivations.[10]

Geertz's theory of symbolic action is presented here as a model for systems of cultural anthropology rather than literature as such; nevertheless, his critique of excessively narrow and empirically minded definitions of religious influence is just as relevant for literary analysis. Geertz's article also highlights the controversial and relatively unexplored nature of this conceptual area, and it is worth briefly examining theories of the transformation of religion over the last two centuries to suggest why this continues to be such awkward terrain for contemporary academic discourse to negotiate.

One of the earliest and most subtle proponents of transformation theory was Ludwig Feuerbach. In *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) and other works, Feuerbach proposed to dissolve theology into anthropology, to remove God and enthrone man in his place. Feuerbach believed that man externalizes and projects his best qualities, attempting to dignify them by giving them the name of divinity. However, the modern era, said Feuerbach, ought to recognize that these "divine" qualities in fact emanate from within human beings: man should restore his sense of inner value, power, and autonomy by canceling the fiction of heaven. Feuerbach vehemently opposed both the idealism of Hegel, which proposed to reconcile contradictions within some grand architectonic synthesis, and also the aesthetic and moral idealism of Kant, which, said Feuerbach, indicated the extent to which Kant's mentality was "still bound by theism."[11] Feuerbach preferred to locate truth with the concrete and the particular, those down-to-earth phenomena which could be empirically verified by science and by ordinary human processes of perception. He preached a gospel of human limitation rather than human transcendence, although he liked the idea of preserving a "religious" sensibility, provided it was clearly acknowledged how this was a strictly human affair where "god" had descended into man so that man himself was now the divinity.

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[10] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (New York: Praeger, 1966), pp. 43, 25, 40.

There are several problems with Feuerbach's philosophy from the perspective of my particular argument. In the first place, Feuerbach cherishes a millennial notion that the residue of metaphysical displacement can finally be overcome, that all traces of the transcendent can one day be removed, that alienation can apocalyptically be alleviated as humanity itself assumes the role of godhead. This kind of romanticism reveals an impossible nostalgia for Eden: the idea of totally overcoming alienation, of removing all elements of spiritual aspiration and yearning, is a form of pastoral utopia. In the second place, the "anthropology" with which Feuerbach proposes to supplant "theology" is in fact a specifically Protestant anthropology. The opening of *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (1843) finds Feuerbach openly asserting that the Catholic conceptualization of divinity within the figure of God himself has now given way to a Protestant concern with Christ, the God of man. Protestantism, says Feuerbach, "is essentially Christology, that is, religious anthropology," and he clearly sees himself as advancing this project one logical stage further by his proposed demystification of Christ and relocation of all Christ's divine aspects within a human incarnation.[12] Feuerbach liked to think of himself as a second Luther, and, like Luther, Feuerbach recommends the prioritizing of an individual's "inner light" over every pernicious attempt to systematize and objectify the spirit. The systems and generalizations Luther was escaping were those of the papacy, of course, whereas Feuerbach primarily was fleeing the universalist impulses of Hegel and Kant, but the underlying premises in each case are very similar: an impulse of resistance, a refusal of the individual to succumb or be "interpellated," as Althusser would say, into any kind of cultural network. As we have already seen in the controversy between Althusser and E. P. Thompson, this kind of nonconformity itself betokens a Protestant cultural mentality; Catholic anthropology, by contrast, works toward patterns of analogy and universalism, conformity and ritual. In some ways, the methodology of this book could be seen as based upon a more "Catholic" version of Feuerbach's transformation theories: like

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[11] Ludwig Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Manfred H. Vogel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. 29.

[12] Feuerbach, *Principles*, p. 5.

Feuerbach, it dissolves theology into anthropology, but it considers that cultural anthropology within a less Germanic, less millennial, and more "Catholic" light.

