In order to comprehend the Frankfurt School’s contribution to the sociology of religion, one must first have a working understanding of the Frankfurt School’s critical theory of society or as it is more commonly known the critical theory. So, let us begin with an overview of the historical development of the School’s key thinkers and their intellectual contributions. First, and foremost, the critical theory of religion is a sub-category of the critical theory and relies upon many of the assumptions and assertions of its parent (Siebert 1987.ix; Ott 2001:1-14). It also must be noted, unlike other academic disciplines where strict adherence to the separation of the disciplines are maintained, the critical theory and the critical theory of religion engage in interdisciplinary programs of research (Horkheimer 1995:188-243; Held 1980:30-33, 187-189; Bronner 2011:1-8). As a final note before we begin, the word critical means something very particular to critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. The word critical is commonly understood as ‘expressing adverse and/or disapproving judgment.’ For many, the term is part of the
category of ‘hard language’ and is often avoided in the sphere of politics, at all cost (Carlin 2004:6-8, 77-84). When critical theorists use the term critical, they imply, in addition to the first understanding, two additional notions: (1) that the ‘negative is the positive’ (Hegel 1997:53-54), and (2) that in the foreground of any and all inquires into the inner-workings of society — be it in theory formation or analysis — the effects of the antagonism between the classes must take center stage. In other words, critical theorists do not harmonize or ‘sweep under the rug’ how the game ‘society’ is rigged in favor of the high bourgeoisie and those who support them. With this being said, allow me to give a working definition of critical theory in order to explain Prof. Siebert’s critical theory of religion.

Let us begin with Micheal Ott’s very succinct explanation of the critical theory, found in Prof. Siebert’s three volume manifesto (2010). Ott wrote, the critical theory:

“... comprehends modern civil society as an antagonistic society totality based on the non-equivalent exchange process through which the society produces and reproduces itself. From this critical perspective, the resulting antagonisms of modern civil society are the consequences of the capitalistic production and reproduction system wherein the capitalist class systematically appropriates the surplus value / profit that is