

Towards a Political Economy of the Sacred:
A Marxist Critique of the Sacred Dynamics of Society

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ABSTRACT

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By

Phillip Dexter

This thesis puts forward the argument that the efficacy of ideas that have an impact on human subjects, causing them to act or behave in particular, noticeable ways, such as religion and ideology, is a product of the process of the necessary social labour involved in the production, circulation, exchange and consumption of symbolic property. Symbolic property is itself a product of the set-apart sacred, which is a basic, primary, socially constructed category that is strategically deployed in systems for the appropriation, expropriation, ownership, control and management of all property, whether material or symbolic. Socially effective ideas are expressed symbolically, whether they are signs of material, or real objects, or of imaginary things. It is further argued that to better comprehend these systems for managing the symbolic property, a critique of the political economy of the set-apart sacred must be developed.

In developing this argument a literature review was conducted, primarily of structuralist and Marxist social theory, but also of key texts in the study of religion, political economy and of social theory more generally. In the course of this review arguments to defend this hypothesis are developed and the critique of these arguments and the theory behind them also developed. Ideology, the fetish and money, three crucial categories of the set-apart sacred, are considered in terms of their function within the political economy of the sacred.

Conclusions reached include the argument that religion as a category needs to be set aside and the set-apart sacred utilized as a pivotal concept in the study of religion, politics and the economy. Historical materialism, it is also concluded, has many flaws and weaknesses; including idealism, economism and a productivist bias, that make it essential to re-think and to re-materialise the methodology.

The product of this work is a unique conversation between two schools of thought often thought to stand in opposition to one another, namely, Durkheimian social theory and Marxist historical materialism. In the course of this argument, a materialist definition and theory of the set-apart sacred is developed and a re-materialised historical materialist methodology is also proposed. These two theoretical premises are utilised to consider how systems for managing the set-apart sacred function.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	2
Chapter outline and summary	9
Chapter 2: Religion and the Sacred	15
The origins of religion as a conceptual category.....	15
The apparent pervasiveness, persistence and resilience of religion.....	16
The challenges of religious belief and behaviour	21
Definitions and theories of religion: The problem of religion as a conceptual category ...	25
The sacred.....	58
Chapter 3: Marxism and the Sacred.....	81
Religion, the sacred and the economy.....	81
The dominance and resilience of capitalism	82
Historical materialism, religion and the sacred	86
Philosophy.....	91
Economics	99
Socialism.....	104
Historical materialism and its critique	106
Rethinking historical materialism.....	118
Re-materialising historical materialism	142
Chapter 4: Ideology, the Fetish and Money	147
Ideology	155
The fetish	172
Money	187
Chapter 5: Conclusions	200
Bibliography	207

Chapter 1: Introduction

In contemporary society there are ideas that people hold to be a true reflection or representation of the world they inhabit. Religion, ideology, economics, magic and science, to name some of the most obvious instances, are articulated in discourses and appear to move people to act in particular ways. These can be considered as features of the power of language and the beliefs expressed through it.

Belief in supernatural agents, transcendence of death and perceived wisdom about deities are aspects of human existence that are, intuitively, universal. In every community, in every collective, indeed in any society, there are ideas that operate as a more or less dominant version of the world of its inhabitants and that commonly include some religious element. There are aspects of such ideas that consequently determine the actions of people and in turn, the effect of these actions on the world, including on other people. Of all these themes on the power of language, religion is one that seems to be prevalent, persistent and resilient. There is also a space claimed for religious beliefs that is argued to be beyond reason. Religion invokes passion, emotion and dogmatism. It is a unique and powerful phenomenon. Yet, it is a contested category. There is even a radical view held by some that claims religion to be an invented category, that is, that there is no such thing as religion *sui generis* (Dubuisson 2003; Fitzgerald 2000). In spite of this debate about its status, religion also serves as a recognizable and effective linking concept. Pivotaly situated between the

economic, the political and the social in human collectives and cutting across many academic disciplines, religion is perceived as a significant phenomenon that is seen to give meaning to and allows for a variety of interpretations of the world. This dissertation is an attempt to consider this phenomenon of why it is that some ideas, in particular religious ones, appear to be more effective with regard to their impact on human subjects, their organisations and their institutions.

The argument put forward is that the efficacy of such ideas that have an impact on human subjects, causing them to act or behave in particular, noticeable ways, is a product of the process of the necessary social labour involved in the production, circulation, exchange and consumption of symbolic property, that is, of the set-apart sacred. The set-apart sacred is argued to be a basic, primary, socially constructed category, created by the processes of identification, differentiation, definition and categorisation that are a function of human biology, psychology and sociology. The set-apart sacred, it is further argued, is strategically deployed in discourses and systems—whether economic, social and political—within which the appropriation, expropriation, ownership, control and management of all property, material and symbolic—are effected. The set-apart sacred, differentiated from the sacred as defined by theorists such as Otto and Eliade, who expressed the idea that the sacred was a supernatural or holy category, apprehended by humans because of their desire to experience this power or some perceived capability of humans alone, is a category grounded in the material processes of human activity.

One of the criticisms of the sacred and by extension the set-apart sacred is that it is so broad as to have very little meaning. The argument put forward in this thesis is

that the ubiquitous character of the set-apart sacred is its very power as an analytical concept. It functions in much the same way as that of grammar does in the study of language. The set-apart sacred is an organizing principle that is contiguous with human social existence. Socially effective ideas are expressed symbolically, whether they are signs of material, or real objects, or of imaginary things. It is argued here that to better comprehend these systems for managing the set-apart sacred, a critique of the political economy of the set-apart sacred must be developed. In that regard, the category of the set-apart sacred is a general and generalised concept, by its nature. The set-apart sacred is manifested in many different mediums and at every level of social existence. Particular instances of the set-apart sacred can and will be identified and explored below, but it is argued for as a general category.

Political economy classically is the study of the production, exchange and consumption of commercial goods and services and the relationship of these processes to the conventions of, and the political and the legal relationships of society. Because the set-apart sacred is both a sign and a commodity, it has power in the physical, the symbolic and the imaginary spheres of our social existence. Because the set-apart sacred is produced, circulated, exchanged and consumed, “the means, modes and forces” in the production, exchange and consumption, that is, the necessary social labour involved in these processes, the value created either through the force of effect of the social power of an elite or as agreed to by social compact, the transformation of the scarcity or lack of signs into a surplus of signification and the struggles over the ownership and control of the sacred, can be mapped and interpreted, just as the political economy of commercial goods and services can be (Chidester 2005: 19).

The conceptual category of the set-apart sacred is proposed as a useful entry point to the study of what is described as religion, as it is argued that most if not all activity described as religious is actually an expression of the set-apart sacred. The set-apart sacred, it is further argued, is a conceptual category that is created by the most primordial and archaic form of classification, that of binary opposites. This form of classification, is further argued, arises from human biology, that is human physical embodiment, human psychology and human sociology. The set-apart sacred is identified through the basic categorization of things by humans in their physical, cognitive and social ordering of the world. In the course of this process, binary categories of sacred/profane are created and upon these, it is argued, arise all other forms of categorization, including the basis of language.

Ideology, the fetish and money are three categories that are related to yet do not always feature prominently in academic discourse on religion and the set-apart sacred. These categories, in the case of ideology and the fetish often said to be artificial, are crucial to understanding the nature of the set-apart sacred and through this, religion. As with religion, definitions and theories of ideology and the fetish are much disputed and contested. Surprisingly, the same applies to money, a commodity form most people would think had little ambiguity about it. These three categories can be better understood if approached from the vantage point of their history as conceptual categories and with regard to their relationship to the set-apart sacred. These categories are not the only possible ones that could be considered. Objects and commodities more generally can also usefully clarify the concept of the set-apart sacred. But these particular categories, because of the perceived role of ideology in

society, because of the ambiguous nature of the fetish and because of the abundance and power of money, are particularly useful for the argument put forward in this attempt at clarifying the set-apart sacred.

Religion, as a conceptual category, seemingly pervasive or even universal, poses significant problems. Apart from the challenge of constructing a definition of religion, the question as to why people have religious beliefs and what it is about the claimed religious sphere of humankind's existence that makes people believe, is one that occupies the attention of scholars, clerics and lay-people alike. Religion as a conceptual category has been thoroughly critiqued, but it is argued here that despite the problems with the category it has value as a kind of a prism through which to look at society from a useful, strategic perspective. This approach allows for the consideration of the set-apart sacred as symbolic property.

There are too many issues with regard to definitions and theories of religion to make such an endeavour a simple one. It is argued here that in seeking to clarify the nature and the functioning of the set-apart sacred and of symbolic property, the term religion must be set aside. Going beyond the term "religion" is necessary if a clearer understanding of the phenomenon itself is to be developed. In the course of that endeavour, clearer understandings of the nature of the economy and the political sphere of society are also made possible by focusing on the sacred dynamics of society, economy and politics. The reasons for the interrelationship of these spheres of social activity must be considered.

It is argued that what is termed religion is actually one of the ways in which the set-apart sacred is experienced by human beings. The set-apart sacred is a basic

category around which human society is organized. The set-apart sacred is what pervades society, setting terms and conditions for all language, all symbolic property, and for their manifestations in society. It is therefore proposed that a critique of the set-apart sacred is a more effective entry point for trying to understand ideology, the fetish and money and through these to understand the nature of religion, as well as the nature of politics and the economy.

These three modes of the set-apart sacred — ideology, the fetish and money — loosely correspond to the political, the social and the economic spheres. I will argue that these three modes can be understood as systems for managing the set-apart sacred. These systems operate at the transcendental or the imaginary and at the symbolic and the material levels. The relationship between these three categories is essentially based in their common set-apart sacred nature. Importantly, both the imaginary and the material are symbolic categories. Ideology demonstrates the nature of set-apart sacred discourse. The fetish itself is a category that materializes the symbolic and lays bare the social nature of the set-apart sacred. Money, the ultimate fetish, materializes the set-apart sacred and the profane in one unique category. The bridge between these categories as material objects and their existence as imaginary objects is their symbolic nature.

The limitations of this thesis are such that the set-apart sacred, a category that cuts across all aspects of society, cannot possibly be considered in all its manifestations. The set-apart sacred pervades everything humans do and think — walking, talking, eating, sleeping, dreaming, drinking, loving, playing and working — to mention but most obvious. This thesis is therefore limited in its focus onto three

things: the set-apart sacred as a category, a materialist theory of the set-apart sacred and the expression of the set-apart sacred in a general system of political economy.

Obviously, there are issues of deep theory and complexity involved in such an exercise. At one level there is the issue of language and how it is constructed and utilized by human beings. At another level there is the issue of the human subject and the relationship between the subject and the object, whether as the world, things in the world and importantly other human subjects. The relationship between the symbolic and the imaginary on the one hand and the material on the other is no less complex, as is the issue of the relationship between thought and action. It is not possible to offer solutions to all these problems in a thesis such as this, but these issues will be confronted and choices are made in terms of adopting positions on them.

The academic study of religion is a highly contested field of enquiry, as are politics, Marxism, political economy and even the economy in the bourgeois sense. This thesis cannot hope to consider all of these debates, let alone contribute to resolving them. But it can and hopefully does offer some arguments for overcoming some of the challenges these fields of enquiry face. Where positions are adopted in relation to debates, these are clearly identified and hopefully, convincingly argued for. This contribution also makes certain economical choices with respect to other concepts that are significantly related to the set-apart sacred, such as myth and ritual. These are obviously important concepts as they go to the heart of the nature of the set-apart sacred. Given the scope of this thesis it is impossible to exhaust all of these issues, but they are engaged within the focus of this thesis on the political economy of the sacred.

The thesis therefore does not seek to consider Marxism as religion (Cavanaugh 2009: 110-113), capitalism as religion (Benjamin 1996), or the religion of the market (Foltz 2007; Loy 1997), although these are interesting and related questions. It also does not consider religion as an economy or as a market. The literature on these perspectives is considerable and some of it is drawn upon for referential purposes. Where it does make an attempt at a more general contribution is in broadening the field of political economy from being just about the study of the production, exchange and consumption of commercial goods and services to include property in its broadest sense, that is, symbolic, material and intellectual. The focus of this thesis is on elucidating the set-apart sacred as a conceptual category and on re-materialising historical materialism as a methodology. This elucidation is hopefully one that will be useful for the academy, but also for social activists engaged in projects and processes to attempt to transform society. Given the archaic nature of the set-apart sacred, its persistence, its resilience and its pervasiveness, the question arises as to what limits, if any, does the set apart sacred place on the prospects for the social, political and economic transformation of society. This will also be considered.

Chapter outline and summary

Chapter 2 examines the set-apart sacred as an alternative category for understanding what is most commonly described as religion. The pervasiveness, persistence and resilience of religion are considered, as well as the character, weaknesses and failures of religion as a social phenomenon and as conceptual

category. In this effort, an attempt is made to briefly summarise and evaluate the many different types of definitions and theories of religion. In the course of this effort, a critique of the conceptual category of religion is developed. The set-apart sacred is put forward as an alternative conceptual category that explains why certain ideas, things, places, practices, behaviours and people are privileged, that is, are set-apart. In the course of this process it is revealed that as things are set-apart, primarily through the social activity of ritual, they are designated as sacred.

The set-apart sacred is experienced and articulated through various rituals, symbols, signs, times, practices, places and relationships that are themselves set-apart. The set-apart sacred is defined and its creation from the biological fragility, the psychological insecurity and the incompleteness and hierarchical nature of society is explained. In this regard, the significance of human embodiment, of the human imagination and of the constraints of the biological, psychological and social nature of human existence is explored. A theory of the production, circulation, exchange and consumption of the set-apart sacred is developed. The role of necessary social labour is identified, that is, collective ritual activity that unites a group of people by defining them (and in so doing those who are not them) in relation to that which is set-apart by social agreement, consensus or compact.

It is concluded that all religious, political and economic ideas, practices, behaviours and objects are actually systems, or parts of systems, for managing the set-apart sacred. It is therefore the set-apart sacred that is pervasive, resilient and persistent. The set-apart sacred is found not only in what is conventionally designated as religion, but also in the economy, in politics and in the broader social aspects of

human existence. The set-apart sacred is a primary category, similar in many respects to language, the development of which is contiguous with the sacred as a category. The relationship between the material, the symbolic and the imaginary is also considered and the role of the symbolic as the mediating sphere between the imaginary and the real is explored.

In Chapter 3 Marxism and its relationship with the set-apart sacred is considered. Historical materialism exemplifies the methodology for enquiring into political economy. Yet, despite the Marxist critique of political economy, the historical materialist critique of capitalism has not resulted in the kinds of transformation of society that it claimed it would bring about or that were regarded as inevitable. The weaknesses of historical materialism as a methodology for studying political economy are considered and the set-apart sacred is proposed as a category that assists to re-materialise historical materialism and make it a more powerful methodology. The emphasis or bias in historical materialism on production, its economic character and the idealism of the theory, as well as other criticisms such as its arguable determinism, structuralism, reductionism, universalism, essentialism, its teleological nature and its historicism are all considered.

There is even a criticism of Marxism as being ahistorical and this is given attention as well, along with the issue of the human subject and its relationship to the world. The significance of the circulation, exchange and consumption of all objects, including commodities and signs, is promoted as an alternative general political economy. The set-apart sacred as a category is located within this revised, re-materialised historical materialism as a structural aspect of social existence that is

primordial and therefore prior to the economic organization of society. Key to this re-materialised historical materialism are a re-materialised philosophical critique of how ideas have a material effect in the world, a re-materialised labour theory of value, focusing on necessary social labour as the determinant of value, the argument that the development of capitalism and even its current globalised form as predicated on exchange as a primary category rather than production and a conception of socialism that recognizes the complexity of creating an alternative to capitalism, particularly the need to re-socialise society itself. The question of the de-sacralisation of the set-apart sacred is also considered, with consideration to practices of the ritual destruction of property and of symbols. The attempt at constructing a critique that re-materialises historical materialism is significant in that it presents the possibility of sharpening the analysis of capitalism that socialists have made historically and of providing an understanding of the capitalist system that moves away from simply making a value-laden claim about its non-desirability. This could enable a new basis for challenging the capitalist system and of projecting a vision for its transformation. This is not the focus of the thesis presented here, but its mere possibility is one that is potentially very exciting for socialists. One of the constant criticisms of the historical materialist methodology and its outputs is that it has failed to present an all-encompassing critique of capitalism that also suggests material solutions to the contradictions of the system, resulting often in idealist and dysfunctional alternatives to capitalism itself.

The set-apart sacred as exists in forms that are exchangeable and consumable, so it is a proto-commodity form, like money. Anything can be sacred in the set-apart sense, so it is a special type of commodity form that exists in abundance and its value

is not necessarily affected by this surplus. In fact, where the set-apart sacred starts and ends is not clear because there is a relationship between the set-apart sacred and all aspects of society, including the economic and the political. Central to this issue is the question of authenticity or the relationship between those things recognized as authentic and those regarded as fakes or forgeries. This issue arises in relation to all objects and particularly all commodities, where the issue of the relationship between what is regarded as artificial and what is regarded as real or genuine is considered.

In Chapter 4 the sacred dynamics of society are considered through looking at ideology, the fetish and money as examples of the civic, the transcendental and the material expressions of the set-apart sacred. The examples of ideology, the fetish and money are investigated as concrete expressions of the set-apart sacred. The modes and forces in the production, exchange and consumption of the set-apart sacred, the socially necessary labour in this cycle, the value created, the transformation of the scarcity of symbolic property into surplus and the struggles over the ownership and control of the set-apart sacred can be mapped and interpreted in these categories, just like the political economy that considers the production, circulation, exchange and consumption of material, commercial goods and services.

While ideology and money can be understood as systems for managing the set-apart sacred, the fetish is identified as a key symbolic and material category for managing the set-apart sacred by manifesting value materially in society. The fetish does this as it gives unique expression to the social relations that underpin the set-apart sacred. The abundance of money and the relationship between this abundance and the surplus of signification is described. Money, as the ultimate ideology, a God and as the

ubiquitous expression of social relations, that is, as the most abundant fetish, is also analysed.

In Chapter 5 a summary of the key arguments made in the previous chapters is given and conclusions based on these arguments are drawn. The limitations and possibilities for social, political and economic change are considered in the light of the set-apart sacred and its persistence, resilience and pervasiveness. The set-apart sacred as a means for clarifying historical materialism as a methodology to describe, interpret and explain contemporary society gives a clearer picture on the possibilities and the limits to social transformation. These, it is argued, are limited if the approach to transformation is limited to considerations that are purely economic and do not analyse the political economy of the sacred. The need for a materialist philosophy, a truly radical economic theory based on the recognition of the social nature of value creation, and for a socialist perspective that recognizes the enormous task of transformation, with its potential constraints as well as the opportunities it brings in to being, are considered.

Chapter 2: Religion and the Sacred

The origins of religion as a conceptual category

The term religion, from the Latin *religio*, is said to have two possible origins. The one is in the Latin ‘to repeat’, *relegere* and the other is in the Latin ‘to bind’, *religare* (Smith 1982: 38, 141). These etymological origins might have something to offer by way of an explanation of the meaning of the term and even its use today. The term religion in contemporary society is used to describe beliefs and practices that relate to the worship of god(s), the commitment to a canon or set of beliefs and usually includes a set of values that determine lifestyle and behaviour. The concept is not without controversy however. The definition given above is one that would be disputed, since there are many religions that would not fit even that broad description, just as there are many things not usually considered to be religions that would.

It has been convincingly argued that religion, *sui generis*, is a recent conceptual category, with its origins in the rise of Christianity and the period of the Reformation and the Enlightenment (Dubuisson 2003, Asad 1973, 2003, McCutcheon, 1977). Prior to that period, a form of Christianity, along with the remains of previous folk and other supernatural traditions that were also appropriated by Christianity, would have been the total worldview of any Western European, to the

extent that any other religion would have been regarded as not qualifying for the title. Daniel Dubuisson has said of religion that "what the West and the history of religions in its wake have objectified under the name 'religion' is ... something quite unique, which could be appropriate only to itself and its own history" (Dubuisson 2003: 90). The meaning of religion, translated into the language of a particular religion as an all-encompassing worldview, might better be understood as 'the law' (Biller 1985; Bossy 1982). Significantly, this rise of the category of religion, or its invention, is also closely related with the development of mercantile and later industrial, globalizing capitalism. It needs to be pointed out here that this critique of religion is arguably focused on contemporary "Western" societies and their religions. Although there are other definitions that see ritual, objects and other practices and actions as also being religious, for instance in "African" or "Eastern" religions, the view taken is that a similar critique of these would apply, as these religions or rather systems for strategically manipulating the set-apart sacred, may arise in different cultural milieus, but the basic material processes that make this phenomenon possible, do not vary across societies. They also do not vary between various systems of belief, whether religious as in the "Western" and Abrahamic religions, or in "Eastern" or "African" systems of belief that are considered to be about natural laws, as will be argued below.

The apparent pervasiveness, persistence and resilience of religion

Despite the questionable status of religion as a category, it seems to be everywhere. Religion can be found on television, on the radio, in printed books, newspapers and periodicals. There is not a day that goes by without some article or reference in one of these mediums citing religion as an issue. Debates over the nature of religion, statements by religious leaders and debates between religious leaders are all given wide press coverage and airtime. If religion is such a questionable category, the question arises, why do so many people have religious beliefs and what is it about the claimed religious sphere of humanity's existence that makes people believe in it?

This question has dogged clerics, academics and laypersons alike, seemingly for as long as recorded history. The archives of most societies usually include some discussion of the existence and worship of god(s) or superior beings in some form or another, or of beliefs and practices that allow people to engage with these beings in a particular manner. The Ancient Greeks, the Egyptians and the Ethiopians are all mentioned in relation to religious practices by one of the oldest Greek historians (Herodotus 1954: 125, 127 and 157). Ancient Greek literature in general, as well as Roman literature, hieroglyphics on Egyptian pyramids and ancient art dating back to the earliest human communities show some or other relationship with deities.

It is clear from anthropological accounts that societies of virtually all kinds refer to beliefs and practices relating to gods and the supernatural. This activity is referred to as being about religion by the observers of these practices (Tylor 1920; Frazer 1926; van der Leeuw 1938; Malinowski 1948; Evans-Pritchard 1965). There are many different types of religious belief, just as there are various and competing definitions and theories of religion. The academic study of religion has tended to

differentiate between magic, religion and science and within that broad categorisation has described different types of perceived religious practices such as fetishism, animism, totemism, magic, myth, and religion “proper” (read monotheism), differentiating between these and placing them in a controversial hierarchy of development and sophistication (Evans-Pritchard 1965: 1-26). The fact that behaviour relating to the belief and worship in god(s) has been identifiable over such a long period of human history certainly qualifies it as persistent.

One of the features of contemporary society is that despite the predictions that science and secularism would increasingly explain the world and erode religious belief and thinking, it seems as if various religions are as strong or influential as ever and that religious belief in one form or another may even be on the increase (Asad 2003: 1; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 295). Late capitalist societies, developing countries and even former socialist countries have all seen a revival in evangelical religions and the resurgence of orthodox faiths (Norris and Inglehart 2005: 108, 131). The research by Norris and Inglehart points to a significant relationship between economic and social development and religion, recording a decline in the regular attendance at religious ceremonies as development takes place, but with no evidence of a simultaneous decline in religious belief. Whether religion is a declining phenomenon or not, its perceived waning is certainly not dramatic enough to support the claim that its demise is imminent. In this sense it can certainly be said to be resilient.

There is arguably even an increase in religious practices that are considered on the outer fringes of mainstream religion, such as paganism, occult practices and features of religious behaviour in relation to the economy. Echoing the so-called cargo

cults of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jean and John Comaroff describe the rise of lotteries, gambling, prosperity religions and religions as enterprises that seem to coincide with late capitalism (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000: 293-312). Daniel Kalder has also described the new religious movements and the revival of old religious beliefs to be found in the former Soviet Union, once an avowedly atheistic society, where new messiahs now claim authenticity and Russian Orthodox priests practice exorcisms (Kalder 2006).

The academic study of religion has been going on for some considerable time. As has been pointed out above, recorded discussions of comparative religion as a method of studying the phenomenon include the writings of Herodotus as far back as the fifth century BCE (Herodotus 1954). Herodotus' efforts at describing the religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians and Persians as observed on his travels in the Mediterranean region to his fellow Greek citizens, are cited as evidence for the claim that he was the first anthropologist (Chidester 2008: 1).

The study of religion is clearly closely associated with the study of humankind in general and particularly with anthropology. The separation of Christian theology and religion as a distinct object of enquiry appears to have been a product of the European Enlightenment (Asad 1973: 28). This separation arguably allowed for the application of the social sciences in its various disciplines to the field of enquiry of religion in general and for the development of a relationship between the academic study of religion and the disciplines of philosophy, naturalism and sociology, but most significantly anthropology, with these disciplines often overlapping.

Early scholars of religion, ethnographers and anthropologists have at various times either concluded that religion is universal, or alternatively that it is unique to certain people, usually Christians, monotheists or “civilized” people, and have even come to the conclusion that some people have no religion at all. James Frazer recorded that all people had some religious belief, no matter how rudimentary (Frazer 1926: 48). On the other hand, Christopher Columbus, for example, claimed to have met people in the Americas who were not even idolaters (Chidester 1996: 11). In other words, he was claiming that they had no religion at all, not even a “primitive” one. Naturally, these claims about the presence or absence of religion had a lot to do with claims over property, land and empire. Anyone who had no religion was basically not human and therefore accorded no such rights. Such people were defined as savages and treated accordingly. Common sense, however, tells us that most people, except those who are agnostic or atheist, believe in some or other power, being or spirit that, according to this belief, is able to determine the course of the events of history and affect the lives of believers and non-believers alike. In that sense, what is commonly referred to as religion, is pervasive.

If religion is as pervasive, persistent and resilient as it appears to be, the question must surely be, why? There is no proof for the claims of any religion in the scientific sense. There are so many different types of religious belief and it is clear that so many of them are so vastly different from one another, to think of any one of them as being correct, right or true seems impossible, at least intuitively. This raises the issue of faith, which many would claim to be the basis of their particular religious belief. Faith may be an issue for theologians to contemplate, but for a scientific,

academic study of the phenomenon of religion, faith will not do, not least of all because those claiming faith have been socialized into a particular religious community.

Science is very effective as a system for explaining so many aspects of the world and human existence. Despite this, religion and religious belief persist alongside science and within secular societies. There are many creationists, as well as considerable believers in polytheistic religions, as well as forms of religious beliefs such as the worshipping of animals and plants, believers in magic and witchcraft, making science and secularism the exceptions rather than the rule. Richard Dawkins has presented survey evidence that shows that only 48% of Britain's and 36% of Americans believe in evolution (Dawkins 2009: 429, 431). This type of statistic surely also warrants consideration, for how such beliefs as creationism can be sustained against all the scientific evidence available today, is an interesting social phenomenon in and of itself.

Whatever the truth of the claims about the motives of the founding fathers of the academic study of religion, there was clearly more than enough material generated by ethnographers, anthropologists, naturalists and others to turn the study of religion into an important field of enquiry. Consideration of the descriptions, definitions and theories of these scholars must therefore be the starting point if the pervasive, the persistent and the resilient character of religion is to be understood. Before that is entertained, the dubious track record of religion needs some further consideration.

The challenges of religious belief and behaviour

The phenomenon of religion poses a number of challenges to scholars as well as to individuals who have an interest in religion, either as believers or non-believers. Most religions or systems of belief in some supernatural entity or realm try to provide an explanation for certain aspects of human existence in the material world that we inhabit and how to navigate these. They also usually try to provide a guide to exit this world as painlessly as possible, or, once a person has died, to find their way to a better place where the human condition, described by Régis Debray as the insecurity, fragility and mortality of humankind, is usually believed be overcome (Debray 1981: 276). Religious beliefs also usually purport to provide a value system that seeks to help humans to aspire to being a better person, or for a collective, to be a better community.

However, despite these obvious and commonly described positive or benign features of various religions and the arguably noble objectives that appear to underlie the phenomenon, religion, both in the particular and the general form, has always been a matter of contestation and debate. Recently, there has been a resurgence of sectarianism and fundamentalism among believers and also a more activist and outspoken atheism and agnosticism, as evidenced by the increasing number of popular books arguing for or against the existence of God and/or holding religion to account for many of the world's ills (Dawkins 2006; Hitchens 2007; Stenger 2008). The critics of these scientists have strenuously argued for everything from creationism, taking the Bible literally, to so-called intelligent design, finding evidence for the deity in the beauty and splendour of the universe (Schloss and Murray 2009).

Religion has been and is still the source of peace and solace for many individuals, but has been and is still also the basis of war and turmoil for many communities. We need only consider the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, the Christian/Islamic fundamentalist struggle as played out in contemporary society in the so-called 'war on terror' or the 'jihad', or the Hindu fundamentalist project versus all other religions in India and the related communal violence, to name but a few examples, to realise that little has changed since the time of the Crusades, the Reformation or the anti-Semitic pogroms of the last few hundred years. If one considers the Bible, the Qur'an, the Torah, or the Bhagavad-Gita, to name but a few of the more significant foundational documents of the major religions of the world, these are steeped in blood, gore, sacrifice and murder and are generally very violent accounts of the formation of these religions and the communities around them.

In spite of the claims of all religions for the existence of deities, mythic events and supernatural miracles, not one of them has produced any concrete, material, observable evidence of a deity, a myth that cannot be contested, a verified miracle or anything else that can be scientifically verified. The claims made by adherents of particular faiths, are usually nothing but that, with little other than their own texts and oral records of purported events to back up these claims. These faiths only speak to and for those who are born to them or who convert to them. Many of the sacred spaces and places of the major faiths seem to have multiple claims upon them, undermining the narratives that are claimed with these. Periodically we read in the newspapers or see on television some or other spectacle related to religion, from mass-murder suicides in the case of the Peoples Temple led by Jim Jones (Chidester 1988), to stand

offs and gun fights in the case of the Branch Davidian compound headed by David Koresh (Newport 2006), to the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (Friedland and Hecht 1998). In some countries women are put to death in the name of religion, for simply not following the instructions of the men in their lives obediently. Society recoils in the face of all of this brutality, but ultimately it is passed off as being about religion and therefore beyond the realm of the interference of those not within the religion in question, that is, beyond civil comprehension, let alone sanction.

While many religions promise a better place for their followers in the hereafter, most offer little other than psychological comfort and relief for their disciples in the here and now. It is arguable that many, if not all, religions make audacious claims and promises and rarely deliver anything practical to their followers. The response is always of course that they are not meant to. Religions, it is claimed, deal with another realm, the spiritual world or the holy, sacred or divine aspect of our existence. Even on this score, religions fail to live up to their promises, since there have been no confirmed reports of life in the hereafter, only claims by the living. Yet, religion prevails, it persists and it resists, leaving any doubter without a choice but of having to account for the phenomenon, whether one believes, has faith or is religious or not.

There are also so many religions that differ in so many ways that we are left wondering whether what people are talking about when they use the word religion is actually one and the same thing. This seemingly unending surplus of religious activity that pervades our world warrants attention, if nothing else. But this phenomenon of surplus should not blind scholars to the problems with the concept, for in reality we

have very little to go on when it comes to religion other than the word of the adherents of a particular religion.

Definitions and theories of religion: The problem of religion as a conceptual category

When people say they are religious and that they believe in some idea of a superior being or beings, a particular way of life as instructed by a religious *credo*, the place of humans in all of these beliefs, or that what they believe in answers to the vacuum that would exist without this conceptual category, we are called to ask the question, what is it that makes people believe or act the way they do? Similarly, when people are engaged in ritual or worship of a deities or even when they are involved in acts of meditation and contemplation, the same question arises.

Apart from its pervasive, persistent and resilient character, intuitively, all religions seem to have similarities that allow us to classify them as one type of thing. Most religions have texts that set out the religious beliefs and the important rituals that its adherents must follow. The Torah, the Bible and the Qur'an have verses and prayers that should be read by the members of these religious communities, for instance. There are usually days set aside for religious adherents to perform important rituals - Sundays for Christians, the Holi and other festivals for Hindus – to mention but two examples. Although Muslims are supposed to pray five times per day, Fridays are generally regarded as a day when all try to attend the mosque. Jews keep the

Sabbath on Saturday and most Christians on Sunday. Many religions have strict rules for the diets of their adherents.