Yet if Feuerbach's ideas are not universally valid, they are still more apposite than a lot of those that came after him in the nineteenth century. Abhorred, of course, by conventional Christian thinkers, Feuerbach also found himself dismissed by positivists and materialists who found his idea of lingering religious sensibilities to be an idealistic irrelevance. Karl Marx as a young man had great respect for Feuerbach's iconoclasm, but Marx clearly saw his task as to redefine Feuerbach's paradoxical ambivalence within a tougher and more radically materialist idiom. Thus in their 1844 essay, *On Religion,* Marx and Friedrich Engels famously declared religion to be "the opium of the people," a sanctification of this earthly "vale of woe" and a chimera designed to prevent oppressed classes from seeking justice in this world by offering them the promise of greater rewards in the next. Insisting that "religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself," Marx and Engels thought the essential business of a criticism of religion should be rational disillusionment, with discussions of theology becoming superseded by discussions of politics. Engels, for instance, admonished those German historians who failed to recognize that the religious disputes and heresies of medieval times were all simply class conflicts in disguise. Like Feuerbach, Marx and Engels viewed the psychological experiences of religion as a "saintly form of human self-alienation," a culturally induced pathology which prevents man from realizing that it is in fact he himself who invents religion; but for Marx and Engels, the crucial problem was that this obsession with affairs metaphysical impeded mankind's full participation in the historical process. It was in his 1845 *Theses on Feuerbach* that Marx concluded philosophers like Feuerbach "have only *interpreted* the world . . . the point, however, is to *change* it."[13]

The context for Marx's writing was the scientific intellectual atmosphere of the mid-nineteenth century, and this environment produced various other attempts to subsume religion and mythology under a rationalist umbrella. George Eliot, for instance, wrote her novels in the shadow of the "Higher Criticism" of German biblical scholars like Feuerbach and David Friedrich Strauss, who placed a new emphasis upon the allegorical and fictional status of the Bible. Although this skeptical, demythologizing project caused much dismay among the more literal-minded clergymen of the time, George Eliot's sophisticated mind experienced no difficulty in working within the framework of Christian mythology without at all believing in Christian doctrines. In her 1859 novel, *Adam Bede,* for example, as Valentine Cunningham has said: "George Eliot as it were demythologizes the traditional formulas of repentance and conversion as Feuerbach had reinterpreted, humanistically, the Christian symbols and theology. Hetty repents superficially to God, but most movingly to Adam: the human connection is the most prominent."[14] George Eliot herself translated Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* and also, in 1846, Strauss's iconoclastic *Life of Jesus,* which similarly rejected Christ's supernatural aspirations and dealt with him simply on a human level.

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[13] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "On Religion," in *Sociological Perspectives: Selected Readings,* ed. Kenneth Thompson and Jeremy Tunstall (Harmondsworth: Penguin-Open University, 1971), pp. 439–40; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1973), p. 95.

This rationalizing and scientific outlook took a different direction toward the end of the nineteenth century, as Sir James Frazer and other anthropologists set about the task of demonstrating the essential equivalence of myth, ritual, and religion across primitive and supposedly "civilized" communities. These anthropologists disseminated a new awareness of how myth should be seen not just as an archaic form confined to jungles and rain forests but as a vital organizing principle of Western societies. Their work was taken up around the turn of the century by a number of intellectuals who became interested in how the conceptual implications of religion and ritual could be deemed to carry significant weight within the material world even if their metaphysical premises were ignored or invalidated. Whereas Engels saw religion as simply a delusion, and whereas, according to John Addington Symonds, prosaic nineteenth-century historians generally regarded religious myths as "a thickly-tufted jungle of inexplicable stories" and proceeded to discount them, there was by contrast between 1890 and 1930 an increasing emphasis upon the psychological rather than scientific accuracy of symbol and myth.[15]

Stating that "the truth to be looked for in myths is psychological, not historical, aesthetic rather than positive," Symonds's 1893 *Studies of the Greek Poets* proceeds to pour scorn on Professor Max Müller's disregard of mythology as "the bane of the ancient world" and "a disease of language." The philologist Müller shared the general belief of nineteenth-century historians that mythology was simply a series of unverifiable propositions; but Symonds's critique of this pedantic and "unimaginative habit of mind" is consonant with the outlook of Joyce, Ezra Pound,

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[14] Valentine Cunningham, *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), p. 169.

[15] John Addington Symonds, *Studies of the Greek Poets,* 3rd ed. (1893; rpt. London: Black, 1920), p. 31.