In spite of these apparent common features and these superficial similarities, there is no taxonomic list that if it is satisfied, qualifies some belief system for being a religion. Sometimes it seems that these ways of doing things are done to make the differences between religions clear to the followers. Christians, who all allegedly follow a Jewish person that is regarded as the founder of their religion, it is claimed, were told to make Sunday the Sabbath, to break the dietary laws of Judaism and not to circumcise themselves to ensure that it was clear that they were no longer Jews (Wilson 2009: 173-175). Clearly, issues of classification, whether by focusing on differences or on similarities, are key to definitions of religion. But whether these chosen categories are real or manufactured, or whether they exist because of various biological, psychological or social predispositions of human subjects is a crucial issue. It is one thing to classify species of minerals, plants or animals by assigning objects to these categories. It is another thing to seek to create similar categories for social phenomena, not least of all because these are undoubtedly the product of the human subject, in its corporeal form, its social relationships and even its own imagination.

As has been stated already, religious studies, travel, exploration, ethnography, colonial and imperial expansion and trade seem to have gone hand in hand. This is so much so that it is clear that comparative religion as an academic discipline was given its impetus and status by the increasing mobility of people largely brought about through the economic and technological developments that made this possible, as well as through the colonial and imperial conquests that precipitated the expansion of the

global market (Chidester 1996: 1). At various points in history, notably during the European colonial encounter with “savages” in newly “discovered” lands, the invaders came to the conclusion that the people they encountered had no religion. Instead, their beliefs were dismissed as superstition, fetishism, animism, totemism, magic, myth and witchcraft. Explicitly, the comparative exercise that classifies some belief systems as religious and others as not, aside from its pejorative aspect, is one that defines religion in a particular Eurocentric and even Christian-biased manner (Chidester 1996: 16; Asad 2003: 35).

For such a dismissal of the beliefs of others to be effected, some working definitions of religion had to be in operation. Yet if we are asked to provide a definition of religion, there is no end to the variations that can be found in this regard. Even if a definition can be arrived at that all agree on, the problem still remains as to whether this phenomenon can be studied in the scientific sense. There are those that argue that religion is a manufactured concept, in other words, it is a concept that does not relate to any real thing in the world (McCutcheon 1997: 19). As such, it can hardly be studied then. Like most social phenomena, attempts to explain the origins and functioning of religion have presented arguments ranging from the most simple and obvious to those that are complex and obtuse.

There are clearly challenges with regard to the definition of religion and theories that seek to explain the origins and nature of religion that warrant continued enquiry by the academy. There are also challenges for the academic discipline that claims to study religion that comprise some fundamental issues about our knowledge of the world we live in and of ourselves as humans. For the individual, only those with

enduring faith can derive any comfort from their religion. The rest of humanity, agnostic or atheist, is left in a frustrating, paradoxical relationship to the phenomenon of religion. If one is not a believer, or does not have faith, the question that surely vexes all such people is what do these religious believers believe in and why do they believe it when there is no evidence for the existence of any deity, supernatural realm or the human soul? Equally frustrating for the believers is the persistent question posed by the faithless or the heretics. Why is it that they cannot see what is so obviously ‘the truth, the light and the way’ to those in a given religious community? The relationships of people to other knowledge paradigms, such as science, are also challenged in this manner.

There are various terms utilized in the study of religion of concepts seen to be forms of or related to religion. Animism, the worship of animals, plants and inanimate objects such as rocks, mountains or rivers, is one form of behaviour that historically has been regarded as a “primitive” form of religion (Tylor 1920). These entities, it is argued by E.B. Tylor, are believed to have souls or spirits, just as humans are believed to have by animists.

Totemism, regarded by some as similar to animism, is where a particular animal, plant or a mythical creature are said to represent a particular group of people and play a role in ensuring that their lives take a particular course in the here and now (Evans-Pritchard 1965; Durkheim 2001; Levi-Strauss 1967). Malinowski argued somewhat differently, that the relationship to the totem was not a matter of classification, which was Evans-Pritchard’s view and one supported by Durkheim and

Levi-Strauss, but rather it was about the association of these things with the culinary practices of the group (Malinowski 1968).

Magic, or the perceived ability to cause material effects in the world through rituals and practices that a magic practitioner performs, is also a category of belief that is identified as distinct but related to religion (Styers 2004). Marcel Mauss, as did Durkheim, distinguished between magic and religion by identifying magic as secret and private and religion as a public and collective activity (Mauss 1972: 110-111; Durkheim 2001: 42-43). Although many of the rituals, accompanying paraphernalia and beliefs are similar to religious ones, the nature of magic makes it about particular caused outcomes, although it is not uncommon for particular prayers to be for the same end, for instance. Witchcraft is similar to magic, but is more aimed at mobilizing the magical forces to focus on another person, most often for malevolent reasons.

Myths, commonly described as sacred stories or narratives, are also regarded as being of significance for religion. These stories about the founding of communities, particular characters and their exploits, are regarded by some scholars as having their origins in actual historical events, but have become exaggerated or regarded as of particular significance, making them appear to be of a sacred character (Lincoln 1999). Alternative views regard myths as allegories, telling a story not for the details but for the message, as it were (Max Müller 1878). James Frazer regarded myths as either being related to ritual in particular, but to wrong interpretations of these rituals and of false beliefs about the world (Frazer 1926). Whatever its origins, what Malinowski described as a “cultural” force, is seen to be of significance for understanding religion by some scholars (Malinowski 1982: 143). Levi-Strauss has argued that myths, like

other religious features of society, are really stories that describe the way in which people classify the world (Levi-Strauss 1978). Levi-Strauss' rich interpretation of myths across many societies has placed it as a central and essential feature for the ordering of the world by human subjects.

Religion even has been identified of having a relationship to medicine in the discourse of anthropology. In one series of lectures, given to the Royal College of Physicians of London in 1915 and 1916, W.H.R. Rivers claimed to have identified the relationship between medical practices and religious belief in the form of magic as rudimentary medicine (Rivers 1924). There are many examples of other scholars studying practices such as Shamanism and healing in relation to religion and magic.

F. Max Müller argued that if one wanted to understand religion, one would need to know its history as a phenomenon (Max Müller 1878: 21). Max Müller believed language and religion were closely related in terms of their development and regarded the relationship between myth and religion as crucial, even if he was patronising of myth. Max Müller argued that religion is not something that can be considered outside of the ways in which we have developed knowledge about our world. His developmental theory of religion classified what he regarded as primitive beliefs and those he regarded as being more sophisticated as being the logical development of humanity's understanding of religion and the gods.

Max Müller described the belief in the existence of God as being intuitive, founded on the adoration of the deity and the veneration of ancestors, consideration of the infinite nature of the universe and of the fact that all people, regardless of their cultural differences, hold the belief that existence of humanity was the fruit of some

superior being's effort. He regarded various religions as more or less complex but clearly argued that although these religions may differ in their beliefs, all are related to some common faculty we as humans share, a "sense of the infinite" (Max Müller 1878: 26). This argument from common experience rests on the assumption that when more than one person relates a common feeling, emotion or experience, they are experiencing the same thing in the same manner as the others who also say they do.

James Frazer pointed to what he regarded as the original confusion between magic and religion and religion's subsequent relationship with "civilisation" as being what distinguishes it. He regarded religion as belief in a higher power than humans and the efforts of humans to please this power (Frazer 1922: 46). In fact, reflecting on Australian Aboriginal people, he came to the conclusion that these, the "lowest race of men as to whom we possess comparatively full and accurate information", universally practice magic and have magicians, but among them there are no priests because they have no religion (Frazer 1922: 66). Accordingly, the ignorant savages have fetishism, animism, totemism, magic, superstition, witchcraft and confused ideas, whereas "civilized" people have reason, religion and science.

Frazer, in the tradition of the Enlightenment, categorised knowledge of the world into these three systems — magical, religious and scientific — and argued that the type of knowledge that involved the recognition of powers believed to be greater than those of humans was necessarily religious. In this view, religion is just one of a variety of ways of trying to understand the world. Frazer also regarded religion as a phenomenon that developed from the simple to the complex and from false beliefs to true ones (Frazer 1926: 9-10). This view of religion as being simplistic in the case of

“primitive” people and more complex in the case of “civilized” people pervades the discourse of the early scholars of religion. The claim to its evolutionary character clearly echoes the idea of the development of knowledge in other fields, particularly of the natural sciences.

Writing in 1923, Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy*, talks of human experience of ‘the holy’ as being unique to the phenomenon of religion (Otto 1958: 5). Like many scholars who have attempted to define and theorise religion, Otto believed that there was a unique emotional and spiritual experience that is felt in the presence of what he referred to as “the numinous” (Otto 1958: 11). The “Mysterium Tremendum” experienced in the presence of the holy is what Otto argued humans feel when they behold the hidden and esoteric, or that most powerful presence which they are aware of, but cannot clearly see or adequately describe (Otto 1958: 13). If one is to take religious believers at their word, as Otto appears to, they stand in awe of their God or Gods.

Gerhardus van der Leeuw regarded religion as being concerned with the Other and what he described as the sacred, being that Other (van der Leeuw 1938: 23). Like Otto’s Mysterium Tremendum, van der Leeuw’s Other is potent against all that is profane or secular and everything is powerless in the face of this Other (van der Leeuw 1938: 47). This perspective on religion also focused on the inner experience of the individual adherent, even when another was observing that subject. This phenomenological approach is one that takes as given the category of religion and is less inclined to point to the differences between more or less primitive beliefs,

focusing more on the perceived unique experience of the sacred, the holy or the divine, as being the defining characteristic of religion.

Similarly, Mircea Eliade, a controversial but influential figure in the academy, also regarded the sacred as being the key characteristic of religion. He defined religion as the “apprehension of or orientation to the Sacred . . . the Center, the primal time”, with the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane as what founds our perspective of the world (Eliade 1961: 21). Eliade describes what he calls the hierophany - the sacred as manifested - as the basic feature of our world (Eliade 1961: 11). His description of the sacred as the “opposite of the profane” seems trite, but he convincingly argues that a key feature of our world is that the ordinary can become sacred through the rituals practiced by humans in their engagement with the sacred (Eliade 1961: 12). This perspective on the sacred defines it as a transcendental category, distinct from that which is profane or ordinary, but it offers no material explanation of its origins.

Eliade successfully captured the heuristic of the sacred and its perceived difference from the ordinary reality of everyday life. He also articulated the manner in which the profane world could be consecrated and made sacred through ritual (Eliade 1961: 33). In Eliade’s view, the ancient or archaic nature of the sacred was what made it authentic, pure and truthful and he sought to identify and elucidate those archaic aspects of religion that he argued had their origins in the earlier and the most sacred of times, where he believed myth and ritual endowed humans with the ability to understand the sacred character of the world.

On the other end of the spectrum, the philosopher David Hume argued that religion is certainly not something that develops out of reason, for arguments such as

the apparent traces of a designer of the universe or those that seek to credit a first mover of the universe, just as those for sacred realms, the divine and the holy, cannot be proven. Instead, Hume posited that religion is simply part of the observed behaviour of human beings and proof of nothing at all about the basis for these beliefs (Hume 1975: 158).

This sceptical, empiricist view is perhaps one of the most significant perspectives on religion in that it gives little quarter to the need for concrete evidence of a god, if reason is the measure applied for proof. That Hume thought this way in the eighteenth century calls into question the views the some scholars of religion continue to hold even hundreds of years later. The fact that the critique of religion along these lines was a product of the Enlightenment resonates with the argument that the category of religion is itself an invention of the rational project of this period (Braun 2000: 7; Chidester 2008: 2). In this view, religion was defined as the opposite of rational and scientific thought (Braun 2000: 13).

As these attempts at definitions made by some of the first European scholars to study the phenomenon of religion show, any attempt to define religion or to construct a theory of religion usually results in an inconclusive outcome, in that these definitions capture some aspect of what religion is believed to be about, but there seems to be no final, clear taxonomic category that is identifiable and certainly no material basis for the phenomenon (Smith 1982: 14). These various attempts at defining or providing a theory of religion are essentially of one of two types. The first is the substantive theories that seek to describe the religious experience that subjects believe that they have and account for these experiences. Substantive theorists such as Otto, van der

Leeuw and Eliade focus on the perceived uniqueness of the religious experience and try to account for this, taking the category religion as given.

Functionalist or situational theories, on the other hand, have attempted to define religion in terms of its role in society. In other words, religion is explained by the role it plays in terms of our human psyche or the character of social or political organisation. In the functionalist theory that considers the psychoanalytic role of religion, for instance, Freud argued that religion is really an unconscious response to repression that leads human beings to seek answers for their perceived disempowerment through projecting a more powerful being than themselves on to the world to account for their unfortunate circumstances (Freud 1928: 17). In Freud's theory, religion is a "universal obsessional neurosis" that seeks wish fulfillment as a gratifying experience (Freud 1928: 39). In this view, religion is a response to the inevitable, certain death all humans face. Religion functions therefore to obviate the fear of mortality that arguably stalks all sentient beings.

Karl Marx similarly described religion as the expression of human suffering, but at the same time he argued that religion is an ideology that reflects the "upside-down" perception of the nature of the world by projecting the alienation that humanity feels as a result of the perverse nature of capitalism and in particular of the class rule and exploitation that accompanies it. Religion, in Marx's view, also serves as a means to promote the ideas the ruling class in society projected as truths to perpetuate their privileged position (Marx and Engels 1964: 41, 42, 147). Marx developed his own theory of religion from a critique of G.W. Hegel, who argued that religion was the process of Spirit or God within humanity, becoming conscious of itself through the

self realisation of itself as the Idea of God (Hegel 1991: 341). Marx built on the critique of Hegel made by Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach, like Marx a radical, materialist Hegelian, defined religion as the recognition by humans of the infinite within humanity that it then projects on to the world and reveres as a superior being (Feuerbach 1957: 1, 2, 13). Like Freud, Marx held little regard for the claims of religion, but they both acknowledged its status as an ontological category, even if it projects, in their view, a false or imaginary view of the world.

One of the most influential scholars of religion, Emile Durkheim, identified what he regarded as the common-sense definition of religion and the fact that the apparent similarities between various religions in such a view was not sustainable as there were marked differences between these various religions as well (Durkheim 1975: 75-79). He described religious phenomena as falling into one of two categories: beliefs or rites (Durkheim 2001: 36). Within this broad framework, he classified all known things as falling themselves into one of two categories, the sacred or the profane. For Durkheim, religion is the organised set of beliefs and practices in relation to these sacred things that create a moral community of people (Durkheim 2001: 46). The sacred, Durkheim argued, is determined materially, through rites that a collective engages in; uniting the group and giving it its identity (Durkheim 2001: 42). The sacred is to be kept untainted by keeping the profane away from it (Durkheim 2001: 40). Durkheim regarded religion as being a social and collective phenomenon, within which collective representations of the sacred and the profane are structured. In his view, since these are the primordial, organisational categories of humankind, they are also the bases for all logic and order (Durkheim 1975: 111).

Marcel Mauss, a relative and student of Durkheim, further developed this theory of religion and society through studying the history of religion and key aspects of phenomena related to religion, including ritual sacrifice and economic exchange. Mauss defined the structure of society as based on the ritual exchanges made by people that created obligations to one another in relationships configured in and through the sacred (Mauss 1983: 170). This theme of religion, the sacred and the economy was a powerful one that began to emerge as a key focus in the social sciences. In this view, to talk of religion or the economy as distinct spheres of activity is to miss the common essence of the social relations that are expressed in the economic, the political and the social aspects of human communities, including religion. Mauss described ritual behaviour and social contract or obligation created by exchanges of gifts and tribute, as the basis of stable, social existence.

Max Weber, a leading figure in the founding of sociology, engaged religion as a phenomenon that has an observed effect in society, without looking to necessarily define it in an essentialist manner. Religion, symbolism and categorisation go together in Weber's view (Weber 1964: 9). He saw religion's role as being similar to or related to culture, for instance in enabling the success or failure of societies fashioning social cohesion and regulating the manner in which people behave. Capitalism, as the predominant and most advanced economic system, Weber argued, required a specific brand of Christianity, in the form of Protestantism, to best succeed as a system (Weber 1992: 120).

The prolific ethnographer, Bronislaw Malinowski, also studying various "primitive societies", concluded that although religion had a social function in that it

existed to help cope with the inevitability of death and that it embeds traditional values, the various different types of religion did not allow for a definition of it (Malinowski 1948: 47, 88). This means that while we can observe what we regard as religious behaviour, the subject matter is so broad as to include just about anything.

The relationship between religion and culture is also highlighted in the work of E. E. Evans-Pritchard, who also did not provide for a general definition or theory of religion, but focused on specific religions in their context. In so far as he theoretically conceptualised religion, he regarded it as a social activity, contiguous with or reducible to rites (Evans-Pritchard 1965: 47). Like many before him, Evans-Pritchard held a view that religion was more or less primitive, but that more developed religions had within them features common to all religions and interestingly argued that fetishism was the basis for religion (Evans-Pritchard 1965: 20).

Claude Levi-Strauss, in a wide-ranging, life-long study of concrete human communities and their rules of kinship, marriage and custom, identified classification as the first social order, with the sacred and the profane, as identified by Durkheim, being key categories for this exercise to take place. Significantly, Levi-Strauss included other binary relationships such as the raw and the cooked, culture and nature and gender (male and female) as key to understanding humanity and the activities unique to it (Levi-Strauss 1970: 126). He also identified language and myth as being central to religion. In Levi-Strauss' view, a language produces symbolic property, based on the rituals and the rules that identify the prohibitions and the permissions in a society. In the myths that he identified as being fundamental to the particular societies he studied, lesser deities mediate between humans and their Gods, playing a role as

super-beings, creating a cosmic order mirrored in the manner in which communities were themselves ordered (Levi-Strauss 1979: 32).

Levi-Strauss argued that this classification of things was fundamental to the ordering of the world, including putting sacred things in their correct or designated places (Levi-Strauss 1966: 10). In totemic systems, believed to be primordial forms of religion, everything was regarded as ordered in this manner - people, plants and animals - as well as the living and the dead. Levi-Strauss argued that it was imperative to distinguish between the personal and psychological aspects of our existence, the social or civil and the cosmic or transcendental. In that respect, he regarded religion as a key aspect of human social existence. In this system of classification, myths and signs are created that function according to the binary categories that form the basis of how humans order society (Levi-Strauss 1966: 18).

Significantly, Levi-Strauss shared Mauss's view that the function of exchange is the basic mode of human social interaction, again linking religion and the economy in a particular significant relationship (Levi-Strauss 1966: 109). The exchange of women by men, done according to the rules that govern marriage and kinship relations, Levi-Strauss argued, was one of the earliest forms of exchange. This is significant, for as with Mauss' argument for the primacy of exchange, this has major implications for the study of economics, politics and society in general. Such a theory places the privileging of production, wage labour or of capital in the economy, for example, in a contested position.

Peter Berger has also developed a particular historical materialist critique of religion, explaining that religion is the process of constructing a conception of the

world in its totality. In this view of religion, human culture is the process by which society is produced and reproduced (Berger 1967: 11). This system is what produces humans, who in turn maintain the system. Religion therefore functions as a powerful discourse through which society reproduces itself. This view is significant in that it places religion at the centre of the reproduction of society, that is, in terms of the total economic, social and political aspects of society.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz's eclectic definition of religion as being, “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic”, seems at face value to provide a comprehensive, functionalist framework for religion (Geertz 1966: 4). Geertz grounds his theory of religion in the structuralist perspective that takes culture as a historically determined system of transmitting meaning through symbols that are generated by people in the course of their social interaction (Geertz 1973: 89). Like most functional theories, this view of religion says nothing about the question of whether its subject matter is real or not. Geertz's definition of religion is also based more on culture than on the structure of society, making it somewhat different to functionalist theories as outlined above.

The encyclopedic work of Ninian Smart presents another theory of religion. Smart argues that there is no religious essence but rather a family resemblance among religions that enables us to define religion through a “scheme of ideas” of seven dimensions (Smart 1989). In this scheme, religions are practical and ritualistic and

involve worship, pedagogy and proselytising. Religions, Smart argues, are also emotional and experiential; they are mythic and narrative and thus tell a story. They are doctrinal and philosophical, as well as legal and ethical. They are also social and institutional and thus material. Lastly, religions can even be secular in this perspective, such as Marxism and nationalism (Smart 1989: 12-24).

In a critique of social anthropology in general, and of Geertz's methodology in particular, Talal Asad has argued that locating religion out of its actual social context has dislocated it from the relationships of power and authority in society and has obscured the Christian and Eurocentric nature of religious studies as developed in the dominant tradition of the discourse (Asad 1993: 19). Asad proposes instead that religion must be understood in the context of the overall social relations within a society and in terms of the power that elites wield in relation to all cultural systems. In other words, religion is not an isolated phenomenon; it is embedded in the cultural system and is related to all aspects of it (Asad 1973: 14 and 16). This critique of the methodology of anthropology argues for an understanding of religion as a conceptual and social category manufactured in the European Enlightenment subsequent colonial encounters (Asad 1993: 23).

Criticising the universal notion of religion itself and the manner in which Geertz uses concepts such as symbols as cognitive objects rather than relational and communicative categories that are socially constructed Asad builds up a persuasive argument for the re-evaluation of the category of religion in its entirety (Asad 1993: 32). He is more concerned with how particular religions are given authority, than with the category itself. In that respect, his view is that religion must be considered in terms

of the power relations in society-that is as a motivational activity that assumes a particular form in the discourses and practices of a society (Asad 1993: 35).

More recently, Richard Dawkins has defined religion as a system of self-replicating ideas that function more or less successfully in relation to the evolution of our species. Analogous to genes, these memes, as he terms them, are ideas that have survived and evolved because of the social function they perform in relation to our survival as a species (Dawkins 2006: 199-201). This biological metaphor for the development of a system of meaning and symbols to transmit them is similar to Geertz's, but it argues that religions, or any other ideas for that matter, stand or fall depending on their efficacy as evolutionary tools rather than as cultural material.

Each of these definitions and theories is persuasive, as they appear to elucidate certain obvious aspects of religion, but they have all been criticised for their limitations. Substantive theories such as those of Hume, Tylor, Frazer, Otto and van der Leeuw, while they differ in many respects, all seem to simply accept religion as being in existence because people believe in the beings, deities or realm that the phenomenon is said to occupy. This is a circular argument. Just because we have an intuition that there is a God or Gods is proof of nothing other than the intuition. That intuition does not necessarily qualify as anything different than, say, the intuition that there are ghosts, pixies or fairies.

Functionalist theories such as those of Freud and Marx observed religion as a phenomenon, but were critical of it for various reasons: it's perceived negative social impact, its archaic nature and its reactionary tendency or delusionary quality. But none of these definitions or theories is accepted without critique. To simply regard the

function of religious belief and behaviour as being of some or other social significance is to ignore the psychologically significant experience of religion for individuals. It also disregards what that experience says about the world. For instance, the fact that we may or may not believe in fictional (or real) entities that are more powerful than us has a lot to do with how we behave as humans. But whether these beliefs are real or not and what that says about the world also needs consideration. Functionalist definitions of religion can seem crude, missing the human subtlety of belief and faith. The idea that religion is either a psychological crutch or false-consciousness is also limiting in that this does not explain the persistence of religion even once people have developed scientific views of the world and our universe.

The theories of religion based on the interpretation of culture are problematic in that theories that are rooted in ethnographic projects are descriptive, but at the end of the day description is not an explanation. The fact that belief in religions is almost a universal human characteristic simply begs the question, what is religion and how does it work? Some consideration does therefore need to be given to the efficacy of the various theories of religion, for if the objective of understanding why it is that religion has the power it does to move whole groups of people to behave in particular ways is to be achieved, an explanation of the object of enquiry is necessary.

Substantive theories that move from the premise that we have a sense of the power of what we deem to be the supernatural Other are also no proof of the existence of a general category of religion. These sorts of beliefs can even be of a civic nature, such as a nationalistic belief in the flag of a country, national sacrifice, or even of the very concept of a nation itself. As in Geertz's definition, because these definitions and

theories are so broad, these also allow that any belief system that satisfies his five criteria, or grant the experience of some higher power, can be described as a religion. By such definitions we can therefore include baseball in the USA, Coca-Cola globally, Tupperware, Manchester United or even computer gaming as types of religion (Chidester 2005: ix, 52).

Finally, the idea of religion as memes is one that still does not take us any further in understanding what makes these memes articulate what is regarded as religion. This definition of religion sounds trite because the idea that theories that are socially efficacious function positively in terms of evolution tells us little about the nature of religion itself.

If there is no agreement on the definition of religion and if there is no agreement on the basic concept of what a religion consists of, let alone on a theory of religion, there is obviously an issue here that needs to be addressed. It is clear that religion, in the sense of some activities that people engage in, is a real experience for those having it. Whatever is going on that is described as religious belief or behaviour, it seems to encompass a wide range of human activities—perhaps too broad a range. Some scholars have argued that for this reason the category of religion must be done away with. This, they argue, would remove the debate about whether we are talking about the same thing and allow social science to get on with describing and explaining how society functions.

In this vein, Russell McCutcheon has argued that religion should be regarded as a conceptual tool and not as something that exists in reality (McCutcheon 1997: 19). In this view, religion can function as an area of research but is not an academic

discipline analogous to sociology or anthropology, for example (McCutcheon 1997: 28). McCutcheon argues that in the process of manufacturing this field, a particular ideology is developed that authenticates an exclusive representation of history. In such a process it is particularly important to ensure that the interests of the participants and the observers are clearly identified. This is analogous to the manner in which class interest is cloaked in the common sense of bourgeois ideology, at least according to the Marxist critique of ideology.

In a similar but more radical approach, Timothy Fitzgerald has argued that the category of religion is a modern construct and that not only is there no such ontological category, there is no valid basis for the discipline (Fitzgerald 2000: 3). He argues that religion and ritual are terms used interchangeably and that the category religion arises from the “liberal ecumenical ideology” that has been constructed alongside the process of the development of capitalism, the modern state and liberal individualism. (Fitzgerald 2000: 6). This process simultaneously defined the religious and the secular that is an essential aspect of the capitalist system (Fitzgerald 2000: 8). The manner in which the category functions mystifies, confuses and ensures that proper research cannot be conducted on society because of this category that is set apart from all others by the suggestion that it deals with something that cannot be explained as a social phenomenon. This privileging of a purported realm of religion is a circular argument if used as a means to justify the academic study of religion.

Religion is clearly a contested category, fraught with the politics of the phenomenon itself and arguably the interests of adherents and critics alike. It is rendered inadequate as a conceptual category for the purpose of studying the

phenomenon itself by these very debates. As one erudite and articulate scholar has put it, the study of religion is “confused” and the categorisation of religion and religions is arbitrary (Smart 1973: 9-10). That sociologists, economists, anthropologists and those who study it in a more focused manner have considered religion as a conceptual category and a thing in itself has made for an interesting and eclectic dialogue. As Chidester has observed, whatever might be understood by the anthropology of religion, religion is a significant category that functions as a “linking” term where the personal and the social meet (Chidester 2008: 5).

Some among the twentieth-century French critical theorists in particular have engaged religion from various angles that have enriched the debate considerably. In this perspective, religion as a form of social critique, builds upon the work of earlier critical theorists, particularly from the Frankfurt School (Mendieta 2005: 8).

In this tradition, Paul Ricoeur situates religion with language and within discourse as text (Ricoeur 1995: 35). He describes the phenomenology of the sacred and the manner in which myth and ritual are contiguous and are part of generating the sacred and expressing this symbolically. In this view, the sacred and symbolism are bound together as a discourse, configuring the sacred as a component within a system of meanings that is encoded within the social context within which they arise.

Roland Barthes has related myth to religion and to meaning in general, situating religion as part of the generation of knowledge in societies and defining myth as a language (Barthes 2000: 11). In this view, myth, magic, religion and even science are all systems of meaning within which people operate. Barthes suggests that since people manufacture all forms of communication, what is read into the text in such

systems of meaning depends on the social context and the place symbols have in the structure of language and there are taboos and conventions that determine this structure.

Echoing Foucault, who described religion as just one regularized discourse aimed at disciplining our minds and bodies, Pierre Bourdieu has described how the production of techniques that situate people in what he calls fields of power, shapes them, shapes society and presents limits to transformation (Bourdieu 1984: 226). Within this schema religion plays a powerful role as one of the mediums of symbolic power. Bourdieu does away with the economic and non-economic classification of systems in society and argues that all social practice is better understood as “economic practice directed towards the maximization of material or symbolic profit” (Bourdieu 1977: 183; 1990: 122). In this way, he sets out a critique of the political economy of religion, focusing on those social practices that are laden with sacred significance. Developing the economic theme, Bourdieu describes how economic and social goods are produced in the same way that religious and political discourses are (Bourdieu 1991: 50). These are all included in forms of exchange, whether linguistic, economic or religious and significantly Bourdieu describes these as outcomes as stylized rituals of institutional practice (Bourdieu 1991: 118).

Jean Baudrillard takes this critique even further by arguing that what is being produced in the social context are signs that are given meaning and value, but he breaks down the distinction between the so-called real world and the so-called artificial world of signs. Instead, he locates the process of symbolic production within the modern context and argues that media and technology have denuded the world of

reality and produced multiple meanings, making all that we see nothing more than simulations of the real. In this world there is a system of objects, made up of both the signs of these objects and the actual objects themselves that carry multiple meanings in a political economy of the sign (Baudrillard 1996: 117; Baudrillard 1981: 142). In such a view, religions as experienced in contemporary society are not real. They are simulations of the past, produced by effects of what he calls the *simulacra* and simulation, that is, the breaking down of the distinction between reality and image (Baudrillard 1994: 6).

In a similar vein, Jacques Derrida has argued that in modernity meaning is unstable and therefore to talk of defining any category, religion included, is problematic. Derrida has used religious concepts or terminology, but has made these terms devoid of any religious content (Derrida 2002: 92). Where he does speak of religion it is of what he terms a “globalatinisation” (*mondialatinisation*) of a Western European meaning of religion on a “tele-technoscientific” field that is imperialistic and serves to homogenize all belief on its terms (Derrida 2002: 78).

These theorists show that even when religion is being interrogated critically, the extent to which the object of enquiry is contextualised, textualised and appropriated is of considerable significance. Even the ways in which humans see the world, which Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues are determined in the first instance by our bodies, is of significance (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 48). Religion may define who and what we are as people, but our corporeal form also defines knowledge, language and religion. This is because the social facts we experience as structures are determined by both our biological and social existence (Merleau-Ponty 1974: 114). For example, the

very concepts of “up” as the transcendent and most sacred place in the form of heaven and “down” on terra firm or below as the profane relate to our upright, bipedal ability. Humans live down on earth, while the Gods live up in heaven, logically and necessarily because they are set apart from humans.

Perhaps the most radical view on religion among the critical theorists is that of Jean-Francois Lyotard. He describes the post-modern condition as one in which all signs have been hollowed out and where meaning is no longer stable due to the shifts in systems of signs (Lyotard 1989: 7). Lyotard describes what he terms the *differend*, that is a dispute that cannot be settled due to the unstable meanings at play in society, as the fulcrum around which discourses operate (Lyotard 1988: 13). This hiatus creates a constant repetition of debate that has no impact on society except at the symbolic level. In this view, modernity is characterized by myth, with religion functioning as just one articulation of this form.

The work of Michel Foucault is of singular importance in influencing these critical theorists and the social sciences in general. Foucault demonstrated that systems of power were a multiplicity of regularised discourses, created and embedded in society as disciplines. He established genealogies of these discourses, considering confinement in prisons, institutions for the mentally ill and sexuality, but also discourse generally (Foucault 1967; Foucault 1977; Foucault 1990). In this schema, religion is but one category of discourse that is used to attempt to exercise power over people, who in turn use the discourse to counter the effects of this domination.

The academic study of religion in contemporary times has also had to be located in the context of the defining features of the world at this time. The end of

colonialism, the end of the Cold War, the rise of neo-colonialism, capitalist globalization and the recent financial and economic crisis have all created conditions within which the academic study of religion has had to grapple with increasingly diverse and complex issues that relate to it.

This rich, emerging dialogue and the various definitions and theories of religion, have a lot to offer. The power of Geertz's theory of religion as a cultural system, combined with the structuralism conceptualised by Claude Levi-Strauss, arguably dominated the anthropology of religion in the late twentieth century and effectively established an enduring alternative approach to both functionalism and substantivism. The nexus of these structural theories and the critical discourse that flows from it created the possibility of a productive engagement analyzing religion in terms of human biology, language and psychology and through functionalism, integrating this with issues of the social, the political and the economic. Critics of the Eurocentrism and essentialism in these theories, such as Asad, have presented powerful arguments against approaches such as that of Geertz's to the study of religion (Asad 1973: 31). This criticism can be remedied by introducing context into the debate.

The critical theorists introduced the study of language, semiotics, discourse and political economy onto the terrain of structuralism. This has allowed for a dialogue that builds on the substantive theorists, who acknowledged the religious experiences of humanity, the functionalists, who elucidated the social value of religion, and the culturalists who explained to some extent how religion works in concrete societies. But none of these has effectively explained why religion exists, or

why it is so pervasive, persistent and resilient. They have however presented the case for the relationship between religion and the economy in the form of exchange and the creation of value.

As has been shown, among the challenges that the academic study of religion faces is that there is no consensus on whether the discipline has a subject. This seems counter-intuitive at first brush. We all know that what is commonly called religion exists. The majority of people are believers of one religion or another. But definitions of religion and explanations of its origins are so diverse as to render any attempt at providing one that can be regarded as approximating a consensus almost meaningless. Consequently, those who study religion are not always studying the same phenomenon, or if they are, do so in radically different ways (Boyer, 2001: 6, 10, 13, 22, 26; Durkheim, 2001: 40; Braun, 2000: 4; Anar, 2000: 24, 25, 26; Chidester, 2005: vii, 13). Chidester has pointed out that the various histories of the anthropology of religion raise the issue of genealogy sharply. With all the diversity of research programs and the consideration of religion and various other disciplines and phenomena, he has questioned whether any single genealogy can be traced (Chidester 2008: 11).

For those who argue that, in spite of these differences, there is a discipline of religious studies, the academic study of religion has been successfully critiqued to the point that it is now clear that the history of religion and of society in general is now understood to be so complex, under-researched and, frankly speaking, crudely interpreted in the past as to make the notion of the study of religion highly contested (Chidester, 1996: xiii, 3-29).

Chidester points out that the academic discipline of comparative religion was constructed in the context of colonial and imperialist relationships that were dominated by violence, aggression, avarice and prejudice that have colored the study of religion and debates within it. Apart from the fact, as Chidester points out, that these encounters took place on the colonial and imperial frontiers, as he puts it, the conceptual category of religion and the production of knowledge, about people, their beliefs, practices, values, in short their culture, has been interpreted in a manner that suggests that it is impossible to utilise this category in a relative or an interest-free manner. Chidester makes a convincing case for adopting a sceptical attitude towards any claims of impartiality on the part of scholars of religion.

In addition, religion appears to be diffuse in nature, that is, there appear to be an infinite number of possible religions, based on the worship of any animate or inanimate entity, and even on the void. But the abundance of religious activity and the source of religious material require an explanation. It is counter-intuitive that an activity that concentrates on what is deemed by many to be the most valuable aspect of human existence, that of the spiritual or non-materialist, eternal aspect of our lives, is bountiful in the most extreme. This surplus of symbolic property needs consideration. It would seem logical that such material should be scarce rather than in surplus.

It is also not clear how what are generally regarded as ordinary things in one context — a stone, bones, a sign or a place — take on significance in another context that makes them, literally, invaluable. It is not sufficient to argue that things have a religious significance because believers say they do or regard them as sacred. Such

circularity leads quickly to a situation where it is therefore a matter of belief. But this still does not explain the belief.

There are many aspects of social life that are not regarded conventionally as being religious but that exhibit many, if not all, of the characteristics of what most would agree religions have in their makeup (Chidester 2005: viii, 5, 9). Money, flags, countries, celebrities, sports events and many other seemingly banal things exhibit religious features or people behave in ways often defined as religious in relation to these social objects or processes. Money is literally treated as a god by some people in capitalist society and perhaps since its appearance as a socially constructed category. There are rituals in relation to money that have religious characteristics (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). People are sacrificed for their countries and this is justified in religious terms or national terms that have a religious character (Chidester 2005). Religion and social activities that have a quasi-religious character pervade television, competing for prime time viewing with game shows and soap operas. If there are things that are like religion, but are not religion, whatever gives these things their quasi-religious status must also be explained. At the very least this could provide clues to what religion is.

There are many social groups that would regard themselves as a religion, who are deemed not to qualify for this title, either by academics or by other religions. Exactly what is an authentic religion is contested (Chidester, 2005: viii; Chidester, 1988: 24; Chidester, 1996: 11). The legitimisation of a particular religion is partly about the overcoming of the scepticism of those who do not join a particular religious grouping, but it is also about who has the power to legitimate a religion. All major

religions were once regarded as cults, deviant behaviour or even criminal activity. When and how religions become accepted as such is just as significant as how they are formed.

The gap between secular life and religious life appears to widen as time goes by, resulting in the perception that religion has ceased to have any relevance in the modern world (Debray 1981: 335). But this is only the appearance. Religion in the modern world has taken on new forms, partly reverting to reinterpreted forms of historical religions, but also in breaking down previous totalizing religious projects into private ones. The apparent secularisation of society, the marked privatisation of religion and the return of archaic beliefs that rely on religion and the sacred in the form of nationalism and religious fundamentalism needs to be explained, as do the problems of religious competition and conflict and of social conflict in general, that religion seems unable to contribute to effectively dealing with.

Similarly, the recurring patterns of social development and underdevelopment that characterise the contemporary world are challenges that religion fails to explain or to assist in overcoming. Religion justifies oppression, exploitation, injustice and inequality as well as liberation, justice and equity. Our present reality, that of a capitalist, globalising world of simultaneous development and underdevelopment, is a reality within which any attempt to study religion, must be located. Yet a subject with no agreed definition or theory hardly seems the place to start when confronting such weighty matters.

A significant challenge for an enquiry into the subject of religion, apart from the various definitions being so diverse and broad, is that the academic study of

religion is confronted with anachronistic relativism inherent in its alleged subject (Asad 1973: 46). The contemporary version of the category of religion in general and of specific religions that have endured or developed are obviously significantly different to what believers have historically held in relation to their own set of religious beliefs and of their understanding of the religious beliefs of others. The manner in which academics considered religion one hundred years ago can hardly be the same as the manner in which contemporary scholars understand religion. At the same time, Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims today do not worship at the same Church, Temple or Mosque (except in the physical sense of the word) under the same Papal edicts or testaments and arguably do not even worship with the same conception of a God as a century ago.

The view that religion is essentially a category constructed through comparison informs the thinking of many contemporary scholars (Smith 1982: 19, Arnal 2000: 22). According to Jonathan Z. Smith religion is a category created by scholars who are essentially dealing with the past, that is, with history. To do this they seek to identify and then classify the things they see have similarities. In so doing the academy invents this category called religion, but within it there are many variations, subtleties and even differences that are missed. The argument that religion is a comparative category, in other words, can only come into existence as a taxonomic category when two or more systems of belief are being compared, is a highly persuasive one (Smith 1982: 20; Chidester, 1996: 5). Even if this is not intuitively so in relation to individual religions, it is at least in relation to the academic study of the phenomenon, where comparison naturally takes place. This problem could arguably be overcome by only

studying contemporary religion, but this itself is an activity full of subjectivism, interpretation and the politics of the moment. Importantly, as has been argued above, comparison takes place within a normative context, making all enquiries into religion political or value-laden activities (Chidester 2000: 428).

Given all of these issues about the conceptual category of religion — its complexity, its validity, its efficacy, its clarity — scholars are faced with the problem of not being sure that what they seek to study has the status of being a viable object of enquiry. But what is clear is that while most definitions identify part of what religion seems to be and while some theories appear to adequately describe and explain key aspects of religion, its breadth as a topic is such that in the end the category of religion may not best assist in describing what the nature of the phenomenon under consideration is. It may also not help to explain the persistence, pervasiveness and resilience of religion itself.

For the purpose of this enquiry, the most significant issue is not whether religion exists as a category. It is rather that the entry point for studying whatever it is that religion is an expression of is also that of considering the most basic determining features of any religious activity. To explain these features or characteristics of religion and to engage with the very essence of belief, of the impact of beliefs on human praxis, a theoretical premise is required that isolates all these features and provides an explanation for them. This theoretical premise is to be found in the category of the sacred (Chidester 2005: 19). The dialectic of the sacred and the profane is arguably the most important for any enquiry into the nature, characteristics, definition or description of religion (Smith 1982: 38). As has been pointed out earlier,

the category of the sacred is regarded as being broad and possibly simply a substitute for that of religion. But the set-apart sacred, it is argued below, is a material, socially constructed category that is common to all behaviour and beliefs regarded as religious.

Accepting this category as an entry point into a critique of religion does not mean abandoning the category of religion, or limiting the definition of religion to the sacred, but it is a position that recognises the challenges the category religion presents to fruitful academic enquiry. That some substantive, functionalist and structuralist theories regard the sacred as a significant conceptual category is also significant. This means that the sacred as a category presents us with an opportunity to begin a dialogue that attempts to situate the discussion at the centre of all of these theoretical contributions, building on their positive aspects and what they have developed in terms of understanding the relationship between what Lacan has called the real, the symbolic and the imaginary aspects of our social existence. In Lacan's theory of the development of the human subject, the various stages of development of the subject coincided with the realization that this development included an unmasking of reality, exposing the subject to the trauma of the various realisations of their own fragility, powerlessness and difference. This process, one of alienation, Lacan described as creating the difference between these various aspects of social existence and difference. This framework, one that distinguishes between modes of experiencing subjectivity, is a powerful one that allows for the development of a useful elucidation of the manner in which human subjects perceive themselves and the world. In this sense, the categories of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, are the totality of the lived experience of human beings. In Lacan's theoretical framework, the relationship

between the unconscious and these categories is also explored and the manner in which images, the imagination and self-deception, or the filtering of reality occurs between the conscious and the unconscious. How these categories relate to the symbolic expression of ideas is also explained in Lacan's work. Given that Lacan posits the real as the unattainable, human experience and the expression of this is confined to the imaginary and the symbolic, as he puts it (Lacan 1977). This framework also raises the possibility of explaining the powerful nature of the symbolic, as it is arguably the only truly conscious, lived experience of human beings.

The sacred

It has been argued above that there are substantive, functionalist and structuralist theories of religion that feature in the academic discourse on the subject. There are also versions of these approaches that seek to theorise the sacred. Both Otto and Eliade described the sacred as being the essence of religion (Otto 1923; Eliade 1959). As with their theories of religion, the approach they took simply accepted the sacred as a category and then described what it represented or meant, in their view. In such theories, there is no evidence presented for the actual category of the sacred. The sacred is simply proposed and accepted as a reality, based on the claimed experiences of religious adherents who argue that they have interacted with the sacred. Functionalist definitions of the sacred are more interesting in that they present an alternative theory that attempts to explain why people adopt and accept the category of the sacred (and of the profane) and how this then plays a particular role in society. In

these theories the sacred plays a role in creating a hierarchy or order of things that serves to identify them as being more or less socially valuable. But it is the structuralist arguments that present the most fruitful entry point for considering the sacred. This type of theory has its origins in the work of Durkheim and Mauss, who, strictly speaking offered a version of functionalism in their theories of religion. But the structuralist aspect of these theories was present and was brought out by Claude Levi-Strauss in particular (Durkheim 2001; Mauss 1969; Levi-Strauss 1969).

Durkheim's definition of the sacred and the theory he constructs of how it is created offers the possibility of a materialist understanding of the basic ordering of the universe by humans. The effect of the sacred as conceptualized by Durkheim is far reaching. In characterizing the world as made up of the sacred and the profane, Durkheim proposed that there exists a basic, primordial logical, taxonomic system that orders the world into two basic categories. With these categories, Durkheim argued, human beings made sense of the world by setting apart or privileging certain aspects of it over others. This conceptualization of the sacred goes beyond the use of the term sacred to mean simply "valued" or "desired". In ordering the world in this way, humans are firstly privileging some things over others. But in so doing, they are also defining the world and themselves. Fundamental to such a definition of the world is the notion of a biological, psychological and social subject, that is privileged before all else.

Both Fitzgerald and McCutcheon have emphasised the difference between the phenomenological approaches to the sacred, which they decry, and the structuralist use of the concept (McCutcheon 2000: 51; Fitzgerald 1997: 12). In other words, they view

the sacred as something that can be understood as being a concrete social fact. The sacred is observable in the terms and conditions by which humans talk, eat, sleep, drink, work, play and worship. Whether the sacred is a transcendental category is an entirely different matter, but it is clear that the phenomenon of the sacred can be utilised to describe material, symbolic and transcendental or imaginary categories. Religion, by comparison, is a claimed social activity that is presented as a privileged discourse without any agreement on its materiality, or proof thereof.

It is clear that while no agreement can be reached on a definition of religion, it is argued here that what is described as religion, and other social activities that are not generally considered to be religion, revolves around an engagement between people and that which they regard as sacred. The sacred is therefore proposed as the subject of enquiry through which to obtain some clarity about what is termed religion, simply because whatever the ontological or epistemological views one holds in relation to religion, whether one describes religion in substantive, functionalist, structuralist, psychological or culturalist terms, or a mixture of these, there can be no question at all that people engaged in what is described as religious behaviour or activity are engaging with the sacred (Antonnen 2000: 272, Smith 1982: 37). It is only fair to point out that critics may raise the objection that this is just a rather obvious and even unsophisticated semantic maneuver designed to avoid or sidestep the challenges of academic research in the field of religious studies. These critics will have to be persuaded otherwise.

The sacred and religion are certainly not one and the same thing. The sacred as a category refers to things that are set-apart. Religion refers to a number of activities

relating to this category of set-apart things, but also to various other values, principles and possibly a *credo* in certain instances. But what it is clear that there can be no uncontested study of religion without some engagement with the category of the set-apart sacred. It is argued here that the pervasiveness and persistence of the sacred is one of its key characteristics and one of its strengths. There is an argument that the sacred is as ambiguous a concept as religion, but it is argued further here that that ambiguity does not apply to the set-apart sacred, since the basis of that concept is a material one and not a matter of faith or belief. The set-apart sacred cannot be reduced to simply being about value, although value is a key aspect of the category. The political economy of the sacred is an attempt to elucidate how value is produced, determined, enforced and disposed of.

Like religion, the sacred as a conceptual category has its origins partly in the discourse of the Christian faith. The etymology of the word sacred in European societies locates its origin in the Latin *sanctum* and the French *sacre*, respectively, that which relates to the Gods and to sacrifice (Asad 1993: 30; Debray 1981: 257). Social anthropologists and ethnographers encountered the sacred as a category outside of the Christian context when observing “primitive” societies they were studying. The attempts to find out more about humanity through studying people who lived in less economically developed places created an exotic field of enquiry in which the strange, the other and the unknown were encountered. In observing these societies, pioneering social scientists encountered belief systems they categorized variously as fetishism, animism, or totemism, which combined “belief in spiritual beings” with the belief that some unique relationships exists between certain groups of people and various plants

and animals (Durkheim 2001: 76; Malinowski 1948: 20). These belief systems were compared with other religions and with Christianity in particular, whether explicitly or otherwise implicitly.

Along with witchcraft, magic and mythology, these belief systems were variously described as being the precursors to modern religion or as being belief and knowledge systems that functioned as symbolic systems through which humans engaged with and made sense of their world. While many of the early ethnographers made somewhat startling claims about the so-called primitive people they studied, the value of these exercises was that they created a prism through which later anthropologists started analyzing their own societies and constructed theories about society in general. In this respect, Claude Levi-Strauss pioneered the study of the ways in which people identified and categorised food, animals, humans, magic and religion and the relationships between these categories as subjects of crucial enquiry (Levi-Strauss 1964: 93, 104). The objective of his enquiries was to uncover “the world of symbolism. . . infinitely varied in content, but always limited in its laws” (Levi-Strauss 1964: 203). In other words, Levi-Strauss argued that there are structured aspects of society that could be demystified by the study of other societies, initially the so-called primitive ones that would allow the development of a theoretical framework for describing and explaining society in general. Since these categories are common to all societies — so-called primitive and modern — the study of these presented an opportunity to develop laws about how society functions. Levi-Strauss noted the similarities between so-called primitive and modern societies and motivated for an understanding of society that did not place these in a particular hierarchy.

The conceptual category of the sacred as utilised by Emile Durkheim defines it as that which is set apart in society in a particularly, superior, hierarchical position, circumscribed by prohibitions, around which a moral community is situated (Durkheim 2001: 46). This social unit is at one and the same time the actual community, the abstract community as represented in symbols or signs of religion and often the imagined community located in a special, set apart time and space. Religion is distinguished from magic by Durkheim in that he views magic, which is similar to religion in that it consists of particular rites and beliefs, as being distinguished from religion by not binding its adherents into a community. In Durkheim's view, magic is a private activity and religion a social one (Durkheim 2001: 43). By defining the sacred as “that which is set apart and forbidden”, Durkheim strategically located the sacred not as an emotional experience or a philosophical system, but as a concrete social fact, that is, as an outcome of the structural nature of society (Durkheim 2001: 36). Durkheim also simultaneously defined the nature of the profane in that it is that which is outside of the sacred.

Building on Durkheim's concept of the sacred, Mauss developed a theoretical framework that described the relationship between ritual and the sacred (Mauss 1950: 92). Mauss argued that belief in the sacred underpins the manner in which societies function in their totality, setting up effective systems of obligation and exchange and creating a socialised conception of the world and an institution of value as a powerful glue that holds that world together (Mauss 1966: 70). In this view, the symbols that represent the sacred in society are generated by the social relationships that people have, importantly producing a surplus of signification (Levi-Strauss 1987: 62). These

sacred symbols create a milieu within which the pictures people have of the world are constructed. Mauss also described the manner in which the exchange of the symbolic takes place, where things of value, produced by ritual, achieve an important status in society and are therefore representative of some higher value (Mauss 1966: 66). In Mauss view, the sacred is an economic category, with economic value having its origins in the religious activities of people.

Clifford Geertz argues a similar point. These sacred symbols, he claims, “relate to a lifestyle and a designated metaphysics that mutually reinforce one another” (Geertz 1973: 90). Geertz also argues that what defines humans and what distinguishes them from animals is the meaning that they can express through signs and communicate to one another through language. Claude Levi-Strauss extended the category of the sacred from being simply about that which is set apart and argued that it is a category analogous to the numeral zero, creating the extraordinary out of anything, just as the zero creates a system of infinite numerals out of the nine basic digits or even the single integer one (Levi-Strauss 1968: 200). In this sense, the sacred becomes a conceptual category that enables the construction of a crucial theory of how humans make sense of and order the world, since everything that is social has a symbolic value generated by the sacred.

Essentially, what has therefore been argued is that the sacred produces a system of symbols that function as signs of the sacred and relate to one another through meanings and interpretations. The sacred therefore functions just as a language does. Like a language, the sacred can produce an infinite variety of signification, without ever losing its strategic value as a system. This potential for

signification manifests itself as abundance. Signs, like words, are available in infinite supply, as they are the product of the human imagination, expressed in and through the social interactions between people.

Georges Bataille included the profane and whatever is taboo and off-limits into the category of the sacred, arguing that the sacred is all about the power of being designated as set apart, whether as sacred or profane (Bataille 1989: 36). This ambivalence of the sacred makes distinctions between the sacred/profane on the one hand and the ordinary on the other hand and is used by Bataille to describe extreme acts of sacrifice and destruction as ways in which these two aspects of our world that cannot really be integrated, are experienced simultaneously. Importantly, Bataille also points to the ritual destruction of surplus, as does Mauss, as being an essential feature of society. This has important ramifications that will be considered later. At the very least, the routinised destruction of material goods, in order to symbolically create some egalitarian spirit in a community, must create conditions for solidarity between its members and remove the threat of competition escalating to violence, war and the destruction of people.

Peter Berger has defined the sacred as all that is assigned power and that promotes order in society (Berger 1967: 26-27). In this view, the sacred is the foundation of society and social existence necessarily produces religion (Berger 1967: 48). Berger argues that ritual and alienation configure the human interaction with the world in such a manner that the outcome is prefigured as being that of a relationship with the sacred. These rituals are related to and reinforce various prohibitions and permissions.

Régis Debray has argued that this process of demarcation of the sacred and the profane functions in much the same way as the manner in which social groups are demarcated. Groups of any kind, he argues, are defined by that which is on the inside and that which is on the outside, creating a social dynamic of incompleteness that is structurally inherent within society (Debray 1984: 184). The effect of this process of demarcation is therefore felt in the very manner in which society is constructed and reproduced. The social process of incorporation, in this view, creates terms and conditions that set apart individuals from the group as subjects and from each other as leaders and the led in a structured hierarchy (Debray 1984: 205). In other words, the sacred is at the center of social life, it is inescapable, as is the logic this fact initiates. As Debray puts it, the moral community being designated manifests a social physics that is definitively related to the sacred (Debray 1981: 170). As such, human social existence makes people religious by definition, whether in the form of the political functioning of this primordial religious unconscious or in the transcendental form, including in the reification, personification and veneration of deities (Debray 1984: 192).

Debray also makes the case for what he calls a universal or natural religion and a religious-political unconscious. These concepts are contentious and arguably add little to the theoretical framework he constructs. Like Chomsky's universal grammar, Debray's universal religious unconscious is the syntax within which a religion is developed. Just as syntax can generate many different languages, the sacred can generate many different symbolic systems. Frederic Jameson has also posited the notion of a political unconscious (Jameson 1996: 20). As with Debray's religious

unconscious, Jameson's political unconscious pervades human society, manifesting itself in the structures that are created for managing the collective. Obviously, the notion of the unconscious has its origins in Freud's theory of how the human subject is created and configured.

Debray has developed this critique of the sacred and of religion, tracing the development of the concept of the monotheistic deity in the social conditions of nomadic life in the deserts of what is today described as the Middle East (Debray 2004: 38). Describing the effect of incompleteness and the sacred in society, Debray has created a powerful interdisciplinary field of enquiry cutting across sociology, religion, language and media. This field of mediology explores ways in which power is configured and deployed by elites utilising different technologies to communicate or transmit ideas. Debray identifies the different gazes of society depending on the mediasphere that is in operation. That is, he differentiates between the effects of the spoken word in direct communication, the written text, pictures, moving images or the spoken word broadcast by radio, television or the cinema (Debray 1996; 1997).

This view of the origins of belief systems in the material determination of the sacred conveniently provides an entry point into the issues of belief, not only of religion, but also of ideas in general (Durkheim 2001: 40). Durkheim viewed rites and practical activity as being central to religious life. The practices of the identification, production and veneration of the sacred, the rites that go with this and of the management of the profane are the stuff of religion (Durkheim 2001: 42). Durkheim's theory of the evolution of religion through totemism and ancestor worship has been criticized but the fact remains that through defining the sacred as being at the centre of

religious life and arguably at the centre of society, Durkheim laid the foundation for a materialist critique of religion. It is a theory of the sacred that argues that believing comes from doing and not the other way around.

A serious challenge to the concept of the sacred is that of its relevance for the study of religion, or anything else for that matter, due to it being arguably arbitrary and tautological (Smith, 1982: 37, 40). This criticism has to be answered and part of the answer, at least, lies in the recognition of the fact that human activity can be differentiated as being regarded sacred or profane at various levels, ranging from the trivial to the significant. What is regarded as religion is itself activity that is set apart from other social activity precisely by the designation and recognition of it as being sacred belief and activity that relates to things set apart that are transcendental, that are regarded as having a particular significance to communities, whether these be physical objects, imagined beings or even values. Smith has convincingly argued that while the term may seem arbitrary and tautological, what he describes as “the persistence of the sacred”, its consistent appearance in both society and in the discourse around religion, has to be explained (Smith 1982:37). He argues that the categories sacred and ritual are interchangeable as it is ritual that sets apart the sacred (Smith 1982: 55).

Durkheim’s theory of the sacred has also been criticised as being circular in that he argues that society is the sacred and that the sacred is the society represented symbolically (Debray 1981: 172). This criticism can be overcome if the framework that Debray suggests is utilised. The sacred as a “collective, pre-conscious schema”, provides an explanation for how the collective represents itself through the sacred (Debray 1981: 172). The sacred is therefore a structural category, created by the

language and rituals of people in their social interaction. To order the world all objects are compared, found to be similar or dissimilar, categorized as special, that is as valuable, or ordinary and in that setting apart, as sacred or not. The issue of the category of the sacred as being one that includes the profane is an interesting one, but it is not essential to the structural outcomes of social existence that this is the case. The issue of certain things being taboo illustrates this. Taboo is a category of dread of fear and of the potential negative reprisal of breaking a taboo. Even though certain objects may be worshipped as being sacred, they can also be taboo, for instance in the case of animals that are regarded as sacred ancestors of a particular group of people and therefore prohibited as a potential food.

Mathew T. Evans has provided a useful review of the various uses of the term sacred and through this has developed an analytical framework that clarifies the ways in which the term is used. He identifies these uses as the interchangeability of the term with that of religion, its reference to the transcendental and the use of the term in Durkheim's sense of the sacred as set apart (Evans 2003: 33). He describes how the sacred is used personally, spiritually, in the civil space as well as in religious terms and that what distinguishes that which is set apart as sacred in the sense of holy, is that which is regarded as transcendental (Evans 2003: 41-42). Most significantly, he points to the fact that what sets apart the sacred is the observation that it has a perceived value for those in the community or society that hold it to be sacred (Evans 2003: 39). Evans' framework therefore neatly clarifies the ways in which the term sacred is utilised.

Evans does, however, revert back to using terms such as spirituality and religion to describe the sacred, when the categories he ought to be referring to are the personal, the collective or civil and that which lies beyond in a realm that is either real or imagined but cannot be accessed or experienced except through ritual activity in a collectively agreed manner. Evans mentions the value-generating aspect of the sacred but does not expand on this. However, one aspect of the sacred that is clearly identifiable is its socially agreed value. Whether in the form of sacred relics, sacred space, and sacred time or in terms of sacred aspects of our bodies, the sacred is what people desire, covet, steal, treasure and even kill or die for ownership and control of (Fitzgerald 2000: 19). Importantly, Evans' review clarifies the distinction between the sacred, in the sense of the transcendental, and the set-apart sacred, that is, all things designated as sacred, including the transcendental. It is this set-apart sacred that is the focus here. This conception of the set-apart sacred is developed out of the sacred as defined by Durkheim, Mauss and used by others such as Levi-Strauss, Debray and others, but differs in that the material processes of how the set-apart sacred is produced are further articulated. These processes, involving human embodiment, psychology, processes of categorisation and ritualisation, determine a material and taxonomic quality of being set-apart.

Referring to van der Leeuw's work on sacred space, David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal describe how sacred space has value because it is firstly designated sacred through social acts of ritual, but then is also "appropriated, possessed and owned" (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 8). Chidester has elsewhere provided a definition of religion that situates it "between the state and the market,

between political power and economic exchange”, as a sphere of activity where people engage with issues of a transcendent nature or the sacred and with their own being (Chidester 2005: 1). This definition locates the sacred as the focus of what is described as religion, but importantly does so in economic terms. The political economy of the sacred is then defined as “the terrain and resources, the strategies and tactics, in and through which the sacred is negotiated” (Chidester 2005: 19). While this is useful, the limited focus on the transcendental sacred constrains the extent to which this powerful analysis can be utilised. The challenge is to create a more general framework for the political economy of the sacred that allows for the set-apart sacred to be analysed.

Among the first social acts, then, is that which generates the set-apart sacred, both in terms of the founding of the social collective and of the leadership of the collective, both of which are set apart in the sense that Durkheim meant it. But Debray goes further than Durkheim. He claims that the sacred is embedded in the hardware of the social, as it were. He describes it as a “physics of belief”, or a “collective, preconscious schematism” that limits the extent to which humanity, as organised collectively, can think and act any differently to what is commonly observed, that is, to the religious terms and conditions of social existence. His argument is that any group, be it a religious community, a political party or a nation, has basic characteristics because it is organised by and through an ‘ideology’, that is, “the collective, preconscious, schematism” of a religious, political or scientific nature. This ensures that the group can remain organised, but importantly, this process and its consequences are unavoidable. In other words, social existence is mediated in and through the set-apart sacred. The result of this is that the set-apart sacred is the

primordial form of organising, understanding and communicating about the world for human beings. Humans cannot have any stable social existence without a shared conception of the set-apart sacred and consequently of the profane and the ordinary. The sacred generates terms of “affectivity, effectivity and community”; through the social beliefs it constitutes and empowers to be of practical consequence (Debray 1981: 128). In this view, to belong is to believe and to believe is to accept the set-apart sacred.

The social physics of this set-apart sacred nature of society is that institutions are set up to manage the set-apart sacred, namely churches, political organisations and economic formations. In the course of this there are certain mediators that are required who safeguard, interpret and manage the set-apart sacred. This nomenclature — the priests, the politicians and the economic managers — become privileged by their relationship to the set-apart sacred and their position between it and the subjects that make up the collective. Understood in this way, the set-apart sacred pervades all aspects of our social existence. As Evans has shown, the set-apart sacred has a presence in the private, the civic and the transcendental spheres. Debray’s framework allows us to consider the set-apart sacred in the economic, the political, the social, the sexual or any other sphere. This is because the syntax of the set-apart sacred, as he describes it, is the basic framework for any collective existence and the functioning of that collective.

The ordinary, that which is not set apart or sacred, is an important category, since what privileges the set-apart sacred over the ordinary must also partly define its opposite and vice versa. While it may seem tautological, it seems fairly obvious that

that which is not the set-apart sacred is what is ordinary. Clearly, this is most of what people engage with all the time. This is partly what gives the set-apart sacred its power and character, since it is the set-apart sacred that stands out from the ordinary, whether it be in terms of time, space, objects, people or activities.

Of course, the set-apart sacred is produced by ritual, that is, by any agreed and shared social process in which the collective invests time and effort. These can be in terms similar to those that Lacan has defined — the real, the imaginary and the symbolic — creating a structure of value that functions at all of these levels (Lacan 1977). This total reality that is socially constructed through the set-apart sacred is one that orders the world at all these levels and does so for space, time and objects, including people.

Key to this process is the function of ritual in society. Like religion, ritual is an invented category, in that just about anything can be regarded as a ritual (Smith 1992, 1997). Ritual encompasses many aspects of human activity. There are special rules for the activities that go together with the worship of deities (Boyer 2001: 269). From this perspective ritual, is behaviour designed to create a certain effect among participants in them, making them believe that what they are doing is sacred activity.

Smith has described ritual as activities that humans engage in that are set-apart by the attention to the detail of these acts and their repetition (Smith 1987: 191). Describing the role of sacrifice in relation to ritual, Smith has suggested the power of ritualisation lies in its set apart character and this with the practices of sacrifice. In Smiths terms, ritual is “a mode of paying attention” and of identifying interest in something (Smith 1987: 103). Smith has also articulated the relationship between

ritual and place, describing how the marking out of space and its ritualized existence is what turns the arbitrary into the particular, thereby sacralising it (Smith 1987: 104). The sacred then can be understood as relating to the dimensions of time and space and to the process of making something sacred by its location being specified and it's being marked as different from that which is not sacred. This difference of the sacred, the setting apart of it, turns things such as blood from being a source of impurity, to one of purity, for example (Smith 1987:110). Significantly, Smith argues that ritual and the sacred relate to institutions such as kingship, pointing to the set-apart sacred nature of certain individuals.

Clifford Geertz has described ritual as the various ways of making sense of the world by investing certain activities with “consecrated behaviour” (Geertz 2000: 112). In this way, the lived and the imagined world, are brought together through certain activities that the participants understand to be significant. This is certainly the case, but what is significant is not the relationship between the material and the transcendental aspects of ritual. It is rather the symbolic nature of the set-apart sacred and the human activity in producing this that is significant. There is also a significant interpretation of ritual as being work that is carried out by communities and the people in them (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 156). In this perspective, ritual is an activity designed to repair the social fabric, rent asunder by death, misfortune or calamity (Chidester 1988: 12). This social labour is significant in that it relies on all of the community to participate in it and its power is derived from those who do so and their will to re-imagine the world in a particular way. Durkheim recognized the significance of ritual, placing it at the centre of the social activity that defined the community

through its beliefs (Durkheim 2001: 11, 36). But this perspective on ritual still views it as related to beliefs in deities, the transcendental or other immaterial factors or forces.