T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and many other modernist writers of fiction who were to deploy the icons of ancient Greek or Old Norse not for their literal significances but for their mythopoeic qualities, the ways in which such archaic symbolism could offer a medium for the imaginative expression of intangible truths. For Pound and Joyce, as for Marx, all myth and religion was finally an anthropomorphic conception. But whereas Marx castigated such anthropomorphism as human self-deception, Pound and Joyce believed this anthropomorphism, though necessarily fictive and man-made, could still be useful as a means of lending some kind of shape and order to the anarchy and "futility" (as Eliot called it) of the lapsed modern world.[16] Joyce, who read Strauss's *Life of Jesus* in 1905, clearly follows the modernist line of exploiting the cultural power of religious myths without literally believing in them. Stephen Dedalus's sermon on art in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* with its emphasis on aesthetic radiance, harmony, and wholeness, is a demystified reworking of the theological conceptions of Thomas Aquinas, who had said the same thing about divine presence; and the religious sensibility in *Ulysses* is evident from the very first page of the novel, when Buck Mulligan mimics the Eucharist service by holding up his shaving mirror – rather than the Communion host – and declaiming "Intribo ad altare Dei" (I will go unto the altar of God). Despite remaining a fervent atheist throughout his mature life, Joyce used to sneak into the back of Catholic churches during services on the pretext that he was admiring the liturgical form of the mass, and his works are proof, if ever it existed, of the potency with which Catholic fictions can operate within an overtly skeptical and secular context.

The single most famous transformation theory also dates from the turn of the century: Max Weber's 1904–5 treatise, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* Here Weber associated the rise of capitalism in the seventeenth century with the characteristics of asceticism, self-discipline, and systematic self-control, which the new ideas of Calvinism enjoined upon its followers in the wake of the Reformation. Weber explicitly refused to make any moral judgments on the issues under consideration: "The question of the relative value of the cultures which are compared here will not receive a single word." Nor did Weber claim that the Reformation had originated capitalism, merely that it had helped capitalism on its way:

> We have no intention whatever of maintaining such a foolish and doctrinaire thesis as that the spirit of capitalism. . . . could only have arisen as a result of certain effects of the Reformation, or even that capitalism

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[16] Ibid., pp. 35–6. Eliot used the word "futility" in his 1923 essay on Joyce, "*Ulysses:* Order and Myth," rpt. in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot,* ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 177.

> as an economic system is a creation of the Reformation.... On the contrary, we only wish to ascertain whether and to what extent religious forces have taken part in the qualitative formation and the quantitative expansion of that spirit over the world.[17]

Weber's disclaimer has not prevented him from being criticized by more empirically minded historians on the grounds that he oversimplified complex issues through neglecting time sequences and telescoping various data. Some social scientists have also been unhappy with Weber's tendency toward "idealization": the whole idea of a disembodied "spirit" of capitalism is anathema to many radical sociologists who insist the economic base must precede any abstract idea. Although Weber himself claimed that "it is, of course, not my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and of history," nevertheless for some modes of more traditional Marxist thought any nonmaterial idea is necessarily an illusory phenomenon which must emerge from a state of false consciousness.[18]

Luciano Pellicani, in fact, has asserted that Weber's attempt to prove the autonomy of ideas and the power of ethical values within history was a direct response to what Pellicani called the "obsessive" economic materialism of Marxism. The result of this implied argument with Marx, according to Pellicani, was to make Weber's thesis too polemical and overgeneralized. Pellicani pointed out that "capitalists" can easily be found in the Middle Ages, that Calvin and other Puritan leaders publicly attacked the acquisitive instinct, and that Calvinism among the Scots actually helped to slow down Scotland's rate of economic development by comparison with that of England. In a rejoinder to Pellicani, Guy Oakes replied that the early medieval capitalists were simply adventurers and the "spirit" of capitalism became institutionalized only much later on. According to Oakes, Weber openly acknowledges that these Puritans ostensibly reviled mammon but he also analyzes that "paradoxical quality of history" whereby the Calvinists' achievement of wealth was one of the unintended consequences of their religious sensibility.[19]

The debate about Weber's thesis is a long and complex one, but one of the most unconvincing attacks on it is the notion that this is merely a "bourgeois" response to the intellectual challenge of Marx. For while Weber happened to be writing about the development of the bourgeoisie, that is not his central theme: his central theme is the transformation of

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[17] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner's, 1958), p. 91.

[18] Ibid., p. 183.

[19] Luciano Pellicani, "Weber and the Myth of Capitalism," *Telos,* no. 75 (1988), pp. 57–85; Guy Oakes, "Farewell to *The Protestant Ethic?*" *Telos,* no. 78 (1988–9), pp. 81–94.