Mauss also placed ritual in relation to the sacred claiming that the “basic idea of all ritual. . . was this idea of the sacred” (Mauss 1972: 10). As was shown earlier, of significance is Mauss’ location of the production of value in the activities of ritualisation and therefore the creation of the category of the economic as originating in the religious activities of people. It is arguable that the same applies to political activities that clearly have their origins in the communal processes of societies.

Catherine Bell has located ritual as “a strategic arena for the embodiment of power relations” (Bell 1992: 170). This perspective is a significant one, for it explains why it is that in performing rituals certain people play certain roles, have access to paraphernalia and conduct the important parts of any ritual. This setting apart of certain people is similar to that described by Debray, as shown above. Bell goes on to say that ritual is not merely about the repetition of tradition, but that ritual activities are the medium through which ideas about the world are constructed, embodied and reinforced. Ritual is therefore activities that are set-apart from ordinary ones in that they are activities of material consequence, even if not in the form intended by the participants. Ritual activities are therefore set-apart sacred activities of social labour performed within the collective that generate and locate meaning and value for the collective.

The set-apart sacred is that which is set apart through ritual, held to be of value by the collective and related either to the personal, civic or transcendental spheres of our social existence. It exists at both a material and at an imaginary level, but is

always and everywhere as symbolic. Where it is mutually agreed upon to have a value, it may be traded or exchanged. The means and methods of this circulation of symbolic property are set out in agreed terms. These are the traditions, customs or laws of a society.

Because the set-apart sacred is determined in this manner, it is ubiquitous. So we find personal items or treasures that we hold as set-apart sacred, such as an heirloom. The family or close personal friends who agree on the value of such objects determine this. We also find communal or civic set-apart sacred items such as national flags, constitutions and anthems. In such instances, the community or its ancestors that participated in the process of fighting for the power of these social institutions determines the set-apart sacred. Significantly for the purposes of any enquiry into religion, there are set-apart sacred things of a transcendental nature, those imagined, symbolic and material things that are regarded as holy. Examples abound, from those beliefs to do with places, such as churches, mosques or temples, to periods of worship and observance such as holy days. Human bodies are deemed to be set-apart sacred, particularly by those located within them. There are set-apart sacred relics, such as the bones of saints and shrouds that people steal, kill for and die for (Chidester 2000: 218). What all of these have in common is that a collective act, an act of social labour, has designated them as set-apart, that is not ordinary, and of some more or less agreed value. This is the necessary social labour that creates the symbolic property that is rendered sacred in its being set-apart.

In other words, what makes these things set-apart sacred therefore, is simply that they are agreed to be such by a group of people and then marked as such. This

group may be successful in transmitting this set-apart sacred character of a place, time or a thing to others, whether geographically or over a period of time. That is what any particular religion is - an historical community of people who share a belief in what counts as set-apart sacred and who observe this belief in practice through private and social demonstrations of this belief and who have an agreed institution for managing the set-apart sacred as they see it. Initially, these things of value are created by ritual, that is, by practical acts of social agreement or compacts that set-apart a place, time or an object through such communal activities that reinforce the initial agreement that demarcates the set-apart sacred. This process, whether of praying, abstaining or indulging — any act of observance — creates the terms and conditions of the set-apart sacred. Of course, once there is agreement on what the set-apart sacred is, it can then be represented by itself, or by a sign or symbol. Once the set-apart sacred has been produced and symbolically represented, it can be exchanged. This is how the set-apart sacred is located at points where it can be consumed in society. It is therefore clear that the production and exchange, the appropriation and consumption of the set-apart sacred are all relationships that have an intrinsic economic character.

Crucial to this process is the fact that while the set-apart sacred is produced collectively, it is invariably appropriated by elites and individuals, whether by force or by sleight of hand and these become the custodians of the symbolic property of a collective. The role of kings and priests in this regard cannot be over-emphasised. It is this social process of the privatization of communal property, in the first instance symbolic, but later physical, that arguably creates the institution of private property.

In order to better understand this economic character of the set-apart sacred, or rather the economic potential of the category, there is a need to consider the ways in which the set-apart sacred is manifested in society. One of the closest if often contradictory relationships is that of the religion and the economy. Religion and the economy are two spheres of social activity and of academic enquiry that have been in significant dialogue with one another. On the one hand, religion either exhorts the virtues of economic activity or it warns of the vices of economic activity, usually in terms of some notion of excess (Chidester 2005: 112). Economists have either viewed religion with a sense of skepticism or of opportunity. There are common themes in religion that deal with the power of religion to assist in acquiring material things. This is evident in so-called cargo cults (La Barre 1971; Lawrence 1964; Worsely 1957). It is also present in various brands of prosperity Christianity, where members of these churches are told that their relationship with God and Jesus Christ are the most important for their desired economic success (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 303).

This is not to argue that religion is a market (see, for example, Finke and Iannacone 1993) or that markets are religion (see Benjamin 1996; Foltz 2007; Loy 1997). These types of theories are plentiful and are significant. Rather, it is a perspective that argues that the very notion of economic activity is premised on a conception of value that has to be generated through the set-apart sacred.

What has been argued here is that the set-apart sacred has a genealogy that is of immense value. The set-apart sacred, as a category, enables an understanding of how society is organised and functions. The set-apart sacred functions in a manner analogous to language, in that the symbols and signs of the set-apart sacred, the

symbolic property of society, are generated through the rituals that hold society together, including those of sacrifice. The set-apart sacred presents itself as a narrative about society, whether in the form of myths, legends or dominant discourses, religion and ideology being examples of these. These discourses occur in the media of the oral, textual and technological, all means of communicating these set-apart ideas. The taboos and conventions that manifest themselves as magic, animism, fetishism or religion are ways of saying and doing things to get other things done. In the course of this doing, the surplus generated by society, both in symbolic and in material terms, is disposed of. It is these aspects of the set-apart sacred that allows for the development of a general political economy.

The set-apart sacred is therefore a material effect in society. Like language, the set-apart sacred has effect by being the material symbolic. Symbolic property has two aspects. It is both an object and a sign. To the extent that all things are signs, they have both a symbolic and a material effect. It is material property that has to be understood in this manner, since it exists in both realms. To that extent, Baudrillard is right in asserting that the ideological aspect of things, their symbolic aspect, is primary, but only if understood as simultaneously a physical, a psychological and a social category. This is manifested through human embodiment, that is, the corporeal and mortal nature of human existence, the psychological fragility and insecurity of humans and those relations that are simultaneously personal and social in nature (Bell 1992: 95).

Since the set-apart sacred is an economic category and since the dominant relationships in modern capitalism are all defined in monetary terms, it is crucial to

consider the relationship between the sacred and the most powerful analysis of political economy, historical materialism.

Chapter 3: Marxism and the Sacred

Religion, the sacred and the economy

Marx, Durkheim and Mauss all recognized the sacred nature of the economy and the economic nature of the sacred. Marx's work, primarily a critique of capitalism, but one that originated as a critique of religion, is littered with references to the sacred and religion. In *Capital Volume 1*, money is sacred, gold is a Holy Grail and commodities are deities (Marx 1976). In *The German Ideology*, man creates God in his own image (Marx and Engels 1970). In the famous quote in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, religion is described as "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opiate of the masses (Marx 1977: 131). William Clare Roberts in his *Marx in Hell: The Critique of Political Economy as Katabasis*, provides a rich analysis of the religious imagery that is scattered throughout Marx's works (Roberts 2005). Richard Comstock has provided a review of religion in Marxism, citing its ambiguous role in the critique of political economy (Comstock 1976).

Marxism's relationship to religion is complex. Not only is the Marxist critique of religion not clearly articulated in one place, it also often appears in Marxist literature in relation to concepts such as alienation, fetishisation, false consciousness and ideology. This makes clarification of the Marxist relationship to religion a difficult but nonetheless important task if the theory is to be strengthened and developed. In truth, Marxism or historical materialism is founded on a critique of religion that was

later developed and expanded to include a critique of the economy and of the form of democracy that accompanied capitalism, that is, bourgeois or liberal democracy.

Like Marx, Durkheim understood that economics alone was not the answer to the human condition. Durkheim however, unlike Marx who arguably dismissed religion as a distorted way of viewing the world, emphasized the fact that the relationship between economics and religion mattered (Durkheim 2001: 162). But it was his student and protégé, Marcel Mauss, who uncovered the economic aspects of the sacred and the sacred aspects of the economy. Observing the practices of exchange and of worship among Melanesian people, Mauss came to the conclusion that religion and economic exchange are significantly related to one another (Mauss 1969). This relationship was obviously at odds with perceived wisdom at the time, since the social sciences had created hard divisions between religion and economics, religion and politics and religion and science. Yet Mauss and other Durkheimians such as Robert Hertz demonstrated the inter-relatedness between these categories and significantly undermined the primacy of economics (Hertz 1960). But if that is accepted as the case, the dominant discourse of recent centuries has been that of the economic and certainly historical materialism has been a powerful force in that discourse. While many different religions have existed side by side, sometimes in peace and at other times in a state of war, there is one economic system that has come to dominate the world. It is that of capitalism.

The dominance and resilience of capitalism

Like religion and despite all of Marx's predictions, capitalism has endured and is arguably more pervasive, resilient and persistent than ever before. While slavery and feudalism exist, they are no longer the dominant systems of human exploitation and oppression. Capitalism in the form of the private ownership of property and the processes of the production, circulation, exchange and consumption of commodities has outlasted these systems and the various socialist experiments of the twentieth century. While Marxists and some other social scientists have usually taken the view that capitalism is a fairly modern development and has arisen as a result of the development of the economic systems from more rudimentary systems, there is a view that the exchange of goods and services is as old as human society itself (Graeber 2006). In this view, various modes of production, exchange and consumption have coexisted with each other in more or less dominant positions at various periods of time. In other words, these are not separate, successive systems that develop from one to another or within each other, but at various times the practices of slavery, of feudal relationships and arguably of other social and economic relationships, such as indentured labour, have existed alongside commodity production, exchange and consumption. The modern form of capitalism, the mass production of commodities, is unique, but earlier systems of the private production and exchange of goods and services were proto-capitalist, in that they involved production, exchange and consumption, albeit on a reduced scale.

The modern variant of capitalism is dysfunctional as a system. It does not and arguably cannot produce enough of the goods and services desired or even needed by humanity and as result of the shortages experienced, many go without the basics: food,

shelter, and clothing. Almost half of the world's population lives on less than US\$2.50 per day (Shah 2009). Capitalism is accompanied by inequality, poverty, underdevelopment, conflict and environmental degradation. Under capitalism, the vast majority of the world's wealth is owned and controlled by a tiny percentage of the population. The poorest 40 percent of the world's population accounts for only 5 percent of global income, while the richest 20 percent accounts for 75 percent of world income (Shah 2009). Capitalism is routinely denounced and criticised by workers, politicians and priests, yet it persists. Capitalism experiences periodic crises that cause wide spread unemployment, increased economic hardship and consistent uncertainty. The recent financial and economic crisis (as if these are two distinct and separate things) is only the latest of the many of these that have affected the increasingly global economy. In the last one hundred years there have been at least three, if not four, such crises (Krugman 2008).

Despite these recurring crises, capitalism is now arguably at the peak of its power globally and the once existing proposed alternative to capitalism in the form of 'really existing socialism' has all but disappeared, apart from existing in the form of undemocratic dictatorships of Communist Party and Workers Party elites in a few countries. Wikipedia lists only five communist or workers parties as ruling parties, out of a possible hundred or more that once held power or were dominant parties (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_communist_parties).

Arguably, the most powerful and one of the most widely accepted critiques of capitalism is that of Karl Marx, developed together with his comrade, friend and collaborator, Frederick Engels, and further elaborated by an illustrious list of activists,

scholars and intellectuals as a field of social enquiry. Marxism is one of the most significant collective efforts in academic history. Marxism, historical materialism and the study of political economy generally, as influenced by the theory of capitalist development proposed by Marx and his collaborators, is a powerful discourse, a social network, an institution and an academic field in its own right.

Despite this history, all the predictions of the immanent crisis and the impending collapse of capitalism, to be followed by the development of socialism and of communism, have yet to materialise. Capitalism, like religion, seems not only to survive all these predictions, but it has grown and arguably developed and even strengthened itself, in spite of the intermittent crises of the system.

In recent times, the critique of capitalism has taken on new forms. Globalisation has resulted in social movements that respond to this process and that have taken on a global dimension themselves. Despite this development and in spite of the recent global financial and economic crisis, no serious socialist, social democratic, anarchist or any other similar alternative has been put forward that has captured the imagination of the multitudes of poor, exploited and oppressed people of the world. Certainly, whatever they have experienced, it has not been enough to move them to change the system, despite the predictions that their number and the manifest weaknesses of the unipolar power of the United States of America, seen as the bastion of capitalism, would ensure this. This lack of revolutionary fervour on the part of the masses is in spite of today's incredible global communication capacity in the form of relatively inexpensive radio, television, mobile and fixed line telephony and the

internet and the manifest, vast disparities of income, wealth and lifestyle that exist between the wealthy and the poor.

The obvious question then arises: what possible value could a theory of society that has not proved itself to be true or efficacious have, even if purely for academic purposes? Despite this manifest failure of historical materialism, it has endured, periodically emerging as the more or less dominant discourse within the social sciences as well as politically. The methodology of Marxism, historical materialism, does provide an account of the world and of capitalist society in particular that seems to many people, intuitively at least, to be a true reflection of their lived reality. Marxism is constantly re-theorised, sometimes from within itself by new interpretations of Marx, Engels' and others work, or sometimes from without by the relationship between the discipline and other fields of social enquiry, such as structuralism or semio-linguistics. Historical materialism does need to be considered as an important entry point in to studying the capitalist system, since despite its manifest failures, it still commands respect and stature within the academy and in broader society. If there is one phenomenon that appears, superficially at least, similar to religious movements, it is that of the social movements, political parties and other organisations that persistently wait for and work towards the end of capitalism.

Historical materialism, religion and the sacred

Marxism and particularly the Marxist historical materialist method has been one of the most powerful intellectual and practical phenomena of the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries. It may still emerge as the same for the twenty-first century. Since the time of Marx's critique of capitalism, virtually the entirety of humanity has been engaged in debates, arguments and wars over whether his theory has validity or not.

Not unlike the world's great religions, Marxism has cut a swath through history, leaving a body count as high as any religion. Marx and Marxism have been read in many different ways, most often depending on the political interests or intentions of the interpreter, but even so, usually in terms of genuine debates about capitalism and the challenges that arise from the system. Historical materialism is considered as a potential answer to these challenges and aspects of society that continually dog human beings: exploitation, poverty, under-development and inequality, to mention a few of the most significant. These theories and the conclusions that can be drawn from them are also debated, seemingly without end.

Not least of all, Marx has been read in terms of the consequences of the application of Marxist theory for society. Traditionally, the view taken is that Marxism is a philosophy, an economic critique of society or a social critique grounded in economics and a theory of history (Lenin 1968: 23). This description comes in part from Marx and Engels' own claims in this regard, but also from scholars who have engaged in the critique of, the reinterpretation of, or a fundamental opposition to Marxism. Lenin, arguably one of the most erudite Marxist scholars, defined Marxism as "the system of Marx's views and teachings. Marx was the genius who continued and consummated the three main ideological currents of the nineteenth century, as represented by the three most advanced countries of mankind: classical German philosophy, classical English political economy, and French socialism combined with

French revolutionary doctrines in general” (Lenin 1974:21: 43-91). Lenin argued that the most significant content of Marxism was Marx’s economic doctrine. This economic bias is something that will be considered below, but the significance for Marxism of the critique Marx made of religion cannot be over-emphasised.

Marxism and religion have had what can at best be described as contradictory relationship. On the one hand Marx and Engels described religion as false consciousness, that is, as ideas that are not a true reflection of reality, generated by the productive relations under which people labour and are exploited and that are expressed in the social relationships that arise from these (Marx and Engels 1968: 619). On the other hand, they saw religion as an expression of the suffering of alienated humanity. The famous quote of religion as a pain reducing soporific is always assumed to cynically sum up Marx’s view on religion, describing Marx as being anti-religion. In fact, as can be convincingly argued, the meaning is quite the opposite. Opium, in Marx’s day, was a medicinal substance, known for its properties of relieving pain. Seen in this context, Marx’s metaphor for religion is a sympathetic one, identifying religion with real pain and only temporary relief.

While in his latter years Marx did not spend too much time directly theorising religion, it is clear from his and Engels’ many statements on religion that they held no truck with it in the final analysis, even if they regarded it as a significant phenomenon. Their view was that once capitalism had been destroyed, the conditions would be created for people to hold ideas about the world that reflected it as it really is. The veil of ignorance would be lifted, as it were, and religion would cease to exist.

There are myriad religious analogies and metaphors as well as references to religion in Marx's work. William Clare Roberts has cited many of these in an exposition of Marxism as a Katabasis, a descent into the underworld (Roberts 2005). Roberts points out the Judeo-Christian references of Marx and argues that he utilizes religion as a literary strategy, a way of figuring descending into the underworld of capitalism. Be that as it may, Marx drew on Jewish and Christian religious experiences and descriptions of life to give an impetus to what he had set out to do, criticise capitalism and propose an alternative.

Richard Comstock has described Marxism as having a quasi-religious status and the Utopian aspect of Marxism as a significant religious aspect of the theory (Comstock 1976: 327, 329). Comstock sets out very clearly and concisely the different ways in which religion appears in Marx's work. He describes Marx as treating religion as alienated consciousness in Feuerbach's sense of this concept, where humanity creates God in the image of itself and then reifies and fetishises this image (Comstock 1976: 330). Comstock argues that Marx also treats religion as an ideological consciousness that is based on the economic and political alienation humanity experiences under capitalism (Comstock 1976: 332). This explanation of Marx's view of religion is helpful in that it traces the historical development of the critique, locating it in the overall development of Marx's critique of capitalism. Comstock describes how the common structure of alienation is one in which religious alienation is the paradigm for alienation in general. Significantly, Comstock describes religion and social being in general as functioning as language does, giving meaning and enabling interpretations of social existence (Comstock 1976: 329).

This interpretation of Marxism is significant, as it points to the multi-layered and complex relationship between the two phenomena central to Marxism that Marx and Engels sought to unmask — a critique of the capitalist system and a critique of the system of ideas that help to sustain it. In that respect, religion was arguably understood by Marx to be a general problem of society not being scientifically understood, along with bourgeois ideological views, primitive science and magic and similar social phenomena. Considering the relationship between the sacred and Marxism is therefore critical to understanding the historical materialist methodology.

The set-apart sacred makes an appearance in Marxist discourse in a number of ways, but never as a direct field of enquiry or interest. James Luchte has pointed to the relationship Marx had with the sacred, particularly in his younger years (Luchte nd: 6). Luchte cites poetry and classical studies as places where Marx identifies the sacred as being significant. For the most part though, the sacred is identified in Marx's works as a descriptive category and by a process of interpretation. It is in concepts such as alienation, fetishisation and in relation to commodities and money that Marx refers directly to the sacred nature of certain things under capitalism. Marx also considers the problems of religion and capitalism in terms of the dehumanizing effect these have on the human subject, distorting the subject away from what he regarded as the species being of humanity — a thinking, working, and creative — animal (Raines 2002). The set-apart sacred as a category, however, has a lot to offer a historical materialist analysis of society, but before that is considered, the historical materialist methodology needs to be explored.

In understanding the power of this methodology, the key concepts Marx's developed need some further consideration, as do the roots or origins of Marx's methodology. As Lenin explained, Marx's theory was developed out of a number of strands of theory and practice that preceded or were contemporary with his efforts (Lenin 1974: Volume 21 43-91; Fine 1975: 13). Marx and Engels' own organizing activities in Germany, France and England were also important in shaping this theory. Each of these three strands needs some elaboration. It is instructive to note that this clinical division of Marx's theory and method is not borne out in the work of Marx himself. Arguably, the chronological development of Marx's work is a far better framework for understanding the complex nature of the relationship between his philosophical and economic theories and his vision of socialism. In this exercise, the critique of historical materialism will also be developed, revealing it to be less materialist and less radical than Marx claimed it to be.

Philosophy

Marx claimed his philosophical standpoint was truly materialist. He claimed all previous philosophy to be either idealist or crudely materialist. His materialism, developed as a critique of Feuerbach, another Hegelian, lifted the veil of ignorance Marx claimed had been created by idealist philosophers. In the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx explained that, "the main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism — that of Feuerbach included — is that the object, actuality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity,

practice, not subjectively“ (Marx and Engels 1968: 28). In attempting to differentiate his revolutionary philosophy from Feuerbach, Marx was grappling with a school of philosophy that has its roots in G.W. Hegel’s extensive and influential set of ideas. Feuerbach and other Hegelians had developed their views as a critique of their master. Hegel had set himself the task of bringing “philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title ‘love of knowing’ and be *actual* knowing” (Hegel 1977: 3).

In so doing, Hegel argued that the philosopher who would succeed in knowing would accept that such knowledge must be Science. He argued that this knowledge brings freedom in the only meaningful way, as the recognition of duty and as the recognition of self as Spirit (Hegel 1991: 17). Such recognition is achieved through the dialectic, the natural process that allows the truth to come to the fore through a process of resolving contradictions by recognizing them as part of the whole, that is, the positive and negative that make up the Subject (Hegel 1977: 40). What Spirit or self-consciousness is, when it realises itself, is the apprehension of God in the world.

In other words, for Hegel, all philosophy is essentially the process of trying to apprehend the true nature of existence and this is about ultimately realizing that what the development of the world is about is God’s will and our apprehending it and moving towards it (Hegel 1991: 50). In Hegel’s view, humanity lives its existence constructively when it recognises the essence of this existence as being the movement towards the realization of the world in the image of the divine. History therefore has a purpose, according to Hegel. Within this process, self-consciousness only recognises itself in relation to another self-consciousness. But this relationship is contradictory

for the dependence of self-consciousness generated by this relationship places it in subservience to that other (Hegel 1977: 138).

Hegel argued that Spirit, humanity's self-creative energy that is driven to become self-conscious, was the distinguishing feature of humanity (Hegel 1977: 297). Nature, according to Hegel, is self-objectified Spirit in the form of the successive societies that have dominated collective human experience (Hegel 1977: 210). Hegel viewed the process of becoming a self-conscious being or a community as the overcoming of the alienation of Spirit by the illusion of the objective world. In other words, making the world subjective as opposed to objective creates unity in the world between humanity and God, or Spirit, through its self-realisation (Hegel 1977: 216-217).

The influence of Hegel on Marx cannot be over-emphasised. Whatever Marx's critique of Hegel, it is clear that he accepted much of the framework of Hegelian thinking. It has been argued by Robert Fine that Hegel influences Marx so profoundly that the idealism of Hegel pervades Marx's thinking, ensuring that Hegel's dialectic and his theory of history live on in Marx's work (Fine 2001). This has significant implications for historical materialism, as will be shown below.

Developing his own critique of Hegel, Feuerbach described God as self-alienated humanity or self-consciousness, projected as a fantastic being (Marx, 1970: 122). This perspective reveals all philosophy to be essentially religion articulated as general thought, with humanity at its centre. In contrast to Feuerbach, Marx described religion as having been made by humanity and detached from its source. This begs the question of exactly how religion is created. That Marx saw humans as those beings

that can self-individuate themselves through their consciousness and realise their self through their labour, lies at the heart of political economy (Marx and Engels 1970: 42). The fact that humans as self-conscious entities can only experience themselves as physically set apart - from other people, from collectives or from inanimate entities - creates the psychological preconditions for alienation, fetishism and ultimately religion through the relationship with the set-apart sacred (Marx 1970: 47).

In his critique of Hegel and Feuerbach, we see many of the key concepts that Marx develops in their initial form: the development thesis of history moving towards an identifiable goal, the idea of freedom as being the recognition of necessity, the dialectic and struggle as the engines of development, alienation as the condition of humanity, science as the exemplar of knowledge and the notion that appearances of things often mask the actual essence of things. The opaque reality that is a feature of capitalist existence ensures that the truth eludes humanity. The task of the philosopher is therefore to reveal the true nature of things, but crucially, for Marx, this is done through a combination of scientific enquiry and political practice (Marx and Engels 1968: 30).

The Hegelians who attempted to build on their master's ideas were essentially divided into two tendencies, idealists and materialists. The idealists supported Hegel's ideas as they also sought to clarify them, recognizing the weaknesses in them, but essentially regarding the basic philosophy as adequate. Materialist Hegelians, on the other hand, accepted the basic premises of Hegel's philosophy — the world was developing towards an objective, there were ideas that formed the basis of the objectives of this movement — but they renounced the idea that this was based on

recognition of the divine or even that the divine was in existence in the world. Marx, as a Young Hegelian, fell into that radical camp of thinkers who recognised Hegel's contribution to philosophy. But Marx's criticism of Hegel and his followers was that they saw the world 'upside down', to use his metaphor. The world was not being made or fashioned in God's image by humanity. Humanity had imagined and "created" God in its own image. Even the materialist Hegelians, who criticized Hegel's idealism, were not spared Marx's razor sharp analysis and vitriolic attacks. Tackling Feuerbach, Marx stated that he "starts off from the fact of religious self-estrangement, of the duplication of the world into a religious, imaginary world, and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. He overlooks the fact that after completing this work, the chief thing still remains to be done. For the fact that the secular basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must itself be understood in its contradiction and then, by the removal of the contradiction, revolutionised" (Marx and Engels 1968: 29).

Therefore, instead of resolving the idealism of Hegel, Marx argued that Feuerbach in fact entrenched it by subsuming humanity in its definition as being the image that is projected of the divine being. Marx argues that, "Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations" (Marx and Engels 1968: 29). Marx's materialism is therefore one that seeks to identify all philosophy as grounded in the material world and not as Feuerbach does, in

religious thought. Rather, for Marx, it is religious thought that arises from material conditions in the world. Ideas, in Marx's view, are not abstract entities, but are a product of society and the social relations that make it up.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx went further, stating that in relation to German philosophy in general, of which he had been a scholar, proponent and a critic, "the critics [of Hegel] started from real religion and actual theology. What religious consciousness and a religious conception really meant was determined variously as they went along. Their advance consisted in subsuming the allegedly dominant metaphysical, political, juridical, moral and other conceptions under the class of religious or theological conceptions; and similarly in pronouncing political, juridical, moral consciousness as religious or theological, and the political, juridical, moral man — man in the last resort — as religious" (Marx and Engels 1970: 40). This philosophical subsuming of all aspects of the critique of society into the religious itself is the key weakness of idealism for Marx. It leads to a confusion of cause and effect and obscures the real nature of human relationships. Be that as it may, the fact that Marx dismissed this interpretation of society and privileged economics had other unintended consequences.

Marx and Engels proposed instead that in studying society, "the first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature". They went on say that "the writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men" (Marx and Engels 1970: 42). Leaving aside the

sexist view of the world that sees people as men, placing humans at the centre of the world and articulating the facts about the world that flow from this is the central aspect of Marx's materialism. In contrast to bourgeois philosophy, Marxism recognises that "definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into these definite social and political relations...the social structure and the State are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals, but of individuals, not as they may appear in their own or other people's imagination, but as they really are; i.e. as they operate, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will" (Marx and Engels 1970: 94). The human subject is therefore at the centre of Marx's view of the world. But it is a subject alienated and constrained by the unnatural nature of its relationships to people and to material and symbolic goods. This condition, one that necessarily objectifies and reifies relationships, people and objects, is one that sees the world predominantly determined by the relationships between things, rather than by the relationships between people.

This complex picture of society and how ideas are determined opens up the possibility that Marxism allows for the fact that even if ideas are determined within the parameters of prevailing material conditions, there does exist the space or opportunity for these ideas to be shaped by other things, as others have argued. Debray has cited human biology as under-theorized by Marx (Debray 1981). Lacan has argued that the psychological development of the individual is as significant as the socialization of the subject (Lacan 1977). Adorno has argued that mass culture, the development of which post-dated Marx's theoretical initiatives, has fundamentally

changed the nature of capitalism and democracy, making the characterization by Marx of humans as labouring subjects far too simplistic (Adorno 1991). But importantly, all aspects of society are grounded in the conditions in which people find themselves. Determinism is therefore central to Marx's philosophy and method. But it is not a crude determinism in which people do not have choices. Their choices are limited by the material conditions they find themselves in and the extent to which these conditions allow ideas to develop.

Marx and Engels identify the division of labour in society as one of the most significant features of human existence. This social institution shapes everything about society: relations of power, access to resources, food and shelter and even the dynamic between men and women. They state that, "there develops the division of labour, which was originally nothing but the division of labour in the sexual act, then that division of labour which develops spontaneously or naturally by virtue of natural predisposition (e.g. physical strength), needs, accidents, etc. etc. Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears. (The first form of ideologists, priests, is concurrent)" (Marx and Engels 1970: 43). This centrality of labour in Marxism — for the development of consciousness, for the character of human society and of the division of labour for the development of society — cannot be overstated. Marx argues that everything else arises from the base of economic activity in society and how this is shaped, in this case by the division of labour, and given the particular modes of production, the uniqueness of these modes and the relations of production that accompany them.

In Marx's view, it matters not what people think about the world as they see it. What is important is how the world actually is — its essence — as Hegel also puts it. Marx's theory is therefore one that develops through a critique of idealism, as exemplified in Hegel's philosophy of history. Moreover, Marx criticised even those followers of Hegel who called themselves materialists, arguing that they had not improved Hegel's philosophy. It is this critique of German philosophy and materialism in particular that lays the philosophical basis for Marx's revolutionary materialist conception of society. In grounding social theory in humanity's "species-being", the logic of the theory is inevitable. From this flows the primacy of conscious human effort, that is labour, but also aspects of that effort that appear to have a life of their own, such as production, trade, commerce and finance.

It has been argued that the German idealist and the bourgeois economic basis for Marx's thinking and the theories he developed was never quite shaken off by German economists generally, including Marx and subsequent Marxists (Kahn 1990: 247). The charge of idealism is therefore leveled at Marx, in that he accepted the duality inherent in the epistemologies of Kant and Hegel. This manifests itself in a number of ways in Marxist theory; whether by artificially separating material reality and ideas people have about it, in the base-superstructure metaphor, or in the revolutionary program that Marx sought to have implemented.

Economics

Marx grounded his economic theory in the work of the classical English economists, Malthus, Mill, Smith and Ricardo. Marx obviously valued the contributions of these and other bourgeois economists. In the *Grundrisse*, he states that “the economists of the seventeenth century... always begin with the living whole, with population, nation, state, several states, etc.; but they always conclude by discovering through analysis a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations such as division of labour, money, value, etc. As soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems, which ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market” (Marx 1973: 100).

This method of the classical economists that abstracts from this model and defines economic activity down to its essence is one that Marx approved of. This is significant as the basis of historical materialism is the same method. What is distinctive in what Marx proposes are different assumptions about the true nature of the economy, such as the primacy of labour. Even this principle is to be found in the analysis of the classical economists, but the emphasis that Marx puts on it is significantly different. In the preface to the German edition of *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Engels points out, “Insofar as modern socialism, no matter of what tendency, starts out from bourgeois political economy, it almost without exception takes up the Ricardian theory of value. The two propositions which Ricardo proclaimed in 1817 right at the beginning of his *Principles*,

- 1) that the value of any commodity is purely and solely determined by the quantity of

labour required for its production, and

2) that the product of the entire social labour is divided among the three classes: landowners (rent), capitalists (profit) and workers (wages)” (Marx and Engels 2005: 11).

In other words, Engels acknowledged that Marx and he had built on Ricardo’s theory of value. But Marx’s argument for the primacy and the exclusivity of labour as the source of value and the nature of the claim that capitalists make on the surplus generated by labour, rather than money or capital, is what makes all the difference. From this flows the labour theory of value and many other economic concepts Marx utilizes. Marx’s critique of these bourgeois economists, for instance in the *Grundrisse*, was that their conception of “the solitary and isolated hunter or fisherman, who serves Adam Smith and Ricardo as a starting point, is one of the unimaginative fantasies of eighteenth-century romances a la Robinson Crusoe” (Marx 1973: 83). This abstract but socially detached individual is not a good basis for studying society in Marx’s view. Instead of starting with real people, located in a particular historical context, these bourgeois economists create a straw man to explain why it is that workers in a capitalist system find themselves free, but are still exploited and as a consequence live in poverty. They dismiss the exploitation as being the consequence not of the system, but of the failure of the worker to work hard enough, to save money or to take advantage of the opportunities the system presents.

Marx stated further that in the case of the study of production by John Stuart Mill, “production, as distinct from distribution, etc., is to be presented as governed by eternal natural laws which are independent of history, and at the same time bourgeois

relations are clandestinely passed off as irrefutable natural laws of society *in abstracto*” (Marx 1973: 87). In contrast, Marx and Engels’ detailed and painstaking critique of the classical study of the capitalist economy, while applying the political and philosophical theory they developed, is a testimony to their partisan thoroughness and their unwillingness to countenance the study of political economy purely in the abstract, that is, outside of the framework of the division of labour, private property and the appropriation of surplus value.

Ben Fine argues that Marxism is a method of abstraction and approximation. It is therefore not purely theoretical, because it grounds its arguments in an interpretation of reality and it seeks to build improved explanations based on the essential aspects of society (Fine 1975: 13). In other words, the difference is that while Marx and Engels valued the detail of the classical economists and built on this, they did not agree with their particular interpretation of “scientific” as applied to economics. Instead, the scientific nature of economics was to be found in the laws that Marx claimed to have developed. This debate continues today, with bourgeois economics as a subject that stands alone and political economy as its radical alternative.

The laws of Marxism, for want of a better description, are to be found scattered throughout Marx and Engels’ work. Insofar as the economy goes, these are fairly simple and straightforward in terms of articulation. The creation of value through the surplus produced by workers and appropriated by capitalists, the role of money, the relationship of time, productivity and the rate of profit, the division of labour and the general law of capitalist accumulation are all articulated by Marx as laws of capitalism (Marx 1976). At the centre of Marx’s critique is the role of money as a specific

commodity form. He describes how the relationship between the economy and political and social power is concentrated in the form of commodities and in particular in the commodity form of money (Marx 1976: 162, 247).

Marx's theory therefore locates the economy in the political sphere. The reductionist tendency in the Marx's materialist methodology is often glossed over by classical and even critical Marxists. In defining the economy, the actual practical activities of economic agents must be distinguished from the interpretation of these agents of their own and other people's wishes, desires and actions and the actual consequences of these. An example may help to clarify this point. A worker manufactures a component for a machine. In completing this act of labour, there can be many levels to the conscious activity the worker is engaged in and even of those who are observers or have some relationship to this act. At one level, the activity is an economic one. It creates value that can be exchanged for something else. It therefore defines the relationship between the worker and the capitalist in that enterprise. At another level, the act may be political, for instance if the component is used for a machine that will be mobilized for national interests in warfare. Overall, labour is always a social act. This issue will be deliberated upon below, because it is clear that Marx's own 'one dimensional man' (sic), *homo economicus*, is to some degree a *Robinsonade* itself. Along with the critique of Marx's economic theory as productivist, essentialist and universalist, this is a heavy charge sheet for the theory to bear.

The economistic nature of Marxism is also articulated in this manner, since the premises Marx accepts are those of Adam Smith, David Ricardo and John Stuart Mill, liberals and capitalists to a man. Marx can also be charged with reductionism and

essentialism for reducing all phenomena down to some or other defining essence, be it the economic nature of societal relations or class struggle as the motor of history.

Socialism

Marx and Engels spent time in Paris that was a crucial experience for the development of their thinking. There the French socialists influenced them and vice versa. Their critique of French materialism in *The Holy Family*, was that while it was an advance on the metaphysics of the seventeenth century, it did not go far enough (Marx and Engels 1956). In *Socialism, Scientific and Utopian*, they argue that “a Communism, ascetic, denouncing all the pleasures of life, Spartan, was the first form of the new teaching. Then came the three great Utopians: Saint-Simon, to whom the middle-class movement, side by side with the proletarian, still had a certain significance; Fourier; and Owen, who in the country where capitalist production was most developed, and under the influence of the antagonisms begotten of this, worked out his proposals for the removal of class distinction systematically and in direct relation to French materialism. One thing is common to all three. Not one of them appears as a representative of the interests of that proletariat which historical development had, in the meantime, produced. Like the French philosophers, they do not claim to emancipate a particular class to begin with, but all humanity at once” (Marx and Engels 1968: 396).

In other words, Marx and Engels were concerned with a project that sought to devise a vision of socialism, but crucially, they were also concerned with ensuring that

this vision could be practically implemented. Here we see Marx and Engels' criticism of those socialists, communists and anarchists who identified the need for change in society, but in their view did not provide the clarity of vision or the political theory to effect the transformation of society. Their characterisation of this form of thinking as utopian is deliberate. In Marx and Engels' view, socialism can never be achieved if it is not led and directed by the proletariat and its political formations. Socialism is developed through the proletariat wielding its power, as it needs to in any circumstances, to ensure the dictatorship of this class over the rest of society.

This is another key aspect of Marx's theory that has been subjected to criticism. Not only is it not clear that the working class, or any other class, can through their efforts bring about socialism. It is not even clear that the conception of what socialism is realistic or even a probability. This is not due to there being anything wrong with the desire for socialism, but rather with the analysis of how it will function as a system and how transformation will take place from capitalism to socialism. As much as Marx criticized the French and English socialists for being utopian, it is arguable that historical materialism may well analyse the faults, weaknesses and problems of capitalism, but its own suggested remedies for these are utopian at best and just plain inadequate at the worst.

What the French socialists did help to clarify with Marx and Engels was the strategic political objective of socialism. The argument that philosophy had to be materialist and that a critique of capitalist society must be grounded in the economy are important. But without a vision of what or how to build on this critique and without a vision of progressive transformation, Marx's methodology would be a

largely academic enterprise. The fact that Marx welded onto his critique a revolutionary program cannot be over-emphasised. It is the idea that there is a socialist future that can be realised through a revolutionary program that has mobilised millions of people in the last 100 years of history. It has also resulted in untold heroism, progress and sacrifice, as well as untold tragedy, the loss of millions of lives and a questionable legacy of any achievement of capitalist transformation.

It is important to consider the key concepts Marx advanced in his theory of society and how to transform it and to gauge their correctness and what the weaknesses may be that have led to the many socialist failures. With respect to the future being inevitably socialist, Marx has been accused of making a teleological argument. In that Marxism is said to be true for all societies and under all conditions, he is charged with universalism and utopianism. These weaknesses in the theory lay the basis for a thoroughgoing critique of the theory.

Historical materialism and its critique

The most concise explanation of Marx's historical materialist methodology can be found in the *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Here Marx states that he "examine(s) the system of bourgeois economy in the following order: *capital, landed property, wage-labour; the State, foreign trade, world market*" (Marx 1976: 1). This sets the agenda for his approach in studying capitalism, the object of his attention. This approach is significant because the order is not arbitrary. He goes on to explain that "in the social production of their existence, men inevitably

enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or — this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms — with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure” (Marx 1976: 3-4).

This is the simplest and clearest outlining of the historical materialist methodology by Marx, hence the lengthy quote. The relationships between the components of the methodology are clearly explained here. Capital, appropriated by capitalists but reproduced by labour, with the attendant systems of management, is the foundation of a system that therefore puts workers into a particular alienated relationship with capital. The product of their own labour, capital is therefore central to the character of the economic base, upon which arises the articulation of these relationships in a system of ideas that becomes entrenched as the only conceivable

way to do things. He continues by emphasizing that there is a difference between the actual material experiences, events and occurrences that humans experience and the manner in which they conceptualise these and articulate them. He argues that “in studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out” (Marx 1976: 4).

Since these experiences and the ideas people have about them differ, there is a lot of room for debate and disagreement, for the exercising of power and even violence, and for the course of history to be anything but linear. This distinction between the material economic base of society and the ideal superstructure is at the core of historical materialism. Apart from the simplicity of the summary in *The Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, it is this division of the world into two distinct spheres that has been challenged by many critics of Marx. The issues are complex: if there is a base and superstructure, what is the relationship, and how does the one generate, sustain and direct the other?

The famous passage that sets out Marx’s own view of his methodology of studying bourgeois economy importantly states that his critique of Hegel, whose philosophy was grounded in a particular religious worldview, dispenses with the notion of civil society by subjecting it to a critique of the political economy of society (Marx 1970: 19-23). In this regard, Marx raises a number of questions about the theory that underpins such a worldview.

In describing his methodology, Marx presents the social relations that people enter into as being on an involuntary basis, even though they are said to be by free association. These social relations he claimed are grounded in and determined by the productive forces that correspond to a particular mode of economic production. The social consciousness that corresponds to this set of productive forces and social relations is expressed in particular religious, political and legal terms. The distinction between the economic basis and the ideological expression of these productive forces and social relations is central to Marxist theory (Marx 1970: 20-21). The consequences of this theory include the fact that relations of production lag behind the productive forces and this creates the conditions and possibility for revolutionary change.

In truth, this simplistic explanation of the world as being moved by forces, pulled by history, inevitably developing to greater heights, simply cannot be sustained. Apart from the fact that these descriptions are metaphorical, all the evidence points to the fact that the world does not develop evenly, linearly or that there is any inevitability to the emergence of socialism or communism. The production relations may well fetter the productive forces, but this is not always the case and even when they do, the outcome is not necessarily social revolution.

It is quite conceivable that even though social relations are involuntary, their origins are not economic. The institution of patriarchy and the gender oppression of women is a good example of a relationship that is based on sexual differences being highlighted and exploited, comes to have economic consequences and not the other way around.

In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels state that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx and Engels 1968: 35). The simplification of the class struggle, between these two opposing camps of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, is where Marx and Engels argued society was headed (Marx and Engels 1968: 36).

Marx and Engels saw the development of capitalism bringing with it the clarification of the class struggle. In their view, the two contending classes, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, would face off against one another with an inevitable result, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the consequent transition to socialism (Marx and Engels 1968: 44). In reality, the class struggle has become more complex and class fragmentation has increased. This notion of a definite movement towards a showdown between the two contending classes is echoed in passages where Marx describes the inevitability of social transformation (Marx and Engels 1968: 40). Even without this clearly reductionist theoretical explanation, Marx’s *oeuvre* allows for many different interpretations and it is arguable that the many interpretations of Marx’s conception of history that survive today are all wrong in as many respects as they are correct. These differences turn on the various views Marxists hold on philosophy, economics and socialism itself.

In *History & Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács describes orthodox Marxism as a method that “does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx’s investigations. It is not the ‘belief’ in this or that thesis, or the exegesis of a ‘sacred’ book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*. It is the scientific conviction that dialectical materialism is the road to truth and that its methods can be

developed, expanded and deepened only along the lines laid down by its founders. It is the conviction, moreover, that all attempts to surpass or ‘improve’ it have led and must lead to over-simplification, triviality and eclecticism” (Lukács 1919:1).

The claim that Marxism cannot be developed and that there is no room for revisionism is surely wrong. As Régis Debray has put it, the metaphors Marx used are in themselves cause for concern, as they are outdated and cannot have predicted changes in technology and physics that the world has witnessed (Debray 1981: 104). This simply means that the way in which Marx saw the world was as he could at the time he lived. The world has developed, as has capitalism, and what was once regarded as appropriate knowledge is now limited. Be that as it may, if method is the key to historical materialism, then clarifying concepts must be the starting point. Without clarified concepts, many of the arguments that take place in the literature that is a significant industry of Marxism can go on forever.

Within this methodology, the key concepts describing material processes Marx and Engels identified are the following: commodities, money, capital, labour, the division of labour, scarcity, production, exchange and consumption. The point about these concepts is that their order is not insignificant. If the economy is studied starting from the perspective that production is more significant than exchange in determining the social relations in society, then the theory developed will make certain assumptions that will influence the thesis developed. For instance, because Mauss has identified exchange as the basis for social relations, he comes to a different conclusion than Marx does about the way the economy functions. That together with the brand of

materialism Marx developed, arguably not that materialist at all, means that the view Marx had of the way the economy functioned may well not be a correct.

However, it is difficult to imagine that labour is not prior to exchange. If labour is regarded as a socialized activity, then the benefits of exchange may well be more equitably distributed in a society. Perhaps Marx was right to argue that the production of commodities is the foundation of modern capitalism, but it can be argued that it is a foundation built on prior relationships of exchange and the use of money.

There are also concepts that relate to the form in which these material processes and activities are experienced and articulated. Among these are value, ideology, fetishism, alienation. These concepts, developed in the early stages of Marx's career have tended to be regarded as allegorical by some or as concepts that are heuristic devices rather than real, material processes. A re-reading of Marx that places alienation, objectification and fetishism as the real human condition, with the set-apart sacred as the medium through which humans order and interpret the world, allows for a material description of the world in its totality — economic and political, ideological and religious — and thereby ensures that the way in which society is considered does not end up in an exercise of crude reductionism. All of these aspects of humankind's existence make up the social relations of a political economy of the sacred.

There are other important concepts utilised by Marx and Engels, such as credit, time, class, the state and civil society that cannot be considered here, simply because the scope of this effort is focused on the set-apart sacred and its relation to historical

materialism. But these key concepts are significant as they all stand in relation to the set-apart sacred. By way of an example, the issue of time can illustrate this point. In Marx's theory, time relates to the rate of profit and the creation of the surplus that is appropriated by the capitalist (Marx 1976: 333, 340, 683). Antonio Negri has argued that time does not simply perform the function of allowing labour to be measured. Importantly, he argues that time acts to homogenize labour, making it possible for social labour to be subsumed in to capital (Negri 2003: 23, 51). By marking out activities using a socially constructed measure, time therefore facilitates this coercive process, enabling the actual appropriation of value through a symbolic activity. With origins in monastic prayer and evangelical piety, this time-discipline is clearly a symbolic activity with material effects in the political economy of the sacred (Landes 2000; Thompson 1967).

Marx attacked bourgeois social science because he believed it to be inadequate in a number of respects. Together with Frederick Engels, he developed a critique of the social sciences that precedes his general theory of capitalism. This critique highlighted the deficiencies of the social sciences as practiced by the economists and philosophers of the day. Central to this critique was a view of what they regarded as the first forms of ideology in society: magic, fetishism and religion (Marx and Engels 1968: 618).

Religion, Marx argued, is humanity's genuine but limited attempt at offering a theoretical explanation for the world in which humans exist (Marx and Engels 1970: 42, 51). In Marx's perspective, such a worldview is under-developed compared to a scientific one, for the simple reason that theory is a product of the consciousness of

humans who are as developed as the society they exist within (Marx and Engels 1970: 43). In early or under-developed society, people rely on magic, animism, fetishism and other forms of rudimentary science to describe the world and their conditions. Certainly, what Debray has described as humanity's "fragility, mortality and uncertainty", has prompted attempts at explaining the world with a view to predicting and controlling future events (Debray 1981: 276). Marx placed these different attempts at explanation, prediction and control in a hierarchy, with secular, bourgeois ideology at the apex and scientific socialist theory as the logical improvement on that.

In Marx's view, these ideas that seek to explain and manipulate the world, with particular attention to how society functions, are always presented with a spin or bias that seeks to legitimate the current order of things in society. In earlier or less developed society, priests and kings were usually one and the same thing and the gods were deemed to have placed them in the position they occupied (Marx and Engels 1970: 44). Marx and Engels argue that, as society develops, from primitive communalism, to feudalism and then to capitalism, the understanding humankind has of the world becomes richer, more sophisticated and more scientific (Marx and Engels 1970: 47). But this does not change the fact that ideology and all social theory is biased to represent the interests of the ruling class in a particular society. Thus the warrior-kings in primitive society, the nobility in feudalism and the bourgeoisie in capitalism are deemed by themselves as pre-ordained to rule.

As Marx put it in *The German Ideology*, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class that has the means of material

production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance” (Marx and Engels 1970: 64).

Of course, Marx then went on to claim that what distinguished his methodology was that he presented a perspective in the interest of the working class, who would inevitably become the ruling class under socialism, which he predicted would follow capitalism as surely as night follows day (Marx and Engels 1968: 46). Under communism, which Marx argued would just as certainly follow, class would cease to exist as a social phenomenon and all of humanity would be equal. The egalitarian formula, often wrongly attributed to Marx himself (it was a statement made by another socialist, Louis Blanc), nevertheless sums up a vision of harmonious social exchange: ‘From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs’ (Marx 1875). The revolutionary materialist basis of Marx’s theory was a decisive shift from previous idealist and materialist philosophies. This development of Marx’s thought is significant as an end in itself. That Marx studied Hegel, Fichte and Schiller, idealist but substantial intellectuals, and developed theory as a critique of these thinkers, laid the basis for a decisive shift in materialism that literally changed the world (Marx and Engels 1970: 39). However, there are questions about the historical materialist method and Marxism generally that require further consideration.

To be effective, a critique of political economy must include an explanation of all value in the economy. It must explain use-values, exchange-values and all other values, in all forms, material and symbolic as commodities and as money in particular. In other words, it must deal not only with the phenomenon of commodities and their production, but also with the circulation of value (Fine 1975: 16). Traditionally, Marxism, as well as bourgeois economics, has considered commodities, capital and money in a narrow, exclusively economic sense, focusing on those commodities that are usually bought and sold to ensure our reproduction, such as food, accommodation and tools, to name the most obvious. In reality, commodities consist of all natural objects that are manipulated by people, including collected and manufactured objects, in so far as these are deemed to be significant, to be property and to be available for exchange.

Political economy is therefore about significant objects, in the material form as well as in the symbolic. In the world of objects there are those things we find, things we make, those that we keep, those we give away, things we exchange or sell and also things we steal. There are even things we ignore that are potential commodities. There is also the issue of the significant characteristic of modern society, where increasingly some commodities take on a wholly intellectual form, or are a service that is provided.

These material objects and intellectual properties and provided services, Marx and Engels argue, become commodities by the time and effort that is spent on them, that is, through the labour expended in their production (Marx and Engels 1968: 64-93). Commodities are created by conscious human intent and are recognised by conscious human agreement. The secret Marx claimed to have revealed with respect to

capitalism was that all value was created by labour, but that under capitalist conditions this fact was masked by the apparent role of private capital as being the creator of value (Marx 1976: 747). This sleight-of-hand, as it were, is made possible by the fact that social labour, that is, the cooperation necessary to make production possible, is privatised by the organisation of the productive process and by the private ownership of property under capitalism.

Under capitalism, the development of the division of labour, the use of money, a unique commodity, both in terms of precious commodities and later paper money, as well as private ownership or title, make for conditions that ensure that social labour becomes privatised labour (Marx 1979: 44). This feature of the capitalist system ensures that what was previously extorted by sheer physical force from those whose labour is utilised to create value, either through slavery or through indentured labour, is given 'voluntarily' under capitalism through the contract between the worker, who sells his or her labour power to the capitalist who buys it. This contract enables the capitalist to organise production in such a manner that the difference between the absolute surplus value a worker creates, measured by the length of the day worked and the relative surplus value created, measured by the productivity of the worker, is such that he can appropriate the difference (Marx 1979: 33).

While individual or private labour seems to be the form in which labour power is manifested in society, in reality, without cooperation between those involved in various moments of the productive process, nothing much would be produced. Labour is therefore a social activity, in which the community, at various levels, local, national and increasingly globally, is involved. Value is therefore derived not from private acts

of labour, but from the socially necessary quantities of abstract labour required for the capitalist system to function (Marx 1979: 44). How this value is manifested in capitalist society is in the form of commodities.

Rethinking historical materialism

Marx has been accused of over simplifying the nature of capitalism, the possibilities for the development of socialism from capitalism and of both being simultaneously historicist and ahistorical. The debate that has taken place within and about Marxism has followed a few parallel trajectories, so it is not easy to put the critique of Marxism into a conceptual or a chronological order. Following Marx's death and the demise of the First International, debates about political and economic developments in Western Europe took on a particular character with impending revolutions and the First World War dominating the discourse. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the subsequent formation of the Second International shaped the debate between those described as revolutionaries on the one hand and reformists on the other. Exchanges between Lenin and Kautsky and Lenin and Bernstein, for example, saw the labeling of these critics of the Bolshevik Revolution as reformists, apparently a heinous crime.

After the death of Lenin, the period of the Stalinisation of the USSR, coinciding with the Second International, saw Marxism atrophy into a stagnant metaphysics. The subsequent developments of the Second World War, the struggle against Fascism and the Cold War saw orthodox Marxism and so-called Western

Marxism going their separate ways. In the period of anti-colonial struggles, Marxism assumed different forms or had different emphases, depending on the context within which it was being applied. In Europe after the Second World War, largely because of the experiences of mass Fascism and the working class colluding with those who perpetrated genocide, the Frankfurt School and the critical theorists radically revised Marxism. Their perspective infused the study of mass culture, communications and subjectivity in Marxism. The Frankfurt School also focused on the changes in the productive processes of capitalism as well as the effects of technology on the capitalist system.

In recent history Marxism has been engaged with and by feminism, queer theory, Black consciousness, structuralism, post-structuralism and post-modernism, to mention a few of the most important influences on the theory. This dialogue has seen Marxism critically developed as well as being simultaneously undermined. That anyone could think that Marxism should remain in some orthodox canonical form, given the developments of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries is hard to fathom, though some 'revolutionaries' hold dear to this notion. These developments will not all be dealt with in detail here as part of the debate about Marx and the set-apart sacred incorporates aspects of this critique. But in so far as these criticisms have a bearing on concepts deemed crucial to the set-apart sacred, these need to be highlighted. As has been pointed out, these concepts, critical to the historical materialist method, are not without their problems. Some of the more telling of the criticisms of these concepts will be considered. Ultimately, historical materialism must

be rescued from the weaknesses identified within it if it is going to be a useful methodology for studying society in general and the set-apart sacred in particular.

The main criticisms of historical materialism are set out below. It should be understood that given the development of historical materialism, there is no one version of the methodology. Part of the effect of the critique has been to continually interpret and re-theorise the methodology. There are however the basic ideas and concepts as outlined above that are common to almost all versions of the methodology. It is also important to note that these criticisms come from different angles or paradigms. The liberal critique of Marxism in general seeks to rubbish it and portray it as having absolutely no validity whatsoever (Popper 1971). The classical or orthodox Marxist critique seeks to refine and strengthen the basic concepts and ideas to keep the methodology intact as is (Cohen 2001). The critical theorists range across the spectrum from those who are prepared to keep certain aspects of the methodology, although they seek to refine these. The more radical theorists are happy to leave nothing but a few loose concepts and to seek to re-theorise Marxism in general (Baudrillard 1971, Foucault 2004).

The most often cited criticism of historical materialism is that it is reductionist. In this regard, it is said to be crude in that its arguments reduce the explanation of some or other aspect of capitalism down to a basic phenomenon, for example, the claim that everything in society is explained in the final analysis by economics (McLennan 1996: 55). Reducing all there is to say about society to the abstract level of its component parts, for example the economic, or to the significance of class,

discounts important aspects of society and humanity, be they biological, psychological or cultural.

Marxism is also accused of being functionalist, for example, in the manner in which ideology is said to exclusively operate in relation to class interest (McLennan 1996: 61). This type of functionalism does not allow for the fact that there may be effects of the resistance to bourgeois ideology, for instance, or as Foucault has argued that power might not operate in such a linear manner (Foucault 1977). In reality, the ruling class does not always dominate ideology, although it is clear that these interests in very powerful ways influence the ideas that prevail. The discourse on economics is but one example, where ideas that run counter to orthodox neo-liberalism are marginalized in development economics (Stiglitz 2002).

Historical materialism is said to be essentialist in that it characterizes structures and relationships as having a set of characteristics that is determinant of their nature (McLennan 1996: 65). It is regarded as seeking to explain the system as a structured whole within which the needs of the system are catered to. It continually seeks to find singular, significant features to which the very identity of something is bound while characterizing the entity or process in question as having some other, less significant features without which the thing in question would not retain its identity. So, for example, the modes of production - capitalism, feudalism and Asiatic - are described as having some feature of their existence without which they would not be characterized the way they are. Capitalism is essentially a system of commodity production and exchange, feudalism of a system of production by indentured labourers who surrender a proportion to their landlord and the Asiatic mode of production a

system of despotic elites preying on unfortunate villagers. But this essentialism does not take in to account that these modes of production may coexist, that features of them may cross over from one to another and that development may not be along a straight path from one to another mode. Africa, as a continent, has experienced the effects of colonialism and imperialism, for example that have arguably reduced significant parts of the continent from benign feudal systems to despotic authoritarian ones. Zimbabwe is a good example of a country that continues to limp from bad to worse in terms of GDP, life expectancy or any other measure that is chosen to record development.

Marxism is also charged with being universalist, that is, as being either true for all possible worlds or true regardless of what the subjects in the system believe (McLennan 1996: 69). The charge of universalism is an interesting if somewhat obtuse criticism, but it demonstrates the complexity of the debates within Marxism about the methodology of historical materialism. It is impossible to verify many of the claims Marxism makes, so such a feature as universalism, if it is true, is one that will only be dealt with through the passage of time.

Historical materialism is also criticised for being deterministic, historicist, teleological and guilty of naïve realism (Callinicos 1989). These criticisms Callinicos responds to by arguing that while Marxism may display some of these features in various parts of the theoretical works of Marx and Engels, the core of the methodology can be rescued and functions as a powerful analytical tool.

Some have criticised historical materialism for being idealist itself or not materialist enough (Debray 1981). This criticism, dealt with above, argues that the

philosophical legacy of Kant and Hegel weighs heavily on Marx's theory. The bourgeois economics of Smith and Ricardo also created terms for the theory that were carried as a legacy into Marxism and historical materialism.

Marxism is accused of being productivist, that is, of privileging production as the driver of society (Baudrillard 1981). Of all the criticisms of historical materialism, this one is arguably the most significant. Baudrillard's critique of Marx is located in a number of his works, but it is primarily in *The Mirror of Production* that he makes the case against productivism and challenges the centrality of labour. This critique, like that of Mauss', places labour and production in a different relationship to capital, commodities and money, undermining the claim that value is only generated in society through labour and the production process.

Determinism is the claim that given the social structure, in this case of capitalism and the possible outcomes of the structure, whatever happens within it and whatever decisions subjects make, the outcome that occurs is necessarily the only one that could happen. In other words, whatever choices subjects make they cannot alter the outcomes of the system. In this view, regardless of any decisions by actors, the inevitability of the outcomes of the capitalist system are determined by its structure.

Historicism, similar to determinism, is the claim that events as they occur are uniquely and solely due to those that preceded them, giving a causal impetus to how the future is determined. In such a view, society has developed to where it is because of the way the past has shaped the present and that this was necessarily the case. Similarly, the charge of historical materialism being teleological is that it is said to be

necessarily moving towards a particular goal: capitalism to socialism, socialism to communism.

The consequences of these types of criticisms for the methodology are that they challenge the basic foundation of the theory. The fact that a theory exists at all may necessarily demand some form of reductionism, functionalism, essentialism and historicism. It is not necessarily the case that determinism, realism and teleological arguments are as important, but cumulatively, these charges amount to a powerful case against Marxism and the historical materialist methodology. It is in the application of these criticisms to the key theses of historical materialism that they can be tested.

Perhaps the most powerful attempt to salvage historical materialism from these charges is that of G.A. Cohen. For instance, in relation to what he terms as the Development Thesis; the idea that the productive forces “select” relations of production that they favour and that ideological and political relations fluctuate or vary as they strengthen or weaken the potential for development of production relations, Cohen argues that Marx’s theory is true, since there are very few cases where weaker productive forces replace stronger ones (Cohen 1978: 150). Callinicos also points out that not only is this not borne out in practice, but also that even if there is a correlation between these, it is not clear which precedes the other. It is therefore anthropomorphic to argue such a view as the productive forces make some more or less conscious choices. What is clear though is that there is a relationship between the productive forces and the relations of production. If that was not the case, relations of production would be the same across different modes of production and there is no evidence of this. The relations of production may lag, but the process of the

development of the productive forces determines the relations of production in the final analysis, and those that become superfluous wither away (Callinicos 1985: 55). This does not have to occur successively. There can be remnants of previous or no longer dominant modes of production that are nested within the dominant mode of production.

What Cohen describes as the Primacy Thesis holds that the character of production relations in society is explained by the stage of development of the productive forces (Cohen 1978: 150). This Cohen argues is also borne out in practice. Once again, Callinicos argues that even if the stage of development does explain in this functionalist sense why production relations have the character they do, it is not an explanation that requires some leap of faith, but more a general hypothesis that without a particular stage of development, for example, the development of machinery, certain production relations would not have the form they do (Callinicos 1985: 56-57).

Cohen developed a number of other theses to address the challenges to historical materialism, dealing with the compatibility of the level of development of the productive forces with a limited scope of productive forces, a contradiction in which the productive forces have matured to a level where they are no longer compatible with the relations of production, transformation, optimalism and capacity (Cohen 1978). Cohen also challenged the criticism of reductionism by arguing that all theory requires reductionism in some form. A similar point has also been argued by McLennan (McLennan 1996).

The point about these theses is that they address one level of general criticism against historical materialism. These criticisms are significant, but they have largely been answered in the course of debates about the veracity of Marxism. Of far more significance are the criticisms that emerge from the critical theorists, firstly from the so-called Frankfurt School and later from the French critical tradition. These criticisms tend to focus on the changing nature of capitalism and the development of liberal democracy. These have had the effect of blunting the Marxist critique of capitalism and of authoritarian bourgeois class rule.

Through the Frankfurt School, the Freudian unconscious found its way into a dialogue with Marxism, as did Kant's categorical imperative. The individual subject that had replaced the working class for these critical theorists, was finally abandoned to a general theory of communication, influenced by the simultaneous developments of mass culture and consumerism (Marcuse 1964). The extent of these criticisms was to eventually abandon Marxism in any orthodox meaning of the term. The advantage this critique brought was a re-conceptualisation of many aspects of historical materialist thinking whether in terms of abandoning the metaphysics of Stalinist orthodoxy or in terms of re-theorising concepts such as labour, culture, production, exchange and consumption.

This tradition influenced Western Marxism generally, of which it was itself an integral part. Building on Lukács' development of alienation and reification in capitalism, this influential critical Marxist tradition has emphasised a number of weaknesses and shortcomings of historical materialism, particularly in that aspect dealing with the exchange and the consumption of commodities.

From a more orthodox Marxist perspective, Gramsci criticised the economic determinism and the philosophical materialism of Marxism-Leninism, while retaining a strident historicism married with a nuanced conception of power, the role of the political party, the state and civil society (Gramsci 1988: 189-193). This led to a conception of cultural hegemony as being a key determining feature of class based societies, placing the onus on the working class to create their own unique brand of cultural hegemony to lead society.

Other theorists in this tradition such as Althusser emphasised the unique nature of historical materialism as a definitive epistemological break that established a new science (Althusser 1965). This view did away with the subject-object distinction of classical Marxism, instead focusing on knowledge as production and the creation of a material sphere of existence for humanity under what he describes as the Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser 1975). It has to be said that Althusser's agenda was somewhat different from the critical theorists in that he sought to reassert the primacy of orthodox Marxism.

More recent and radical Western Marxists have challenged Postmodernity, emphasizing the role of culture in the reproduction of capitalism (Jameson 1996). Even more recently, Marxists such as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have revitalized historical materialism by re-theorising the critique of capitalism and neo-liberalism, the phenomenon of globalization and the response of the masses to these phenomena. Negri and Hardt have famously characterized the decline of late capitalism and its centers of power as the end of imperialism and the rise of Empire. Within this process the role of the multitude, the proletarianised mass of humanity, as

the primary motive force of history is argued for, moving away from Marx's productivism and even those critics who have argued for consumerism or the embodiment of power in social process (Negri and Hardt 2000, 2004).

Within this discourse a more radical post-Marxist tradition of critical theorists has also developed and been prolific in terms of published output. These Marxists, semio-linguists, structuralists and post-structuralists have built on the work of anthropologists, sociologists and literary theorists in the main, radically re-theorising Marxism. Two of these scholars have posed serious criticisms of Marxism that need consideration.

Pierre Bourdieu has expanded the definition of capital to include cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 2005). This critique has the effect of reducing the significance of Marxism's exclusive economic or financial conception of capital. Bourdieu has also effectively theorised symbolic systems and built on the work of Weber, Durkheim, Mauss and Levi-Strauss in developing a conception of society that focuses on the reproduction of symbolic system as the basic social activity of humans. He has also effectively critiqued the notion of class and class struggle as inevitable and effectively demonstrated that there is a "political economy of religion" (Bourdieu 1977:183; see Swartz 1996; Urban 2001).

Jean Baudrillard has also criticised Marxism along similar, radical lines. Building on Lukács focus on commodities as the central characteristic and challenge of capitalism, Baudrillard has posited consumption as a form of labour (Baudrillard 1975: 44; 1996: 217). In doing so he develops the critique of political economy in to a critique of the political economy of the sign. This is built on a radical critique of

Marxism at a number of levels. Baudrillard argues that the entire Marxist project creates the human subject as a labouring subject, locked into the logic of capitalism (Baudrillard 1975: 19). He instead proposes a “generalized political economy” that recognises the significance of language and culture and in particular of the manner in which value is determined not by production alone, but by exchange and consumption as well.

In fact, Baudrillard deconstructs the commodity to reveal not two aspects of it as its essence as Marx does in the form of use and exchange value, but four. Any object, he argues, exists as a functional object that has a use and therefore some value, as an exchangeable item with an economic value, but also as a symbolic value that is relational to other objects and a sign value that is situational in the cultural system within which it exists (Baudrillard 1996: 218). Baudrillard completely strips away the productivist privilege Marx argues for and the privilege of labour, the division of labour and private property.

For Baudrillard, these four aspects of the commodity create the ideological form of the commodity. In so doing, he dissolves the base-superstructure metaphor of Marxism and recognises the simultaneous significance of production, exchange and consumption as one continuous process dictated by the psychology of needs. This fetishism of the commodity arguably functions as a system in which the commodity is regarded as the set-apart sacred.

Given the definition of the set-apart sacred outlined above and given the criticisms of Marxism as outlined above as well, it has to be said that Marx’s view of society and humanity as being based primarily on the economic, is simply not a true

reflection of the way the world is. Marx hints at humanity's relationship with nature, for instance, but never explores this to any kind of conclusive point. If we take this as a primary feature of human society and locate the structural analysis of society described by Durkheim, Mauss, Levi-Strauss, Geertz and Debray, it is arguable that there are primordial aspects of humankind's social existence that are prior to and that inform the development of the economy, and all aspects of social existence, in significant ways. For instance, Marx describes abstract social labour and labour power as what defines the value of any commodity. Yet, there is no way of determining the extent to which this is embodied in a commodity or the effect of the fact that the price of any commodity is really a matter of social agreement or a type of compact. Indeed, Marx himself described the values assigned to commodities as arbitrary.

It follows that what gives commodities the form and character that they have is not primarily labour, but rather it is the social definition of commodities that allow for the development of wage labour. Baudrillard has argued something very similar to this, pointing out that production is not prior to exchange or consumption under capitalism (Baudrillard 1975). This is not to undermine the labour theory of value, but it is to widen the application of the theory to the creation of all value in society and to radically undermine the individual or atomistic description of labour power as being that which a worker owns. In making this argument, it has to be understood that socially necessary labour can only exist in and for the collective.

Marxism is distinguished by the important feature of its historical approach to understanding the development of society (Marx 1970: 6). In starting from a critique of society that locates humans as being at the centre of nature, albeit in a constant

struggle to overcome and transform their conditions within that reality, primarily through conscious labour, Marx first and foremost set apart humanity from the rest of the world, essentially privileging it, or, to put it another way, defining humans as distinguished by their self-consciousness. This observation is perfectly valid, but one of the consequences of it is that it automatically creates terms and conditions to elevate human existence to that of the level of the set-apart sacred (Marx 1970: 7).

The location of humanity at the centre of society is of course displaced in reality by the effect of the development of the defining features of capitalism, namely wage labour, commodity production and exchange and consumption, through which the development of money, a unique commodity, sets apart the product of an individual person's labour from themselves. This alienation from the product of the worker's labour creates a power over the worker that is mediated through these commodities and which masks the ownership and control of the commodities and thereby benefits the appropriators of the surplus value that labour creates (Marx 1970: 9).

But this does not explain the development of the commodity form and of money. Mauss has described the exchanges made by Melanesian islanders and in particular how commodities were a product of the social relationships that developed as the pattern of social interaction to keep these societies from going to war. It is arguable therefore that the commodity form precedes wage labour, as does money. These could well have developed out of the symbolic practices and the signification of the sacred generated by the rituals developed to manage the sacred in particular instances. Since these signs are not stable, as Derrida has argued, what is a commodity

today probably does not have the same nature or character as a commodity in societies in which commodities were not the dominant form of exchange.

Arguments that capital, capitalists or even phenomena such as interest, are Marx rightly rejects the source of value. The manner in which he argues that the social relations that arise under capitalism are expressed in the form of commodities has been summarised above. But given the critique of value creation made by a number of scholars cited above, two issues arise. The first is the question of how value, a social function, gets expressed in economic terms. The second is the question of how labour, contributed in terms of the exchange of commodities and the contribution to value that is made through consumption, gets accounted for. Here the issue that needs to be considered is how that which has social value is then given an economic value that is expressed in the form of a price.

When commodities are exchanged this is not necessarily something carried out by those who produced the commodity. Indeed, in late capitalism, but arguably even in mercantile capitalism, exchange is and was a specialized activity. Getting goods and services to the point where they are required at the right time is essential to the commodity cycle. It cannot be argued that the labour involved in these processes does not add value to a good or service, since its very possibility of being exchanged may hinge on that actually happening. If goods are produced and exchanged but not consumed, the very cycle of commodities would stall, as happens when a crisis of over-production happens. At that point the value of most commodities fall dramatically. To what extent would that be possible if some notion of value was not being attributed to the consumption aspect of the commodity cycle? Furthermore, if

the value created is given by labour power, then as the value declines in an economic crisis, two things need to be explained. The first is the simultaneous decline in value across the economy, that is, what analysts of market refer to as sentiment. The second is how relative values can change. If all goods are attributed a value due to the amount of labour power expended in their production, how is it possible for some goods to lose more value proportionally than others?

An alternative theory of value, based on the creation of value through the processes of ritual and the designation of the set-apart sacred seems to offer a more accurate explanation. In this respect, necessary social labour is expended in various forms in the commodity cycle and in the cycle of the production, exchange and consumption of all goods, symbolic as well as material. This creates symbols and signs that designate the arbitrary, but socially agreed, value of any object, including any commodity. That allows for the mobilization of the factors of production to produce these commodities, as the capitalist can fairly judge what amounts of other commodities, including labour, can be expended during the production phase, those involved in managing the exchange of the commodity are able to ascertain whether it is economically worth their while to do so and the consumer is happy to pay the price for the value of the commodity. In other words, exchange and money precede wage labour in the modern form and these prior social processes have to some extent facilitated the development of wage labour.

Of course, under capitalism, this value is expressed as the price of the commodity. This does not mean that workers are getting a 'fair' price for their labour as Marx argued that they did not under capitalism. It simply means that the argument

that all value is derived from an individual worker's labour-power is unsustainable. This would also allow for the fact that a lot of the labour that ensures the reproduction of society goes unpaid or even unrecognized, such as domestic labour, child-rearing and voluntary labour, as carried out for reasons of philanthropy. The privileging of paid, wage labour in the process of the production of material goods, is simply an expression of the narrow definition of labour by capitalists because of the way the capitalist system works. To accept this is to accept the terms of bourgeois ideology. If the alternative explanation is considered, where all goods are treated as valuable because of their socially agreed status, then this explains why capitalism works, not by masking only the creation and appropriation of surplus value, but by masking the entire process of the creation of value, turning a social function into a private one.

The capitalist system is one in which goods and services are produced, exchanged and consumed. Marx's critique of capitalism sees these processes as separated, perhaps for analytical purposes. In reality, the relationship between these activities is far more fluid and overlapping. Some things are produced for demand, others to create demand. Marx saw production as the crucial process for the creation of value. In these terms, exchange and consumption are really just the end result, or the reason for production to take place. This consideration of the cycle of commodities as a linear process is one that needs to be interrogated, as it is clear that things are not that simple. One of the most important observations of Marxism is that of the relationship between scarcity and surplus and the cyclical nature of capitalism (Marx 1981: 350). The tendency of the capitalist system to go in to a crisis of over-production and under-consumption periodically is central to Marx's explanation for

why the capitalist system is not sustainable. Similarly, the explanation of the financialisation of the capitalist system and the expansion of credit in producing these crises are key.

There is no doubt that capitalism experiences crises of over-production, over-consumption and the expansion of credit. Over-production and under-consumption are easy to account for in purely economic terms. If there are too many commodities in circulation, or too much of a commodity, it is easy to understand why the commodity would stockpile and once it has reached a certain critical mass, it cannot even be given away. The same goes for over-consumption. If there is a huge demand for a commodity, it stands to reason that its price would escalate to astronomical heights, resulting in a crisis. But why should credit expansion cause an economic crisis?

Credit is simply the creation of an agreement to repay in the future value consumed in the present. Since there is no end in sight to the capitalist cycle, the fact that repayments are late or are not made regularly should not be cause for concern, as long as the debtor pays up eventually. In reality, credit is accompanied by interest. It is the fact that interest can keep growing that creates the uncertainty about the future of repayment of a particular debt. Banks are accused of 'creating' money by offering credit. This is a trite criticism, since some or another social institution has to create money. This is because money is an artificial category, created by social agreement. It exists either by social compact or by fiat, but in either case it is not only material, but is also symbolic and has to start life as an imagined object.

Marx's explanation of the alienation and fetishisation process in society is crucial to the understanding of the materialist conception of history. A concept

borrowed from Hegel, alienation is the general condition of workers under capitalism. The very product of the workers efforts, capital, which Marx argued is objectified labour, since it is created by the surplus value labour produces, becomes that manner in which “workers, in effect, continually reproduce the conditions of their subservience” (Marx and Engels 1976: 16). Commodities appear to possess a mystical power over people, Marx argues. This arises out of the manner in which the commodity embodies the social conditions under which labour finds itself in a capitalist system. The form in which commodities appear and their values are unrelated to the physicality of the commodity or the material process that gives rise to a particular commodity. In Marx’s view, this “is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx 1970: 165).

So the products of human effort occupy a position in the world in which they appear to dominate those who produce them. They do so because of the social relations that exist and that determine how individuals relate to these commodities. In the first instance, this alienation disempowers the producers by removing the control of the product of their efforts from them. In the second instance, the fantastic form that these objects take, as entities with powers over people and other commodities, makes a fetish of them. Lukács describes how “the fetishistic character of economic forms, the reification of all human relations, the constant expansion and extension of the division of labour which subjects the process of production to an abstract, rational analysis, without regard to the human potentialities and abilities of the immediate producers, all these things transform the phenomena of society and with them the way in which they

are perceived. In this way arise the ‘isolated’ facts, ‘isolated’ complexes of facts, separate, specialist disciplines (economics, law, etc.) whose very appearance seems to have done much to pave the way for such scientific methods. It thus appears extraordinarily ‘scientific’ to think out the tendencies implicit in the facts themselves and to promote this activity to the status of science. By contrast, in the teeth of all these isolated and isolating facts and partial systems, dialectics insists on the concrete unity of the whole. Yet although it exposes these appearances for the illusions they are — albeit illusions necessarily engendered by capitalism — in this ‘scientific’ atmosphere it still gives the impression of being an arbitrary construction” (Lukács 1972: 6).

The fetishism of commodities, dealing with the appearance and essence of social relations as embodied in physical entities, similarly points to a strategic engagement with the economic and social relations that causes the relationship between humans and these inanimate objects to be experienced as a fantastic one, that is, to an engagement with the set-apart sacred (Marx 1970: 165). In setting apart or dislocating commodities from their producers, particularly labour and through money, these entities become regarded as set-apart sacred and as such, are privileged over human beings. This disjuncture, or turning on its head of the proper order of things, is central to a Marxist critique of society (Marx and Engels 1970: 47).

It is argued here that before the alienation of labour and the fetishisation of commodities due to the division of labour and the institution of private property, the effect of the set-apart sacred needs to be considered. Given the archaic character of the set-apart sacred and its primordial nature, this can also account for the alienation and

the fetishism that is a key feature of capitalism. This would explain the fact that objects were regarded as set-apart sacred before the advent of capitalism in the modern sense of the term.

William Pietz has documented the use of the term fetish in the engagement between African and European traders on the West Coast of Africa from the fifteenth century onwards (Pietz 1985). There is no doubt that this term captures the nature of the different understanding of value as expressed by these people in the cross-cultural exchanges that took place. But it begs the question as to whether all exchange is not of a similar nature and that we accept it as being legitimate and sensible only because it has been routinised, or put another way, embedded in social terms and conditions through rituals.

It is in relation to Marx's conception of our world as being divided into two realms that the set-apart sacred in society is most commonly featured. The fundamental nature of Marx's critique, its materialist claim, lies in the notion that our world has a material basis and a reflection of this reality in the realm of ideas and language. This dichotomy is not difficult to grasp, as it sounds intuitive. We exist as humans in our bodies. The world is outside of us, as are other people. Ideas seem to exist in another realm. But there are problems with this philosophical position. Accepting this dichotomy does make historical materialism a methodological problematic. For instance, how do ideas that arise from the material world translate into language and then impact back onto the material world? It is clear from this passage that this view of society, which sees the material base and the ideal superstructure as distinct, raises many contradictions that need to be considered. In the

first instance, such an analysis begs the question; to what extent are the ideas determined by the base and to what extent, if any, are they autonomous?

Marxist theoreticians who grapple with this problem hold different views. Antonio Gramsci argued that the relationship between the base and the superstructure was a loose or tenuous one and that revolutionaries had to work hard and systematically to move society in the direction of socialism because of this, creating a particular role for a working-class political party (Gramsci, 1971: 257). In Gramsci's view the state has a mediating function, but it creates a dynamic of its own and can even act in its own interest as an entity against the ruling ideas or the economic interests of the capitalist class (Gramsci, 1971: 219). The state, an entity that exists in relation to human subjects as a powerful entity, is also fetishised.

Others, such as Louis Althusser, emphasised the structural nature of society and were more rigid and deterministic about the relationship between the base and superstructure, choosing to unify it in fact into an Ideological State Apparatus that places the state in a crucial but deterministic mediating role between the base and superstructure (Althusser 1971: 16). In this view, ideology and the material world are said to be collapsed into one realm. Significantly, this realm is a materialist one.

The state is a development of the process of accumulation and of the territorial demarcation of relationships that are deemed as privileged, whether by blood ties or some other criteria (Hoffman, 1995: 52). The state organises public power. The development of the state holds within it the key to understanding the set-apart sacred and the political economy of this phenomenon. In early or archaic societies, the distinction between war, religion, politics and economics did not exist in the manner in

which it does today (Marx and Engels 1970: 53). These distinctions only arose as separate human spheres of action with the development of society, particularly population growth, urbanization and the division of labour. In this sense, the creation of religion as a distinct sphere of activity is as much a historical development as the state is, as money is, as politics is, as economics is or any other feature of society. Similarly, the development of so-called civil society is a historical outcome of these processes (Marx and Engels 1970: 57).

The state occupies a particular position in society. It has the monopoly of legitimate violence. It has a privileged legal status and it is the location of administrative or bureaucratic power. Marx has often been criticised for not having a theory of the state. In Marx's *oeuvre*, he engaged with the state mostly in consideration of practical political events, and also his conception of the state is very influenced by Hegel. Lenin wrote about the state theoretically, but has also been criticised for having a crude understanding of the state. His instrumentalist conception of the state is arguably one of the things that led to the distorted exercise of power in the Soviet Union. It is with Gramsci's contribution that Marxism begins to move away from instrumentalism and towards a more sophisticated theory of the state.

The base/superstructure theory also creates another set of challenges that must be addressed. Marx constantly railed against those he regarded as proponents of ideology as opposed to his claimed scientific view of society. By this he meant that the social relations that arise from the productive forces and relations of production are articulated in the manner in which they are because of the fact that they are a distorted image of these as they exist in reality (Marx and Engels 1979: 47).

By accepting that the economy has political or ideological aspects, it must also be accepted that these are not limited to secular or non-religious aspects of ideology. In other words, a re-reading of Marx that takes him at his word must accept that since the mode of production and the social relations of production generate all ideological forms, none of them may be privileged. Or, if they are, there must at least be an explanation for why this should be accepted as being the case. The economic base of society creates social relations that are expressed in the form human subjects experience them, but which in fact do not truly reflect reality. Ideology is therefore the distorted form in which human subjects see the world as mediated by those who manipulate ideas. Truly, such a view of the world must be too simplistic. Apart from the instrumentalist nature of this description, it is hard to see how we can decide on the accuracy of any ideas unless we accept blindly the idea that historical materialism as described by Marx is a canon. Similarly affected is the concept of class.

If classes are groups of people who have particular relationships defined with the productive forces and the relations of production arising from these, then anyone who does not accept this worldview automatically poses a problem for the theory. Class may be an objective reality created by the capitalist system, but given what has been said about the base/superstructure hypotheses, there is a problem for historical materialism that must be addressed. Class is experienced subjectively. To what extent is an objective relationship, experienced subjectively, real? Even if it is, to what end is this reality of any practical significance?

Re-materialising historical materialism

What remains of historical materialism, given these criticisms and the re-theorisation of Marxism? Commodity production, exchange and consumption, if understood as being socially embedded practices that arise not from the institutions of private property and wage labour, but as rituals that designate certain objects as set-apart sacred, is still useful analysis of the economic processes that take place under capitalism. But the idea that all value is derived from the individual worker involved in the process of the production of a particular commodity has to be abandoned. This does not undermine historical materialism, it actually re-socialises labour, as it is necessary social labour in the form of all ritual, whether in work, play or worship, that creates value in society and not the individual labour power of each worker.

Labour as all socially necessary labour and all necessary social labour is a broader definition of work. It recognises that all labour needs to be accorded a value and brings out the social aspect of labour in particular. This also sets apart labour, but does not privilege wage labour in any way. Of course, this does not mean that all labour is remunerated, but it does establish the basis for a claim for it to be.

The designation of the set-apart sacred, the creation of symbols, signs, language and ideology are the basis for understanding society, but not as existing in some ideal realm, but in the materiality of the products of rituals, that is, the labour of all in a community or society. Ideology is therefore no longer separated from the material world but exists as a material consequence of the world in all facets. The fact that it can be articulated in the real, the symbolic and the imaginary should not allow

the confusion of assigning each of these spheres the same ontological status. The sign and the signified are not the same thing, unless it is a material object and even then it is debatable as to whether they are the same thing in one, as the sign can have an independent existence from the object. In other words, all objects, including commodities, function at a symbolic and at a material level, but some signs and objects mediate between these two spheres. Examples of these types of signs and objects include symbols of political power, symbols of the power of objects over human beings and symbols of economic power. These can be found in the categories of ideology, the fetish and money.

Fetishism and reification and the relationship between real objects and the subject are laden with significance therefore. It is not just that some objects are fetishised, but the entire system of objects is fetishised and necessarily so if they are to have any value. Objects are always more than what they seem. They are signs and symbols of power relations and social structures. Included within this system are institutions such as the state, class and civil society. These also are fetishised, but exist as relationships that are objectified through designating these with particular significance.

Alienation, as a real condition under which people suffer, as the form in which relationships between subjects and objects is experienced, creates a disjuncture for the subject. It is arguable that this is unavoidable, as there is no way something can exist outside of the subject without them being aware of it in an alienated manner, particularly if it is deemed to be the property of the subject but they have no claim or title to it. Our very embodiment precludes any other possibility. But if these objects

are understood as being set-apart sacred, it is possible to demystify the relationship. Socialisation may of course reduce the potential alienation, but there is no evidence that this is necessarily the case. In fact, if anything, socialisation in practice has been an alienating experience in itself. To better understand the nature of alienation, the objects that are created will need to be demystified to the point of having no value for the subject at all or be brought under the subject's direct management and control.

The reason for this is that before the significance of labour is recognised, the relationship between people as subjects, whereby they negotiate the terms and conditions of these relationships and locate them in a symbolic order, must be recognised. In this respect, the set-apart sacred as a category is key. Everything has to be classified, compared, identified or labeled and the first or primary order outside of the subject and the object, is the set-apart sacred (that includes the profane) on the one hand and the ordinary on the other.

Once the set-apart sacred is structurally set down as the embedded symbolic logic of any group, wage or remunerated labour gets laid over this, as do production, exchange and consumption. The set-apart sacred is produced by necessary social labour, that is, any collective activity that unites a group of people by defining them and those who are not them and by designating objects, relationships, people, signs and symbols as having a particular value. The set-apart sacred exists only by social agreement or consensus. Once that breaks down, not only does whatever was set apart become devalued, but it can signal disagreement or discord in the once united group and lead to social unrest and even to violence and the destruction of property and people.

The set-apart sacred exists as forms that are also exchangeable and consumable, so it is a form of commodity and arguably a form of currency, or money. The set-apart sacred is arguably the first mediating property in any social situation. The value of these symbolic commodities are agreed upon as a social act but expressed in symbolic form. In economic terms this is the value or the price if it is expressed in money, or any other commodity.

Anything can be set-apart sacred, so it is a special type of commodity form that exists in abundance and its value is not necessarily affected by this surplus. In fact, where the set-apart sacred starts and ends and where the economic starts and ends is not clear, as there is a relationship between the set-apart sacred and all aspects of society, including the economic. The set-apart sacred therefore assists in creating the possibility of understanding what is called religion, ideology and the economy as material processes. Once the set-apart sacred is accepted as the primary category for social organization, there is no need for recourse to idealism, as a material theory of the ordering of the social is the basis for a materialist conception of society.

Historical materialism and the set-apart sacred can be brought into relationship with one another through the relationship between necessary social labour and socially necessary labour. This structural relationship sets the terms and conditions for all exchange, production and consumption. The physical embodiment of human beings, their psychological orientation and their collective existence, create the conditions for the set-apart sacred and the methodology of historical materialism, re-materialised, creates the possibility for developing a political economy of the sacred. These are best

considered through examining systems for managing the set-apart sacred. Among these are ideology, the fetish and money.

Chapter 4: Ideology, the Fetish and Money

The set-apart sacred can be mapped in a number of different ways, depending on the objective of a critique. In this chapter the following are considered - ideology, the fetish and money - as examples for illuminating the set-apart sacred, its centrality in the process of the creation of value and in the course of that, its role in the economy, the politics and the social spheres of human existence. By way of a summary of the arguments made so far, the following is put forward.

Religion appears to be pervasive, resilient and persistent. Religion is, however, a vague and inconsistently utilised conceptual category, similar to the conceptual category of ideology in that respect. There is no agreed upon definition of religion and theories of religion are inadequate in that they do not ultimately define or explain the apparent phenomena in a manner that can be agreed upon by all scholars. The same can be said for ideology as a conceptual category.

The academic study of religion is caught up in a debate about definitions and theories of religion because, like its intended subject matter, the field of religious studies encompasses many different systems for managing the set-apart sacred and tries to describe these within a framework that is clearly inadequate. In that respect, it sets itself a task that it is bound to fail. There those who argue that religion is simply a natural occurrence as it is actually a common category to all cultures. The same may be argued regarding the sacred, but this argument is a circular one. If religion or the

sacred exist as social phenomena, the question still remains; where does it emanate from?

The conceptual category of the set-apart sacred is proposed as an alternative to that of religion, as it is argued that all activity described as religious and even some not generally considered as religion, is actually an expression of the set-apart sacred. The set-apart sacred is a conceptual category that is created by the most primordial and archaic form of classification, that of binary opposites. This form of classification arguably arises from human embodiment, that is, from the manner in which humans view the world as a function firstly of their biology and corporeality, so that categories such as left/right, up/down, male/female are obviously natural to creatures that live in this way. This order of things is obviously also prevalent in psychological and social terms as well, with good/bad, friend/stranger, being obvious ones as well as us/them and nature/culture for social groupings. This gives rise to the possibility of the sacred/profane categorization. The set-apart sacred is identified through the basic categorization of things by humans in their cognitive and social ordering of the world. In the course of this process, binary categories of sacred/profane are created.

These categories obviously privilege one thing over another, whether by asserting their desirability or the benefits of the category. In setting things apart, certain ways of behaving are used to create the necessary social effect to identify the set-apart sacred. This process is one of the necessary social labour that is required to ensure that a collective remains cohesive.

The set-apart sacred, that which is set apart in society and held to be of a higher order than the ordinary, is what is designated to be so by virtue of social

agreements that are reproduced through necessary social labour in the form of rituals. Ritualisation is the manner in which human subjects strategically demarcate objects, people, relationships and conventions and by so doing privilege instances of these from others that are then regarded as ordinary or even profane.

These rituals identify set-apart sacred objects and concepts, including people and relationships, the good or accepted ways of doing things, including the rituals themselves. These outcomes are then recorded, either verbally, in image form, in text or simply by associating this social compact with signs to represent it. This generates the value-laden symbolic property that serves as a social and cultural good. The symbolic property that the social grouping generates in the course of setting apart the sacred and the manner in which these signs are produced, circulated, exchanged and consumed are expressed through these systems for managing the set-apart sacred, whether with regard to the physical, the symbolic or the imaginary realms of human life. This social creativity stems from a number of features of human existence.

There are aspects of the nature and character of humankind that are primordial, archaic, axiomatic and automatic. These aspects stem from the biological, psychological and social aspects of humankind and the nature of its existence. Biologically, humans are corporeal beings, that is, they exist within a body that physically alienates them from the rest of the world, including other people. As a result of this embodiment, humans are special to themselves as individuals, and incomplete, or to put differently, they are set-apart from the world. This set-apart existence alienates humans from other people and objects, creating a subject that is fraught with a number of conditions and characteristics as a result of this alienation.

The fragility, mortality and the insecurity of humans forces them into a relationship with the social groupings they are born into or join, where the threat of exclusion or of physical violence determine the set-apart nature of the collective. This set-apart character ensures that the group is reified by its very existence and the corporeal nature of humans.

Psychologically, human beings are bound to objectify, identify, categorise and classify, usually by comparison and by finding similarities and difference in these comparisons. Humans are consequently alienated physically, but are also psychologically bound to objectify everything around them. In this process of identifying and objectifying, there is a hierarchy of things created by these basic categories of good and bad, up and down, left and right, and other binary oppositions that flow from this physical embodiment that sets apart everything in another category that is best described as the set-apart sacred on the one hand and as the ordinary on the other. The category of the set-apart sacred includes that of its deemed opposite the profane and a distinction should be drawn between the sacred as set-apart and the transcendental category of the sacred as in that which is regarded as holy. While the simplistic notion of binary oppositions or bi-polar ordering of the world has been criticized, it can be argued that even more sophisticated notions of comparison involve some use of opposites or of degrees of difference to categorise things.

This dichotomy is articulated through social conventions, that is, by prohibitions and permissions that are defined and reproduced through rituals. The production of the symbols and signs of this process that identify the set-apart sacred are the basic symbolic property of language and culture and the development of

language, culture and systems for identifying and managing the set-apart sacred and the ordinary are contiguous, if not one and the same thing. Religion, ideology, magic and the fetish are terms utilised to describe systems that are established by humans in a collective of one kind or another to manage the set-apart sacred.

These systems for managing the set-apart sacred, being semiotic, are best considered as being similar to languages or best understood to function in the way that languages do. The process of the production, exchange and consumption of the set-apart sacred is where the apparent movement between the perceived dichotomy of the real and the imaginary takes place. The real and the imaginary, as well as the symbolic itself, are necessarily expressed in symbolic terms. Objects or ideas are no less real for being symbolically expressed, but imaginary things can also be expressed symbolically, creating the illusion that they are real. The fact that set-apart sacred things are necessarily alienated and set-apart, means that they are fetishised and reified, that is, they are seen to be vested with powers in and of themselves and endowed with a particular ontological status.

Socially, humans are born, live, develop and ultimately die in a group or community and usually of more than one kind or another. This socially defined existence means that human identity, consciousness of self, language and culture, as well as the rituals that reproduce the set-apart sacred, the profane and the ordinary are learned in and through the reproduction of these social groups. In the structure of any group is a necessary incompleteness, a consequence of the closed yet open nature of any group that must necessarily be defined in opposition to an 'other'. This creates

terms and conditions for the group itself that set it apart, designating it as set-apart sacred.

There are few, if any, truly egalitarian societies or organisations. Most, if not all groups are also necessarily hierarchical, privileging one or more persons in the group by designating them as leaders, giving them a role as elders, warriors, priests or politicians. This category of people is not only tasked with or more often than not appropriates managing the set-apart sacred on behalf of the collective. In the course of this endeavour, these individuals are also designated as set apart, that is, as sacred themselves. This creates the condition for the division of labour in society that manifests itself firstly in gender terms and also in class terms and for the general inequality that goes with privileging anyone.

Included in the social agreements that set apart certain things are exchanges of a social, political or economic nature, thereby creating different markets for the symbolic and material property that is in existence. Because the set-apart sacred is reproduced collectively but is alienated from the collective that reproduces it, it can be privatised, appropriated and expropriated, allowing for the accumulation of this symbolic and material capital by individuals.

This privatisation and the hierarchical nature of social existence also create the conditions for classes to be formed. Social reproduction requires systems of negotiation, consultation, production, circulation, exchange and consumption, without which there would be perpetual social conflict. These systems therefore require legitimisation and reinforcement. This is also achieved through processes of ritual that endow these social agreements, compacts or contracts with a set-apart sacred status.

These types of agreement are objectified or given materiality through tokens, signs or symbols that are also endowed with certain powers or status. This creates value, in the form of an agreed relationship of obligation expressed in terms of one or another object. This creates the possibility for the exchange of objects and therefore for the development of commodities, including money. The fetish is one form of the materialized set-apart sacred.

The economy develops as the system for managing set-apart sacred physical objects. These are collected, produced, exchanged and thus circulated and consumed either as part of human physical and social reproduction or in terms of the symbolic reproduction of society. The symbolic set-apart sacred is endless in supply, as anything can be designated as sacred by agreement. The material sacred by contrast is limited in supply as it has to be physically collected or produced. This means that there is a surplus of symbolic property but a shortage of physical property. Physical and symbolic property that can be exchanged become commodities.

Commodities can be expressed in terms of one another or of something else, usually a third commodity, that is, a sign of the value of a commodity. This is when commodities act as money and become a common means of expressing the value of other commodities. The disjuncture between the volume of symbolic property and that of physical property is significant and must have consequences for the relationship between the different systems for managing the set-apart sacred. Among these consequences is the fact that value is simply a question of sentiment. It can be destroyed as easily, if not easier, than it can be created.

The division of labour, the appropriation and expropriation of symbolic and material property, the development of commodities and money, along with processes of production, circulation, exchange and consumption, develop contiguously, infused with the patterns of violence, resistance, power and hegemony to be found in any collective. The systems for managing these social processes, the waging of war, of negotiating peace and of institutionalizing these practices are what are described as the politics, religion and economics of a society.

Historical materialism, the critique of classical, bourgeois political economy, is economistic, productivist, bearing traces of idealism, and is limited by the outdated metaphors it uses to describe how society functions. Historical materialism needs to be re-materialised to take cognisance of the structural aspects of society that predate capitalism, that are pervasive and that have persisted under capitalism. The set-apart sacred is one of these phenomena and the systems for managing the symbolic property that arises from the set-apart sacred are others. Once the economy is understood as one system for managing the set-apart sacred, its relationship to other systems for managing the set-apart sacred can be explained and the character of the economy itself better understood.

Unmasking the set-apart sacred in this manner reveals why it is so persistent in the economic form it is experienced, that is, in late, globalised capitalism. Understanding the role of ideology, the fetish and money in the capitalist system creates the possibility for determining better ways for describing, explaining and managing the set-apart sacred.

Ideology

Ideology is a system for managing the set-apart sacred in the civic or the political sphere of human social existence. Ideology therefore necessarily functions at the material, the imaginary and at the symbolic level. Ideology, or the phenomenon of the power of symbolic property in the civic sphere, operates by creating terms and conditions through which the elite or leadership in a collective can interpellate and mobilize human subjects. Privileging a particular discourse or narrative that sets out a foundational myth or thesis about the group in question, its vision and mission and the rules for belonging to it achieve this. It also sets out the terms for disciplining and excluding subjects from the collective. Since the collective needs to be mobilized to defend itself from time to time, the terms of this narrative or discourse even include the possibility of sacrifice of the individual on behalf of the collective (Debray 1981: 141).

In Marxist theory in particular, but also more generally in the social sciences, ideology features as a conceptual category that seeks to explain the relationship between people's beliefs and their actions, usually of a political or economic nature (Marx and Engels 1970: 47). Ideology is however a highly contested category. The history of what was initially "the science of ideas", as initiated by Comte Destutt de Tracy, is a problematic one (McLellan 1986: 6; Boudon 1986; Eagleton 1991). The Comte Destutt de Tracy initially conceived of ideology as being a social science through which all ideas would be studied. This development of an attempt to create a

discipline coincided with the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and the rise of what is described as secularism.

Marx also utilized the concept of ideology as the link between ideas and action. But no theory of ideology exists in Marxism, except in very schematic terms (McLellan 1986: 10). Marx was disparaging of what he regarded as ideology, that is, ideas of the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, as opposed to the ideas for and of the proletariat. There is no end of the mention of ideology in Marx's work and reference to ideology pervades academic literature. Nationalism, liberalism, fascism, socialism and many other identifiable traditions of political thought are all categorised as ideologies and the outcomes of these ideas explained as having being 'caused' by these ideologies (Watkins 1964: 2).

There is a considerable body of literature that either equates religion and ideology or treats them as similar. This view is of course one found in Marx, Gramsci and Althusser, to name but a few of the historical materialist thinkers that viewed ideology in this way. Classical Marxists claim that religion and ideology are products of the material base of society and are forms of false consciousness, that is, they are distorted or rudimentary ideas that represent the real character of the economic base, the forces of production and the relations of production (Marx and Engels 1970: 47). Althusser believed religion to be a part of what he termed the Ideological-State Apparatus. It was thus material in its effect in society and he claimed it existed as an ontological category (Althusser 1984: 43). Jakubowski, a critical but classical Marxist, has described the historical materialist concept of ideology as a total one, in which all of reality is only partially represented by the more or less false consciousness that

humans experience. It is the “conscious expression of the objective appearance assumed by capitalist reality” (Jakubowski 1990: 103).

Ideology has been re-theorised by Marxists who regard the classical Marxist theory of ideology as deficient. In these attempts, ideology is given an increasingly broad definition and in the course of this sometimes ceases to be based on the central Marxist notion that ideology is a feature of the superstructure of society that arises from the material base of the economic productive forces and social relations that accompany these. One of the more widely quoted and recognized revisionists of Marx in relation to ideology is Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci not only re-theorised ideology, but also tackled the problematic causal relationship between the base and the superstructure, through which ideas are argued by Marx to have force of effect. In Gramsci’s view, this relationship is not to be understood mechanically, but rather as symbiotic, where the relationship of ideas over society and society over ideas develop dialectically, influencing one another (Gramsci 1971: 164, 181). The dominant or hegemonic ideology, in Gramsci’s theory, obtains force of effect by eclipsing other ideologies and becoming what is regarded as “common sense”, that is the most accepted explanation for some or other aspect of social existence.

Developing a more nuanced conception of ideology, Gramsci explained the concept as an important structural component of capitalist society (Gramsci 1971: 168). In Gramsci’s view, ideology and the superstructure are broadly one and the same thing and the recognition of this places an onus on revolutionaries to build an alternative ideology in the course of the struggle for socialism (Gramsci 1971: 235). This view and even that of a more elaborate definition of ideology such as that of

Rossi-Landi, still leaves the relationship between the ‘material’ and the ‘ideal’ world unexplained (Rossi-Landi 1990). Gramsci fails to explain what it is about these ideas that gives them hegemonic status. He alludes to the fact that the institution of the state backs such ideas, but even this is not a satisfactory theoretical explanation of why such ideas are dominant. There are cases of ideas that are state-sanctioned that are not hegemonic and that ultimately fail. A good example of this is the state-sponsored policy of apartheid that separated black and white South Africans. This policy failed ultimately because its perceived hegemony was false. Ideas that prevail must do by social agreement.

A structuralist approach within a Marxist paradigm, such as Althusser’s, explains ideology as the discourse of the society and state apparatus, organized to interpellate subjects, reproducing the terms and conditions that uphold the prevailing class relations in society (Althusser 1971: 45). This form of Marxist theory, a development of the historical materialist methodology, has been criticized by among others Frederic Jameson. His criticism is that this view of ideology as a totalizing system of the production of knowledge is too rigid and dogmatic. Jameson argued that all ideology was ultimately utopian in that it necessarily distorted worldviews in the interests of the collective on behalf of whom it has deployed (Jameson 1996: 289).

Structuralists such as Levi-Strauss and those who built on his work may not refer to ideology *per se*, but implicit in structuralism is the idea that the realm of civic and religious ideas is one that is manufactured in the course of the general social reproduction of culture. Ideology, in this sense, is one of the many facets of culture (Geertz 1973: 194). This definition has the virtue of removing the pejorative terms of

the concept of ideology, but it is still inadequate in that it continues to conceptualise ideology as some objectified realm of socio-political thinking that is distinct from religious thought, for instance, and distinct from the lived, material existence of subjects.

Baudrillard continues to use the term ideology even though he insists that the base-superstructure distinction must be abandoned (Baudrillard 1981: 144). He uses the terms to describe the manner in which the system of the production, exchange and consumption of commodities, including the sign as the form in which the entire system of the circulation of commodities has been coded, operates. In this use of the concept, ideology remains a form that mystifies or occludes the reality of the commodity without altering its form as a system of the simulation of meaning (Baudrillard 1981: 160). Where Baudrillard's use of the term ideology is useful is with respect to the manner in which he describes value as being embedded in the social discourse in ways in which it is managed on behalf of those who function in elite or privileged positions in society.

Foucault described ideology in a manner that sought to bring out the contested nature of ideas. The discourses in which various practices are inscribed on society, whether through individual subjects or on collectives, function as more or less dominant discourses, determining the ways in which knowledge is produced and manages and therein lies the ideological aspect of these discourses (Foucault 2004: 33-34).

David McLellan has also given a succinct summary of the problem of the concept of ideology (McLellan 1986). The criticisms made of ideology are similar to

those of religion as a category; ideology is a somewhat vague concept, many things can be defined as ideology that do not have all the characteristics of ideology and the relationship between the concept of ideology and the world we live in is a tenuous one. That there are similar conceptual categories as these surely says something about the way the world is and about the way that it is being theorised. It is not only Marxists who have made this comparison. The functionalist tradition of social anthropology treats ideology, or worldviews, and religion as similar as well. In this case, ideology and religion are seen as systems of symbols that are generated by people in societies that function as knowledge systems (Geertz 1973: 129). That these are seen as aspects of culture that share certain features must be considered as being of significance. But there are problems with the conceptual category ideology as well as religion.

Debray eloquently outlines these problems in his *The Critique of Political Reason*, where he explains that ideology is an illusory category and better understood as a “collective, preconscious schematism” that links ideas and action through making these have force of effect in society (Debray 1984: 125). Significantly, Debray describes the sacred nature of ideology, as expressed in the form of ideas about the founding and continued existence of nations, communities, churches or movements, that is, any and all social collectives (Debray 1984: 206).

Debray criticizes ideology as being an illusion perpetuated by Marx to fill the yawning gap that Debray argues exists in Marxist theory (Debray 1981: 60). This gap, Debray proposes, arises out of a number of weaknesses in Marxist theory, namely, its limited materialism, its historicism and its static nature (Debray 1981: 19, 100 and

106). Debray introduces a number of concepts into the debate and constructs a theory of how ideas have a material force in society. He sees magic, religion and ideology as different expressions of the phenomenon of the material effect of language (Debray 1981: 73). In his unique contribution, Debray identifies the incompleteness of social formations caused by what he describes as “the lack” at the centre of human collective existence. This lack generates the “social physics” that gives the force of effect to words in society (Debray 1981: 180, 245, 270, 324). In fact, it is Debray’s view that the terms and conditions that give this power to words to mobilise people are sacred (Debray 1981: 329).

That Marx and most Marxists treat religion in much the same way as ideology is significant. Seen either as a type of ideology or as an archaic proto-ideology, religion is as much “false-consciousness” as secular ideology is argued to be (Marx 1975: 244). The veracity of such claims is not what is to be considered here, but the relationship between these conceptual categories is important. There is clearly a long history of relationship between religion and ideology, dating back to the time that the “science of ideas” was first conceptualized by de Tracy (Rossi-Landi 1982: 34).

As noted in Chapter 2, Richard Comstock has provided a powerful summation of Marxism as a critique of religion. He argues that apart from the fact that Marxism can be argued to function as a quasi-religion itself, the theory is utopian in its outlook and this is enough of a similarity to be of significance (Comstock 1976: 327, 329). He argues that Marx’s entire enterprise is founded on a critique of religion that describes it as “alienated consciousness. . . archeological consciousness that reflects a fundamental alienation. . .in political and economic orders” (Comstock 1976: 328).

From this critique of religion, Marx was able to build a critique of politics and the economy, with the critique of religion as the exemplar. He quotes Marx as describing religion as having the effect of occluding the reality of human existence. Acting as a fetish, religion is therefore seen as a reified, imaginary abstraction. Significantly, Comstock argues that in Marx's theory religion is accused of standing in the way of the development of truly well-rounded human beings and that this effect of the phenomenon is one repeated in the political, economic and social spheres of any society (Comstock 1976: 340). The significance of Comstock's critique is that it establishes clearly the theoretical basis for the comparison of religion, ideology and economics as systems that function in a similar manner. This effect is located in the human condition and it is manifested in the human activity described.

Debray has described ideology as the primary medium of the logic, language and discourse of the collective in that it functions as a "collective preconscious schematism" through which ideas can have material effect (Debray 1981: 125). If we take ideology to be a product not solely of the economic base of society, but as a system through which we order and manage meaning in the collective for the purposes of all communication and social activity, then the set-apart sacred aspect of ideology is brought to the fore. The many ways in which ideology has been conceptualized need consideration though, as they help to elucidate the sacred in the many faceted form it operates in society.

Debray has presented a materialist critique of the concept of ideology that does not seek to present one form of discourse as privileged over others, but rather considers the way in which ideas have the force of effect in society through being the

discourse that mobilizes people and translates into action (Debray 1981:). Debray's "collective preconscious schematism" explains how the formation of any group necessitates a myth of origin and of the legitimisation of power in a particular hierarchical form as presented back to the collective. This sacred discourse is what remains dominant unless the group in that form disintegrates. Although this theory can be described as structuralist it is one that goes beyond the description of ideology as embedded in language and describes how the formation of social collectives and the production of the dominant discourse are different sides of the same coin (Debray 1981:).

Debray's theory of ideology, or rather his theory of the political-religious unconscious, has weaknesses. There is no need to identify the unconscious as the source of the dominant discourse if this process is understood as being a material one where the dominant discourse functions as part of the symbolic capital that is utilised by members of the collective to negotiate the social existence that they must all endure. But the theory has the virtue of not relying on any simplistic metaphor and of positing a relationship between the sacred and the social that provides the basis for understanding how it is that certain ideas have a material force of effect.

Ideology is clearly therefore not simply a way of representing the world in the intellect, for any conception of the world is one that has a history that must be socially agreed upon or contested. Ideology is determined by the basic structure of signs, symbols and language that make up a social collective and are co-determined by the particular power relations that prevail in any society. All systems of language, all classification and categorization, have an accompanying set of prohibitions and

permissions that are ordered in the first instance by the designation of the set-apart sacred.

These signs have been generated by the ways in which things are done through ritual. They form a syntax of the sacred within which social meaning and logic are developed. This is true of the set-apart sacred in the transcendental, the civic or political sphere, in the personal, in the symbolic and in the imaginary aspects of social existence. What is called ideology, the system for managing the set-apart sacred in the civic or political sphere, defines the collective, the political hierarchy and the symbols that establish the collective as set-apart sacred.

The explanation of the syntax of the sacred explains the similarities between religion and ideology. They are both systems for managing the set-apart sacred. In point of fact, the attempts to highlight the distinctions between religion, ideology, magic and myth, while useful for descriptive and analytical purposes, unfortunately have the effect of occluding the common features of these systems, namely their basis in the set-apart sacred. As society becomes more sophisticated or complex, so do these systems of managing the set-apart sacred. Apart from the fact that they become embedded, or hegemonic, as capitalism develops, globalises markets and the systems of commodity production, exchange and consumption, the set-apart sacred systems take on a more general and more uniform character, even though the discourses may differ. The syntax of the sacred also explains in part the coterminous nature of religion and the secular. If these are understood as products of a particular stage of development, then it is relatively easy to explain the perceived religious character of some secular ideas.

How this syntax is manifested in contemporary society is in language that is unmistakably descriptive of the set-apart sacred. What are described as instances of ideology, such as liberalism, or socialism, cannot be expressed in the final analysis without some recourse to things that are set apart as sacred. In the case of liberalism it is the set-apart sacred individual, free to do as he or she pleases unless constrained by a totalitarian state. In the case of socialism, it is the heroic working class, exploited by the capitalist, but who will free society. These are all instances of the set-apart sacred and take the form of secular ideas expressed in religious language.

Some examples help to illustrate how ideology, or the set-apart sacred in the civic sphere, operates. Speaking about the founding of the secret society that was responsible for ensuring that apartheid become the official policy of the then government of South Africa, the leader of the Broederbond explained that the “Afrikaner Broederbond was born out of the deep conviction that the Afrikaner volk has been planted in this country by the Hand of God, destined to survive as a separate volk with its own calling” (Bunting 1964: 47). The Broederbond functioned as a secret order with a sacred mission, that is, the upliftment to power of the Afrikaner people. Among its adherents, apartheid was regarded as a legitimate policy, designed to achieve this divine mission. Of course, its opponents expressed legitimate horror at this terrible system, declaring it a crime against humanity, a judgment that was adopted by the United Nations in 1973 (Mortons and Jeffrey 2000: 27).

In response to the Broederbond and the National Party, the South African Communist Party made a call to heroism in millenarian and sacred language. It called upon workers in “this sense of solidarity and support, and by the exhilarating

comradeship known only to fellow workers in a militant movement. . . (to) advance to do battle with the capitalist Goliath, confident that if we play our part unfalteringly we shall in our lifetime see the robber and butcher class brought low and the workers' 'Soviets' in power. . . (to) hold aloft the glistening banner of the World Commune to be, when the class war shall have been for ever stamped out” (The Road to South African Freedom, 1962, SACP internet archive, www.sacp.org.za). In fact, the SACP was fond of talking in religious overtones, whether it was in terms of spreading the Gospel of Communism, mobilizing people to defend the sacred rights of the people or simply in the sense of reiterating the inevitable, cataclysmic end of capitalism. As of yet, this is still to happen.

Similarly, the language used by the heroic freedom fighter, Solomon Mahlangu prior to his execution, depicts the struggle in unmistakably sacrificial terms. He stated that his “blood will nourish the tree that will bear the fruits of freedom” (ANC internet archive, 2009, www.anc.org.za). In a similar vein, the then Deputy President of the Republic of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, spoke in equally awe-struck tone of the eclectic African national pride that pervaded the moment of the adoption of the South African Constitution (Statement of Deputy President T.M. Mbeki, on behalf of the African National Congress, on the occasion of the adoption by the Constituent Assembly of the “Republic of South Africa Constitution Bill 1996”, Cape Town, 8 May 1996., ANC Internet archive, www.anc.org.za)

His references to the souls of Khoi and San ancestors, to the blood of fallen warriors, to the names of ancestors as well as the general tone of this address were skillfully designed to emphasise the sacred nature of the event of adopting the

Constitution. This resort to sacred symbolic images re-appears time and again in the work of political leaders who seek to entrench a sense of the sacred nature of political life.

On a less positive note, the manner in which the ideology of the liberation movement has been perverted to justify the current status quo and to obfuscate the reality of the accumulation of wealth by a few while the majority of South Africans get poorer in relative and in some cases in absolute terms is instructive. The president of the country, Jacob Zuma, has left no opportunity to attend a church service or to associate himself with religion, go by (“Zuma visits Rhema, prays for peaceful election”, *Mail and Guardian* 23 January 2009). Zuma visited many churches during his campaign and since the election of May 2009 has established a committee of religious leaders to advise him on matters relating to government (Louis Fourie, “Ray McCauley takes aim at gay rights”, *Rainbow UCT*, 11 September 2009).

Even communists cannot escape the sacred discourse of politics. In assessing what he describes as the drift towards irrelevance of the South African Communist Party, one journalist pointed out that the interpretation of key texts of the liberation movement, sacred texts, was once the preserve of communists. Butler claims that South African Communist Party, an ally of the ANC, is no more than a shadow of its former self. Likened to the clerics of the national democratic revolution, he points out that “in past decades (the SACP) could claim to be the key interpreter of the liberation movement's sacred texts, a vector of historical forces, or an organisational powerhouse that could punch above its weight in the struggle for freedom”. By contrast it is now seen as increasingly irrelevant (Anthony Butler, “Nzimande steering SACP ship

towards political irrelevance”, Business Day 29 September 2008). To think of the SACP cadres once acting as high priests of the liberation movement, dispensing wisdom from the sacred texts of the revolution is not an image that squares well with the role of a communist party. But revolution by its nature is set-apart sacred work. What is instructive is the manner in which this role is so clearly described in terms of the set-apart sacred.

In discussing the Constitution of the Republic, reference is made by one commentator to the fact that it is “not a document drafted by some detached group of peacemaking law advisers. . .(the) Constitution is the product of a historically unique process undertaken by our own people, a process that raised all of us above ourselves so that we could end our own suffering and save our country, when we vowed collectively to end our ethnic conflicts and never return to them”. In language clearly designed to invoke feelings of awe, he continues to claim that the deal that resulted in the Constitution “was a deal we all made with ourselves. A sacred deal” (Alistair Sparks, “Our Constitution is Sacred”, Business Day, 16 September 2009). This tone clearly echoes that established by the then Deputy President of the country, Thabo Mbeki, on the occasion of the adoption of the Constitution.

In reviewing the ANC tradition of struggle and freedom songs, journalist Jacob Dlamini points to the sacred character of the original songs, now defiled by the penchant for political leaders to focus on money rather than freedom (Jacob Dlamini, “Remix of struggle songs hits a dissonant crescendo”, Business Day 5 September 2009). Dlamini cleverly captures the contradictions of the times, where once sacred things have been commercialized, where an elite has appropriated these and where the

system of managing this symbolic property has been warped to perpetuate elite rule rather than to empower the masses.

In politics, the sacred finds its way into discussions over everything conceivable. In rebuking a colleague, legal academic Mia Swart wasted no time in reminding controversial judge, Justice John Hlope, that judicial independence is sacred (Mia Swart, “Waiting for a *dues ex machina* to end Judge Hlope’s comedy”, Business Day 19 June 2009) The discussion of the independence of the judiciary is therefore conducted in terms that ensure that those who enter the debate are made aware of the gravity of the issues at stake. Invoking the set-apart sacred character of the debate does this.

When the new political party formed in 2009 in South Africa, the Congress of the People (COPE), challenged the ruling ANC, a journalist was quick to point out that COPE was tackling the “sacred cows” of the ruling party (Amy Musgrave, “COPE resolutions take aim at ANC sacred cows”, Business Day 16 January 2009). In other words, within the politics of the liberation movement there are certain policies, issues and conventions that are considered to be sacrosanct. The new party, in suggesting that some of these “sacred cows” need to be slaughtered or, at the very least, put out to pasture, had to face the wrath of the ANC and the discourse used made it very clear that in transgressing these rules, COPE was defiling what was once held to be sacred. Of course, this also demonstrates the fact that what is sacred is only so by agreement or consensus. Once this consensus had broken down, those who no longer valued things in the same way felt no qualms about transgressing a once set-apart sacred boundary.

Similar examples can be found in the discourse of most polities, whether capitalist, socialist, liberal or social democratic. National ground is holy ground, constitutions are sacred and leaders are to be revered and often simply obeyed. David Chidester has referred to the mass-murder suicide of the members of the People's Temple and the language of sacrifice used by former President Ronald Reagan as examples of the manner in which ideas, spoken in words, give effect to real, concrete events in the material world (Chidester 2005: 91-110). Although these ideological claims are articulated in symbolic terms, in this case by the Reverend Jim Jones and President Reagan respectively, these symbolic depictions of redemptive sacrifice have a material impact on the lives of people.

As significant as mapping the set-apart sacred is in political discourse, the manner in which technology has influenced the production, circulation and consumption of ideas, particularly of a political nature, is notable. The creation of what has been described as a technosphere by Derrida or a mediasphere by Debray is a terrain on which ideas have been given new dimensions by the medium through which they are presented (Derrida 2002, Debray 1996). Echoing Marshall McLuhan's description of the effect of the different media through which subjects are engaged and their impact, the effects of technology as described by Derrida and Debray create a sense of permanence, of inevitability, and of heightened power of ideas presented (McLuhan 1965).

But underneath this veneer of technology lie the words and their material effect. Perhaps mirroring the productivist tendency of orthodox historical materialism, but certainly exhorting the set-apart sacred, Stalin could talk of writers as "engineers

of the human soul” (a quote attributed to Stalin in a speech in 1932 but in fact a phrase coined by Russian novelist Yura Oleshka). In fact, responding to a debate on the transition from capitalism to socialism and communism, Stalin claimed that “Comrade Yaroshenko (an unfortunate opponent who went the way of many in the course of the building of ‘really existing socialism’) does not understand that before we can pass to the formula, ‘to each according to his needs’, we shall have to pass through a number of stages of economic and cultural re-education of society, in the course of which work will be transformed in the eyes of society from only a means of supporting life into life’s prime want, and social property into the sacred and inviolable basis of the existence of society” (Stalin 1972: 68). Clearly Stalin sought to establish terms and conditions in this debate that would allow very little room for disagreement. By invoking the sacred, he was in fact closing down the debate.

Mao similarly resorted to the sacred when he exhorted “the people of the whole country to throw all their strength behind the sacred war of self-defense against Japan. He stated that “our slogans are: Armed defense of Peiping, Tientsin and northern China! Defend our homeland to the last drop of our blood! “ (Mao 1965: 13). As with so much of the discourse of nationalism, sacrifice in the name of the collective is articulated as a sacred duty by Mao, in this instance to defend the national integrity of China.

Clearly, all politicians, whether conservative political leaders such as the Broederbonders, religious leaders, such as the reverend Jim Jones, arch-capitalists such as Ronald Reagan and orthodox communists such as Stalin and Mao all resort to the sacred, both literally and figuratively, when the ideological chips were down. This

language, designed to mobilize those who it addresses, invokes the set-apart sacred, making any counter to this type of call difficult to utter. In such discourse, usually claimed to be secular in modern political times, the set-apart sacred is invoked as the “affective command”, as Debray puts it (Debray 1981: 138).

Such language is of course not material itself, in the way this term is used in common sense. Ideology can and usually does function as the imaginary. There are no clearly defined nation states. Borders are porous, particularly in modern times. Boundaries are essentially arbitrary, in that they could be anywhere. When a call is made to defend a set-apart sacred something — a territory, a people or principle — this entity originates in the imagination of someone and some collective. In any project that imagines a nation, there are those who resist such a call. This does not make the nation any less real once it is imagined, but it is difficult to see a territory, a nation of people or their language as the manifestation of the set-apart sacred. But the effects of ideology are material, precisely because they are symbolic. For the materiality of the set-apart sacred to be observed, we must return to the problem of the fetish.

The fetish

The fetish and fetishism are significant but complex and problematic concepts that relate to the set-apart sacred. William Pietz describes the origins of the fetish as a conceptual category in the discourse that developed as a result of the commercial relationships and cultural interactions between European and African traders on the

West Coast of Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Pietz 1985: 1). In the course of this interaction, a term that originated in Europe to describe an act of black magic or witchcraft was transposed onto the perceived religious or superstitious practices of Africans as observed by the Europeans in this dynamic relationship (Pietz 1985: 1).

The word fetish has its origins in the verb ‘to make’ or ‘to do’: *fetich* in French, *feiticio* in Portuguese and *facticius* or *facere* in Latin (Ellen 1988: 214). The concept of the talisman, a version of the fetish, was used to describe relics of saints, usually their body parts by the Portuguese and from there its use was extended to the objects observed as being of religious significance to the inhabitants of the African West coast (Ellen 1988: 214). As utilized by the European traders who observed the religious practices of the indigenous inhabitants of Africa that they encountered while trading with them, the term came to mean any material object that embodied “religious, commercial, aesthetic and sexual values” (Pietz 1985: 3). Key to the identity of these objects was their artificial character as perceived by the observers of these objects and their apparent worshippers. The social value of such objects is determined in a particular context, in this case between these two cultures, and takes on a form or presence in language that has meanings to those in the encounter, but not necessarily the same meaning to each of the parties.

Roy Ellen describes the cognitive processes he believes are at work in the development of the “cultural representations” that are designated as fetishes. These are the “concretization of abstractions. . . the attribution of qualities of living organisms . . . (the) conflation of signifier and signified. . . (and) an ambiguous relationship

between control of the object by people and of people by the object” (Ellen 1988: 8). Of course, the relationship appears as ambiguous, but the object cannot actually control people. It is the illusion of the power of the object created by the physical nature of the object, the anthropomorphism in its definition and the failure to correctly analyse the nature of the sign in and of the object that gives the object this apparent power.

Bill Ellis, in a study of the rabbits foot as a fetish, has defined fetishism as “the fabrication, acquisition and use of a material object invested with extraordinary spiritual forces, which thus becomes a metonym for an implied narrative and so a means of gaining control over complex social relationships (Ellis 2002: 58). Again, the powers are not actually invested but are believed to be. But the key point is that the process is a strategic one, utilized linguistically and ideologically, to manage the relationships between people.

The concept of the fetish is obviously a powerful one, for as Pietz points out, it went on to be utilised by August Comte, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud to describe various aspects of society. Comte used the fetish as a theory of religion. Marx, while using the fetish as a theory of religion, also utilized the concept as a critique of capitalism (Marx 1976: 163). Freud used the concept of the fetish to characterize the sexual relationship some people have with inanimate objects that are seen to embody or represent parts of the human body or the act of sex. Fetishism, therefore, has a strategic and powerful place in modern theoretical and analytical discourse (Pietz 1985: 1). A review of all of the literature dealing with the fetish is obviously not

possible here, but some consideration of the development of the concept is required if the role of the set-apart sacred is to be analysed.

Significantly, Pietz has described Marx's use of the fetish as a mechanism to understand the ideological nature of the way in which reality is constructed for the human subject. Arguing that contemporary Marxists have tended to downplay the significance of the fetish in Marx, Pietz describes the theory as "a critical, material theory of social desire. . . that presents modern political economy as a real social metaphysics. . . and. . . as a fantastically alien misrepresentation" (Pietz 1993: 129). In this view capitalism and all it comprises — capital, machines, land and money — is a system that has power over people. In other words the entire reality constructed for human subjects is fetishised. Hence Marx's use of language — describing the world in religious, magic and occult terms — is not just a literary strategy. It is in fact the way in which the world appears to those who live in it (Pietz 1993: 130). The fetish is therefore a crucial category for Marxism and one not very often quoted or considered in the discourse generally. It is the category that brings together Marx's critique of religion and of political economy. It is unfortunate that the economic and productivist nature of historical materialism did not allow for the emphasis of this aspect of the theory generally.

As has been pointed out, the idea of the fetish as a sign is not a new one. The earliest recorded theoretical description of the fetish is that of the politician Charles de Brosses (Ellen 1988: 214). De Brosses, Masuzawa argues, sought to utilize the fetish as a theory of religion. This, Masuzawa argues, was also the position taken up by E.B. Tylor (Masuzawa 2000: 243, 244). In this use of the fetish as a theory of religion, the

worship of an object and the attributing to it of powers, both over people and other objects, is seen as a primitive or first form of religion. Masuzawa points out that the term fell into disuse as a theory of religion, but was picked up in other academic discourse to describe the fetishism of commodities and of course sexual fetishism, but at the same time the concept fell in to disrepute, beings regarded as a rudimentary theory about rudimentary practices of primitive people (Masuzawa 2000: 247).

Auguste Comte also used the term in relation to religions, signs and symbols and it is through his influence on the social sciences that the term finds its way into the uses by, among others, Freud (Masuzawa 2000: 249). Freud developed the concept of paraphilia from the fetish of Comte (Ellis 2002: 54). The sexual form of fetishism derives from the original religious meaning of the term but it is diagnosed when objects that are depersonalised and objectified arouse and sexually satisfy a subject that experiences this fixation. In advice that can surely only promote sexual sobriety, one organization concerned with the health of its members advises that “paraphilia is a sexual disorder best treated with shock therapy” (www.minddisorders.com). Clearly, fetishes are not things to be trifled with.

Marx used the concept of the fetish to explain the manner in which commodities, the production and exchange of which he regarded as one of the defining features of capitalism, had come to have a perceived super-natural existence and power over the workers that produce them (Marx 1976: 164). Commodity fetishism was thus the product of the distorted nature of capitalism. Capital and commodities, goods produced and money, really are expressions of the social relations that exist, but these are presented as things in themselves that have “the fantastic form

of a relation between things” (Marx 1976: 165). Ellis points out that Marx considered the primitive religious fetishism and the fetishism of capital as not only comparable but equivalent, in that both projected an arbitrary value onto the object in question (Ellis 2002: 54).

This economic aspect of the fetish is significant, in that it goes to the very issue of how the set-apart sacred is of consequence in the determination of economic values. These various uses of the term are also significant in that they focus attention on the nature of the relationship between the subject and the fetishised object, but it is the set-apart sacred aspect of the fetish that requires consideration, as it points to the manner in which the set-apart sacred is central to the transformation of objects into deified objects and to the creation of value.

Pietz’s description of the origins of the fetish observes the specific materiality of the fetish and the social value of these objects, but he also describes how the sacred, the economic, the artistic and even the erotic values of the society within which the fetish is located and seen to have power, are concentrated in these objects. Observing the practices of the local people who were seen to adorn themselves with or place particular objects in designated places, the Europeans engaging Africans understood this to be a practice that was based in pagan superstition and witchcraft. Of course, what was clearly the case but left unsaid, was not the strangeness of these practices and behaviour, for they surely were presented in forms unfamiliar to the Europeans. But the recognition of the similarity between these fetishes and related practices and the religious and other talismans commonly in use in Europe must have been, subliminally or unconsciously, significant.

Pietz has elsewhere argued that the fetish has to be seen in the context of the colonial conquest of territories and the depiction of it as the antithesis of civilization (Pietz 1985: 55). Given the development of the concept in relationships of trade and the way in which the religious worldview of the European traders shaped their responses to those people they encountered, this is crucial to understanding the significance of the fetish as a conceptual category.

In the eyes of the European traders, the fetish was a dark force, related to human sacrifice and the unknown (Pietz 1985). Pietz describes how the attention of these traders was drawn to the myriad objects worn by their counterparts or located in particular places, that appeared to have some supernatural powers and as their relationship with the Africans developed, the various objects and places that were held in similar dread, even if for different reasons, such as fear of the Africans themselves. But the fetish also acted as a mediating force in the context of exchanges not just between the Europeans and the Africans on a racial basis, but also between these as Christians, Jews, Muslims and those who practiced indigenous African religion (Freinkel 2002: 118).

Whatever their misgivings about the practices of fetishists, the Europeans utilised the concept to ensure that terms of trade could be developed and institutionalized (Graeber 2005: 124). Graeber has argued that the fetish as an object is the product of social creativity, first as an object within the local communities who develop these as a social force for securing relationships within their own communities, but significantly, the fetish also came to play a role in the relationship between the locals and the strangers that came to the shores of Africa to trade.

In an interesting critique of Marx, Graeber makes the following points. He recognizes the argument Pietz makes about the significance of the materiality of the fetish, but points out that what created such a complexity for the Europeans in this relationship was not the difference between the fetish and their religious beliefs, but the obvious similarities between the fetish and social institutions such as commercial and political contracts and agreements that were commonly practiced in Western Europe (Graeber 2005: 114). In the local communities where the Europeans observed the fetish, one of its main functions was as the guarantor of contracts. These were materialised and signified in the fetish object (Graeber 2005: 117). They thus served as bearers of economic value, not dissimilar to money, which is arguably a contract.

In the context of the slave trade, patriarchy, relationships of debt and obligation and the space violated by the colonial intruders, the meaning of the fetish must have been significant, giving rise to both the way in which the category was deployed by the locals and engaged by the strangers. What appeared strange to the Europeans was the manner in which the contract was sealed by such symbols as the locals utilised, often blood or the threat of death. But, as Graeber points out, these rituals are echoed in the blood contracts of capitalist trade, not least of all in the slave trade itself, in the fear of debt and the consequences of economic failure in Europe at the time (Graeber 2005: 125). It must be of significance that the slave trade was ultimately about the sale of local African people to Europeans and other people in faraway places. After such sales, the unfortunate victims of this trade literally vanished from the communities they came from. What more powerful consequence of a contract could there be?

In the collective process of negotiating the social arrangements that are materialized and objectified in the fetish, Graeber argues that deities are being constructed (Graeber 2005: 126). In other words, the fetish is a God in the making. This may well be the case, but what is of greater significance is the fact that the social creativity he describes is possible. It is only because the terms and conditions that are produced in this process are of the set-apart sacred that the fetish can play the role it does.

Given what has been argued about the creation of set-apart sacred objects, be they physical objects, symbols, signs or even individuals, and given the physical, psychological and social causes of objectification, alienation and reification, it has to be understood that fetishism is an unavoidable consequence of the manner in which humans classify, categorise and order their world. Inherent in the subject-object relationship is a relationship of alienation. This, as has been argued, is defined by the corporeal nature of humans, that is, the spatiality of human embodiment, as Merleau-Ponty puts it (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 98). Catherine Bell has pointed out the significance of the body for ritual (Bell 1992: 97-117). In her description of the manner in which the body and ritual are interrelated, Bell makes clear the manner in which physiology determines how space is occupied and how their bodies orientate humans within this. The body is the primary entity within which and through which and even upon which the subject practices ritualisation. Given the significance of ritual for the production, exchange and consumption of the set-apart sacred, it is no accident that central to the making of the fetish is ritual activity. Given the fact of human embodiment, it is also not surprising that other subjects are among the most

fetishised of all things. This is demonstrated in the many ways in which human beings live their existence through other people – their immediate family, their loved ones, those they work and play with, and even those they fear.

Any object, including another person, has a degree of power over others. Hegel understood this in relation to the master-slave relationship (Hegel 1997: 116-119). In this instance the fetish exists in the mind of the slave, with the master having power over him, as well as in the mind of the master, for without the slave the act of domination would cease to be possible. In such a relationship the objectification and alienation that are essential to the fetish are clearly articulated.

Foucault also argues something along these lines in relation to power in the discourses that make up social relationships generally (Foucault: 1976: 64, 1967: 173, 1977; 195-196). In each case of the relationships Foucault describes - patient and doctor, prisoner and warder, teacher and student - the relationship itself is fetishised as the counterparts are seen to have a power over the subject in question. Given that subjectivity is relative, that alienation and objectification are unavoidable aspects of the human condition, it is no wonder that the fetish is as ubiquitous as it is argued to be.

Baudrillard describes how the system of objects in capitalism develops a logic and an existence as an independent linguistic-semiotic system, reifying and fetishising signs and the objects signified (Baudrillard 1996). Although Baudrillard is not so much in favour of the term fetish, it is clear that what he describes in relation to the system of objects is an elaboration of Marx's description of the world where commodities exist as fantastic forms and relationships.

This system organises what Baudrillard calls social difference, the ways in which meaning and location of subjects in society is expressed, whether in class or other terms. The effect of this is that commodities are produced as signs but also signs are produced as commodities, effectively creating a political economy of signs. Since these commodities and signs are all objectified and invested with powers within the system, it stands to reason that any system of signs, that is, any language, by its very nature, is fetishistic.

Everything has a meaning in a system of signs, although these meanings are arbitrary. What gives particular things the meaning they do have is an agreement reached by a social compact, or hegemony based on particular power relations. Meanings can vary and be contested, but they are necessarily the product of a society and the relationships in it (Barthes 1972: 109).

The point about the fetish is that it has materiality, is a physical presence, and is engendered with prohibitions and permissions as well as meanings and interpretations. Unlike other signs, the immediacy of the fetish is apparent to the observers of the object, as are the consequences of breaking the social compact that accompanies it. The economic nature of the fetish is that it gives voice to the incommensurability of values that arise out of two or more systems of value interfacing with each other. This is the only way in which value can be attributed to objects when the parties to a trading relationship face each other with totally different schemes of value. It is notable that in the records of the trading relationships of such a nature, both parties consider the decisions of their counterparts as irrational. For instance, Africans defined gold as the God of Europeans and the Europeans defined

trinkets and similar things as fetishes of the Africans. Both parties fail to grasp the scarcity or rarity of the objects in question as being of significance, no matter how common the items may be to them.

The materiality of these set-apart sacred objects arises in other forms that bear a striking resemblance to the fetish. Crisis cults or cargo cults have their origins in similar relationships between social collectives and strangers who enter into economic relationships with them, trading goods and establishing new relationships that either cause crisis or, alternatively, when a social crisis occurs organically in that collective, find expression in this relationship (Lawrence 1964: 232). Due to the relationship between the economic partners and the arrival of one party with goods at intermittent intervals, it is a short leap of logic to imagine that these strangers can be induced into arriving with more of the same precious cargo. Much has been said with regard to these crisis cults, but what is significant is the fetishised relationship with the bearers of the goods and the fetishised objects that are sought after. In the same way that Europeans misunderstood the fetish, the local people in these crisis cults misunderstand the origin of the goods in question. What they probably got right was the process of valorization, often guessing that these goods required little or no physical labour to be manifested by those who carried them (Lawrence 1964: 248).

Lisa Freinkel has pointed out the criticism of the term fetish by Baudrillard, who argues that the fetish has itself become a fetish, due to its fungibility as a term (Freinkel 2002: 115-116). Pietz acknowledges this weakness of the concept among others, but he correctly points out that the fact that the term is so widely used is not a measure of its lack of clarity. It is worth considering that the term fetish is so widely

used because it aptly describes what is encountered in relation to the subject-object relationship and the fact that fetishism is pervasive.

Tomoko Masuzawa has pointed out the fact that the term is possibly “too liberally expansive and uncritically inclusive” to be of much analytical use (Masuzawa 2000: 243). Despite this, the term pervades the literature of the Victorian era, in Masuzawa’s view mainly because of the era being one of the rise of the commodity. But, as Masuzawa points out, there is very little work that has been done in terms of a theory of the fetish as religion in the making (Masuzawa 2000: 242).

There are many objects that might be regarded as fetishes. Among the most obvious are our bodies, to which much of our energy is focused in either preserving or improving at almost any cost. If that is not an obvious example, the amount of money spent on cosmetics, for decorating our bodies, is. In one financial year in the USA alone the figure for cosmetics purchased was US\$8 billion (Anup Shah 2009, “Poverty Facts and Stats, www.globalissues.org/article 26). The fact that adornments and decorations to the human body are deemed so necessary and desirable is a clear case of objects having a perceived power over human subjects and also the power of such objects to dictate the actions of human.

In South Africa over the recent period there have been a number of examples of the fetish and fetishised relationships and activities, particularly in the political life of this emerging democracy. Development itself is a fetish. The concept of development is constructed out of a number of different elements; the role of government in the economy, investment by the private sector and the idea that this process will fundamentally change the lives of the majority of poor and working class

men, women and children. In truth, despite many iterations of plans to ensure development - the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP), the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy, the Presidential Jobs Summit Agreements and the Growth and Development Summit - all indicators show that unemployment has increased, poverty is on the rise and that infrastructure and services continue to decline in terms of quantity as well as quality. Clearly the power attributed to development has been misplaced, but that does not stop the idea of development dominating the discourse of government.

Technology is arguably a fetish. People all over the world are daily convinced to be on-line, digitally connected, to use mobile technology and to ensure that automation is increasingly utilized to do the things that people can or used to. One of the objectives of all this technology is surely to cut down on the labour performed by people and to ensure improved productivity and greater profitability, within the capitalist system, at least. In fact, with the economic restructuring that such technology brings, people arguably work more and possibly for less. These technological objects can arguably be said to have the perceived effect of immiseration, when in fact it is the productive and social relations within which technology is deployed that determine such effects and they do so on behalf of other human beneficiaries of this effect.

There is another feature of these fetishised relationships and phenomenon. Cargo cults, thought to be the preserve of ignorant, parochial communities cut off from mainstream, global culture, are alive and well. The lottery fever, where people are led to believe and clearly want to believe that by spending a small amount of money, they can win big, is almost universal, as are casinos. This idea that money will

be spontaneously generated is not new. But that it has become part of mainstream culture is surely significant (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000).

Similarly, events such as the 2010 Football World Cup have many similarities to cargo cults. The prevailing or popular view of the Football World Cup in South Africa is that it will bring investment, tourists, money and opportunities. Just like the cargo cults as classically described, outside powers, in this case the Federation of International Football Associations, FIFA, are bringing the cargo. All the locals need to do is observe the rules and sit and wait. The cargo will come.

The fetish then is the term used to identify what is one product of the determination of the set-apart sacred and its materialization in society. The fetish is therefore one form of a system for managing the sacred that combines the material, the symbolic and the imaginary within it. The fetish serves to illustrate that all these systems for managing the set-apart sacred have these aspects, but they are covert or occluded and need to be unmasked. The fetish is essentially an object invested with imaginary power through the process by which it comes to symbolize some or another social compact. In the course of negotiating the relationships in any collective, or between individuals, agreements are reached that are recorded. This recordal, whether in the form of a single symbol, a totem or a written contract, is then seen to bind the parties to the agreement. This agreement places both rights and obligations on the parties and is protected by both inducements as well as by sanctions. In essence, any commodity or any sign is a fetish, in that once it is taken to signify both the signified and itself, it is reified and endowed with a power of its own and thus fetishised.

The fetish grounds the sacred in the material and at the same time the sacred socializes the fetish, giving it an agreed value that is then expressed in a number of forms, as social, political or economic capital. From this basis, it is not difficult to imagine how fetishised objects become coveted, as well as feared, and are thus exchanged to ensure that social arrangements within and between communities are preserved. It is a clear demonstration that exchange proceeds commodity production, but follows the production of symbolic property.

Given the predominance of capitalism over all other forms of social interaction, it should come as no surprise that of all the forms of the fetish, it is the most powerful commodity of all, money, that is the most prevalent, the most potent and the most revealing of the set-apart sacred.

Money

Money, as a commodity, as a means of exchange, and as a sign of value is the ultimate fetish, due to its multi-faceted character, its fungibility and its utility in the ultimate control of all of the systems for managing the sacred. Like ideology and the fetish, money functions at a material, a symbolic and at an imaginary level. It is therefore the medium through which the set-apart sacred can be transubstantiated. Money literally changes everything. It commodifies all relationships and things.

Money reveals the sacred and the profane in the category of the set-apart sacred. The description of money as filth, as dirt and as shit is also well documented.

This is of significance because it is instructive of the ambiguous nature of money. On the one hand, it is valued as being symbolic of freedom and of choice. Wealth is revered, even in religions. On the other hand, it is not just any money that is acceptable and the wrong money or money in all its guises can be negatively described.

Money has been portrayed as everything from human excreta to human freedom. In a review of money in Victorian England, Christopher Herbert demonstrates the contradictory relationship between the religious notion of money as a taboo object and its desired character as a modern capitalist tool of facilitation (Herbert 2002: 190). Described as anathema to Christian values on the one hand, and as polluting excreta on the other, none of these depictions has had the effect of tempering the desire for money.

The amount of money available in the world today is staggering. In 2006 the world produced \$US48.6 trillion worth of goods and services. At the same time stock markets were worth \$UD50.6 trillion, bonds \$US67.9 trillion, leveraged buyouts were worth \$US753 billion and all derivatives traded were worth \$US400 trillion (Ferguson 2008: 5-6). One has to ask, where did all this money come from?

Money, like the fetish, means many different things to many different people. Various descriptions of money as a medium of exchange, a store of value, a commodity, as labour power expressed in a sign, money is a slippery theoretical concept, much like the real thing that eludes so many. Numismatics, the study of money and its history, is a subject much has been written on. Money in the form of coins, J. K. Galbraith argues, has been mentioned in the Hindu epics, dating it before the mention of it by

Herodotus as early as the eighth century B.C. (Galbraith 1975: 18). The Mesopotamians also had tablets that recorded debts, arguably a form of money as an early promissory note, as early as the second century B.C. (Ferguson 2008: 26). Given the identification of money in the form of shells and as other commodities in various accounts of ethnographers, it is arguable that money is as old as economic exchange itself.

Money in the form of coins has been found in various places — India, Egypt, Greece and Iraq — dating back to the eighth century B.C. If there is one common theme running through the history of money it is the question of its authenticity. Apart from coins, Galbraith identifies “cattle, shells, whisky and stones” being used as money, but for all intents and purposes, until recent times, metal and precious metal in particular has acted as money (Galbraith 1975: 17).

It is significant to note that there are broadly two different views on the role of money and its origins. The one regards it as a development to ease the complexities of barter and the other regards money as a social relation that gave rise to markets, exchange and even the production of commodities (Smithin 2000: 6).

Whatever the origins of money, its development through spurring on the colonial conquests of the Americas and Africa in the search for precious metals arguably started the process of the globalization of markets. The resultant impact on Europe, inflation, has also been well documented (Galbraith 1975: 22-23, Ferguson 2008: 27). The amount of silver appropriated from the South American conquests is said to have drastically caused the devaluation of the currencies in Europe.

But one of the consequences of this devaluation was the formalisation of banking and the creation of promissory notes that went with it. It is at this point that money really begins to dominate economies. Banking can be traced back to the Roman era and certainly in the Italian Renaissance, the creation of money credit is notable (Ferguson 2008: 42). The explosion of money as a medium of exchange is therefore directly related to the era of mercantile capitalism.

Since there have always been problems with the authenticity of money, whether in the form of adulterated precious metal, in the prospect of forgeries or in terms of the agreed value of a particular currency in relation to others, getting a guarantee of authenticity has been a priority (Galbraith 1975: 20). In this regard, it is clear that money is a matter of belief, since it requires a willingness to accept the *bona fides* of the government, a ruler or some authority that must have credibility (Ferguson 2008: 30). Another way of putting it is that money is a relationship, a process and a sign that is secured by social agreement. Given that anything can serve as money, including nothing these days with cyberspace money, money is the purest form of the sign. It is a powerful code, but also a commodity. It is perhaps the one object that actually functions as Baudrillard describes all commodities to function.

The creation of banking and the removal of the gold standard had the effect of hugely increasing the supply of money and this through increasing the amount of credit available. If anything is responsible for the growth of capitalism, it is the supply of money itself, for money does not sit still. The simple accounting formula that is applied where banks hold only a portion of the deposits they have taken and lend out money they do not have, that is they create money, seems completely ridiculous if one

thinks about it. One unit a banker holds allows them loan out nine! But this alchemy is only possible because depositors believe the banks can pay them. When they cannot, a run on banks follows very quickly and the alchemist's sleight of hand reveals them to be a conjurer.

Marx defined money as being a commodity, albeit one of a special kind (Marx 1976: 229). He also described it as being a unique social relationship and as appearing to have sacred characteristics (Marx 1976: 167). Marx recognized the set-apart sacred significance of money, referring to it variously as alchemy, as a fetish, as an illusion and as the concentrated expression of labour power (Marx 1976: 162). In Marx's view, it is in relation to money, the purest sign, that the social relations are most clearly expressed under capitalism (Marx 1970: 176). Money, a commodity that becomes a common store of value and a means of exchange, does so by being a symbol or a representation of socially necessary labour power (Marx, 1970: 188). Abstract social labour is given status only in so far as it is objectified in a commodity (Marx, 1970: 164). But in creating commodities, humanity is confronted with the "metaphysical subtleties and the theological niceties" that these objects generate (Marx 1970: 163). What is produced becomes an entity with a dual characteristic, that of being a material object and that of being an entity that exists as one stored with potential and loaded with significance" (Marx 1970: 165). With commodities, "the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own" (Marx 1970: 165). Marx goes on to state that "value transforms every product into a social hieroglyphic" (Marx 1970: 167).

The effect of money is to create entities and their representation that have the same characteristics as deities. Marx best describes this creation of symbolic property with respect to the creation of money. As noted, for Marx, money is a commodity with a unique character (Marx, 1970: 186, 188). But the creation of money as a means of exchange, as a store of value, as a symbol of all other commodities is occasioned by a number of processes. Money first arises in the form of some tangible commodity, whether gold, silver or shells, and because the value of all other commodities can be measured in terms of this particular commodity it therefore becomes a medium of exchange (Marx 1970: 189). Money is able to perform this function because it is firstly an expression of objectified human labour (Marx 1970: 188). The expression of the value of all other commodities in one commodity, such as gold, is, “a purely ideal act” (Marx 1970: 190). Money is therefore the “absolutely alienable commodity, because it is all other commodities divested of their shape, the product of their universal alienation” (Marx 1970: 205). Money is therefore first and foremost a symbolic phenomenon.

Money arises only once counting and accounting develop for the purposes of exchange. Money, it turns out, is significantly associated in early societies with religion because only the literate, often priests, carried out this function. Marx regards gold as the Holy Grail of capitalist society (Marx 1970: 230). The relationship between money and numbers is also a mystical one, numbers being seen as representations of the sublime and divine nature of the universe.

Marx describes the very circulation of money as being an act of magic or alchemy (Marx 1970: 229). Interestingly, he points out the confusion that arises from

the fact that commodities first are represented by another commodity in exchange, for example gold, but later, as the money system develops, by a mere symbol of that commodity itself, in the form of paper money. He states that “the fact that money can be, in certain functions, replaced by mere symbols of itself, gives rise to (the) mistaken notion that it is itself a mere symbol” (Marx 1970: 185). Marx describes money variously as “cabbalistic signs” (Marx 1970: 165), or as “possessing magic” (Marx 1970: 169). Money is really the most potent economic sign of capitalism. It is also a sign of many other things, but in capitalist society it is money more than anything else that shapes the relations between people and other people and between people and objects.

The fact that Marx sees through money in the manner that he does begs the question as to why he did not explore that dual characteristic of money any further. Perhaps that was not his interest, but had he, the theory of the commodity cycle would look somewhat different. Graeber points out that money, in certain instances, was worn as an adornment by chiefs or kings in pre-capitalist dominated societies (Graeber 1996). Graeber’s point is essentially that money develops socially not as a product of the economy, but as the set-apart sacred which then becomes utilized in economic transactions. Therefore, the relationship between money and the sacred predates that of the economic use of money, making it a symbol adapted from sacred utility to economic utility (Sutton 2004: 377). The question that has to be asked is whether in that adaptation, the symbolic relationship between money and the set-apart sacred is maintained.

Mauss also described the social and sacred nature of exchange, including the use of certain objects as money (Mauss 1966: 70). He pointed out that shells that were used as money were treated with great reverence and were believed to have certain powers. Again, this primacy of objects endowed with powers, through their set-apart nature and their proximity to political and religious power, is significant, for it reveals the pre-economic, archaic and primordial nature of money.

If money was given its status not by labour but by social rituals that set it apart as sacred, this would also explain its dual nature. In other words, a particular commodity, because of its fungible character, is designated as set apart from other objects and becomes utilised as a medium of exchange because of its set-apart sacred characteristics. Such an object, fetishised in this manner, obviously has the assumed power to change the form of all objects into commodities. But this would make money an expression not of concentrated labour power, but of the value of all commodities by virtue of its set-apart nature.

Money can therefore be regarded as a pure sign and certainly, with the advent of paper money and electronic money, that is clearly what it has become. Money only works or has value because it is agreed to be of value by those engaged in the economic transactions where it is utilised. This is exactly the process of designating the set-apart sacred. In late capitalism, but as is recorded, many times before, the value of money has been seen to disappear virtually overnight when there is a loss of confidence in it. This loss of confidence cannot be attributed to a loss of value as created by or through labour-power. In fact, economists talk of 'good' and 'bad' money. Good money is that which is believed to have more value. Bad money can be

anything that does not have a value as high as it previously did. We have witnessed in recent times, ‘bad’ money in the form of mortgages that are unpaid and derivatives based on these, being isolated because this money is regarded as being ‘toxic’ (Krugman 2008: 175). A better example of the sacred becoming the profane would be hard to find

There are examples of private money systems that essentially create money out of nothing. Communities who seek to promote local economic development or green trading have developed money to ensure closed systems of exchange. These systems invent a currency and through recording transactions between people, allow exchange to take place. Ithaca in the United States is one of the most famous and longest existing private money systems (www.ithicahours.org). This is clear evidence for the fact that money can be created out of anything, by agreement, just as banks literally create more money out of some money (Ferguson: 2009: 63).

It has been argued that there are other forms of capital than financial, namely human and social. But under capitalism all of these are ultimately expressed in a monetarised form, especially if they are to be of practical consequence.

The related concepts of risk and insurance are instructive as they also reveal the arbitrary nature of determining value. Money has been closely related to financial bubbles and to war and revolution (Ferguson 2009). But whatever the effect of these valuations, devaluations and revaluations of money, it is instructive to learn that financial institutions make money out of these transactions whichever way they go.

Roger Friedland has shown how “foreign” money can be a source of great anxiety for religious nationalists in particular, but arguably this is a more generalized

problem of nationalism (Friedland 2002: 401). The fact that money can be endowed with nationalist sentiment demonstrates the extent to which its fetishisation dominates its deemed characteristics. How else can the intransigence of a country such as the United Kingdom in relation to accepting the Euro as a currency be understood? The Pound Sterling is no more or less in the control of the Bank of England than the Euro, but the fetish of a national currency trumps any and all financial logic.

An interesting theme with regards to money relates to transgressions of the value of money through what has been described as the occult economy, gambling and crime (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 301). These transgressions give rise to money described variously as hot, dirty, or fast and the relationship to money in this regard takes on a new level of ambiguity. They also reveal the extent to which people are able to imagine the possibility of conjuring up money out of nothing, winning it, taking it away from somebody else and even destroying it in the hope that this will result in even more money coming their way.

Galbraith points out that money is able to induce a sense of the supernatural in to any relationship or society (Galbraith 1975: 72). This relates to its seemingly inexplicable power to act as a medium of exchange, a store of value, its form in precious metal, alternatively in paper and nowadays even just as a numeral in cyberspace.

If everything is a fetish, including the fetish as a category itself, what gives anything meaning that is not the cause of alienation, psychological discomfort and anxiety, is arguably money. Money is the mediator in capitalism. It is the set-apart sacred in a most powerful material form. It is this form of the fetish, money, that most

graphically reveals the set-apart sacred, the ambiguity of the set-apart sacred and the social creativity that underpins it. Because it is seen as the answer to everything, it is a panacea and the most powerful of all things, but it is always elusive.

David Chidester has described the relationship between blood, money, gangsters of the Cape Flats and the United States of America (Chidester 2005: 113-124). This study in the political economy of the sacred sets out the truly fetishised nature of money where it is seen to liberate, to sentence to death and to transform the nature of reality itself as it globalises the market.

Money is also regarded as the measure of civilization, with barter representing the primitive by comparison (Mander 1991: 216). In the conquests of colonialists in the Americas, Africa and Australia, money was the tool by which colonialists out-organised and defeated the indigenous people, even assigning a value in monetary terms to human lives. Settlers were able to collect a bounty for the scalps of Khoi people in South Africa, Aboriginal people in Australia and Native Americans in North and South America. In the drive to make more money, these practices facilitated the genocide of whole nations.

In modern capitalism, money has continued to dictate the politics of developing countries, whether through the rules of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, prescribing to countries what their policies should be, or in financing *coup d'etat* on behalf of multi-national corporations (Stiglitz 2002, Chapman 2007).

Polyani argues that money is not a commodity, but an “essential element of industry” (Polyani 1957: 72). He describes it as an outcome of industrialization. While

money has clearly changed in terms of its nature and character, such a view is not sustainable. Money, as Marx clearly explains, and as the set-apart sacred aspect of its creation shows, is an entity that is accorded its value by agreement between those who utilize it. Of course, the value can be said to be fictitious or imaginary, but the effect is simultaneously symbolic and real.

Adam Smith regarded money as having no intrinsic value, describing it as merely oil to the wheels of capitalism (Smith 1993: 178). If that is the case, one wonders what he would have made of phenomena such as Ponzi schemes, the most incredible one being that perpetrated by Bernie Madoff. The victims of this scheme, through their own folly, have collectively lost \$US65 billion dollars (Arvedlund 2009: 6). There is no amount of convincing that will make these people believe that what they have lost has no intrinsic value.

The issue of the abundance of money is significant. It surely is related to the issue of the surplus of signification in general. While physical commodities and services can only be created through the activities of people working in a cooperative manner across the productive, exchange related and consumptive spheres of the economy, money, as has been argued above, can be created by fiat. Given that it retains its value by social agreement, this should pose no problem. In reality, it is clear that the value of money relates directly to the supply of it (Keynes 2006). This points to the arbitrary nature of value and the resultant problematic of its expression in the sign form of money. If this is the case, then it is no wonder that the economy is likened to a casino (Costello, Michie and Milne 1989), and that fears of observers and

commentators on what has been done to obviate the 2009 global financial crisis are such that they anticipate continued turbulence and economic recession.

This fetish, money, is unique and powerful. It is at once both the material of capitalism and the purest expression of the ideology of the system. There is no conceivable way in which modern capitalism could function without money as it does today. Neither is it possible to contemplate any alternative to capitalism without the use of money in the modern form. What then does that leave by way of the potential to transform society? With money so much in abundance, yet so unevenly distributed, it is no wonder that one evangelist, the Reverend Ike, has insisted that it is not money but the lack of money that is the root of all evil (Chidester 2005: 112).

Chapter 5: Conclusions

By way of some conclusions based on the arguments given above, the following points are put forward. The set-apart sacred as a category is central to human social existence. Religion, as a conceptual category may seem obvious, but only at a superficial level. A reasoned critique demonstrates its lack of clarity, focus and efficacy as a conceptual category and its contested status as an actual human activity and institution.

The set-apart sacred is a material category that provides a theoretical basis for understanding religion, but also politics and the economy. As such, this category is an effective one that demystifies ideas of the supernatural, the occult, spiritual realms and the like, as well as the idealist notion that ideas have force of effect on the material world through some inexplicable means, by providing a materialist theory for why people have and believe ideas that are obviously imaginary and yet these ideas can have a material impact in the world. The existence of such seemingly obvious and true ideas is due to the relationship between the real and the imaginary spheres of our existence. This relationship is mediated through the category of the symbolic and in the case of the set-apart sacred, through symbolic property. The set-apart sacred assists by unmasking these ideas, allowing what seems mystical, supernatural, holy and significant in an exceptional manner to be considered alongside other social phenomena, such as language and history, to name but two examples that seem to resonate with the concept.

Symbolic property is produced through the process of the determination of the set-apart sacred. All semiotic systems — languages, religions, ideologies and economies — function through the deployment of symbolic property. Hence the possibility of and the need to develop a critique of the political economy of the set-apart sacred.

Historical materialism, regarded as the exemplar of the study of political economy, is shown to be idealist, biased towards production as a category at the expense of exchange and consumption and economistic in its perspective. The set-apart sacred empowers the historical materialist method to be re-materialised, to be located as a critique of production, exchange and consumption, as well as developed as a theory that offers a critique of religion, politics and the economy.

The economy is a development of the set-apart sacred as a category, with exchange being the primary activity that enables social interaction between people or groups of people. While production and consumption as related activities are of great significance, exchange is the dynamic process that lays the foundation for development, for the movement from rudimentary economic activity to commodity production and capitalism in the modern form. This re-thinking of historical materialism opens up the possibility of changing the bias in theory and in practice that leads to political and economic distortions, such as regarding the role of wage or paid labour as the source of all economic value to the manner in which money and markets are managed.

The category of necessary social labour is established as the key process through which value is created. Truly socialised labour, that is, labour that is geared

towards social, political and economic productivity, is necessary to create the cohesion and social stability that must prevail if peaceful development is to take place. To that extent, the Marxist category of socially necessary labour is a limited one, focused only on the production of material goods and services. Necessary social labour is a definition of labour that includes socially necessary labour, but also all the unpaid, unrecognised labour that is central to reproduction of societies most precious commodity, human beings. This includes the production of all symbolic property – found in the forms language, culture, religion, politics and the economy – that is generally not accorded a monetary value but without which the reproduction of society is not conceivable.

The category of ritual is established as the key process through which necessary social labour has the effects it does. Set-apart activities and actions — the stuff of religion, politics and economics — is mediated through the process of ritual. In these processes of ritualisation, value is produced, assigned material existence and is made fungible, by focusing the attention of people on to the particular markedness of an object, a relationship or an activity itself. This assigned value is made tangible in the form of the object itself, or in a sign of the object. Ritual is therefore work.

There are many possible forms of systems for managing the set-apart sacred can take, but three categories are of particular significance, ideology, the fetish and money. These illustrate and elucidate the set-apart sacred in the world. Ideology reveals the power of set-apart sacred language. The fetish reveals the set-apart sacred nature of significant or valuable objects. Money, the most potent expression of ideology and the fetish, reveals itself for what it is in effect, the most powerful deity.

The consequences of the set-apart sacred in society set limits for transformation in society. Any conception of transformation, no matter how revolutionary, must be premised on the understanding that to transform society a new ideology, new relationships between people and objects and between each other and a socialized conception of value need to be developed, at the very least. In other words, humans need to better understand the limitations of their biological, psychological and social construction if they are to overcome these in the pursuit of a better, more just and more sustainable future. Given the power of the capitalist economy, the question arises as to whether this is possible. Socialist experiments, particularly those premised on creating an oasis of socialism in a desert of capitalism, have all failed. At least one of the reasons has been the inability of the socialist system to overcome these challenges to date. It may well be that this is not possible unless the entire global system is changed simultaneously. Patterns of development to date make that possibility an unlikely one.

The set-apart sacred can probably be re-socialised, but the fact that it has these aspects to it—the material, the symbolic and the imaginary—means that in the course of this re-socialisation, a critical aspect of that process must be the unmasking of the set-apart sacred and the destruction of value created. Such an unmasking places on the agenda the fact that a large part of the processes that dominate politics, economics, religion and society generally, are arbitrary and can be decided upon by social agreement. This removes many constraints to possible transformation but may well add others, in that arguments for or against particular decisions cannot be based on claims by one class or category of people very easily.

Superficial change, that does not take in to account the material processes of the set-apart sacred and the ideological power of the category, is bound to only take critique so far in realizing its objectives. A real critique of religion and capitalism must recognise the relationship between these two systems for managing the set-apart sacred and by identifying the origins of this relationship, empower activists to change the nature of both.

Value, if it is to be managed and not allowed to destabilize society, needs to be re-socialised. Historically, this has been done through the ritual destruction or redistribution of goods through institutions such as the pot-latch and sacrifice. One of the features of capitalism is the continued hoarding and monopolisation of value in the form of money and capital. This destabilizes the system. It distorts power relationships, the functioning of the circulation of commodities and of value itself, creating uncertainty and as a result, periodic crises. One issue worth considering is whether or not modern forms of the pot-latch or sacrifice could be beneficial to societies and to the process of re-socialisation. This conclusion is echoed in the calls for developed countries to write-off the debts of third world countries, or for the now quarantined “toxic assets” that were the trigger for the latest economic crisis to be written off.

The questions such conclusions raise are profound. Can the critique of a general political economy be articulated in such a manner that it allows people to understand the nature of religion, politics and economics? Since the power of the set-apart sacred in the form of money is so real and entrenched, it is arguable that this task is an immense one. An intellectual critique of the set-apart sacred may be important

for mobilising intellectuals, but it is not clear that this could mobilise the masses to change the world.

If historical materialism is idealistic, productivist and economistic, what does this mean for the programs of socialist, communist and workers parties around the world? Their manifest failure in advancing the cause of socialism needs no reiteration, but what programmatic alternative is there, other than intellectual critique? Once the task of re-materialising historical materialism is accomplished, social transformation may well be on the agenda, but this requires an end to elitism, an end to all privatisation of the social wealth and value in existence and a conception of co-operation that balances the need for social stability with the need to allow freedom for the human subject. This task is one that may well be described as the human condition, for it was ever thus.

Finally, the academic study of religion, an important and productive institution to date, is revealed to be at a cross-road by the category of the set-apart sacred. Does it take the easy route of accepting some of the criticisms made of it, but soldier on as an academic category that will no doubt employ many people, but to little or no practical consequence except for the intellectuals in the academy itself? Or does it grasp the challenge of the set-apart sacred as a category and look its Gods and Devils in the eye, claim them as its own creations and assist humanity in demystifying the world?

A political economy of the set-apart sacred, like Marx's ground-breaking critique of political economy, can liberate the next generation of scholars and activists. Understanding the significance and the crucial, material nature of the set-apart sacred is the key to humankind's freedom – from alienation, objectification, fetishism and

ultimately indoctrination and exploitation. For that reason alone, it is a key task for scholars in the academy.

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