

PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF KARL MARX'S RADICAL CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

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"For Germany the criticisms of religion is in the main complete, and the criticism of religion is the presupposition of all criticisms."

"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world and the soul of the soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people ..."

"Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself. ... The criticism of heaven is thus transformed into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics."

—Karl Marx (1844)

Introduction

The preceding paragraphs were written by Karl Marx in 1844. They appear in "Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," where he proclaims the radicality of his critique of religion. They are Marx's kerygmatic paradigm, or the magna carta of his materialist, atheistic philosophy. As such, they are of pivotal importance in our attempt to understand Marx's philosophical basis.

This paper seeks to present a compact picture of Marx's critique of religion in the context of his formative philosophical milieu. It also seeks to show that Marx's preoccupation with religion or its repudiation is not peripheral to his thought; rather, it is fundamental, a continuing concern that pervaded and permeated his entire intellectual career. This central concern is reflected in the writings of the so-called "young Marx" as well as the "mature Marx." Therefore, a correct understanding of Marx's critique of religion gives us a key to comprehend his philosophical system. Finally, this paper presupposes that only by confronting Marx's critical assessment of religion, or his rejection of religion, can we begin to construct a theology that takes seriously the challenge of a dynamic movement in contemporary culture and history.

The explication of the philosophical roots of Marx's critique of religion is based on his three works. These are: Marx's letter to his father, dated 10 November 1837 (Marx Engles

Collected Works or CWI, 1975:10-21); his doctoral dissertation entitled *Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, completed in March 1841 (CWI, 1975:25-105); and the article "Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," written at the end of 1843 and early 1844 (See end note 1). Indeed, if there is a peculiar thrill in diving and waving "into the sea" of Marxian texts, there is far more thrill and pleasure in the successful act of bringing "genuine pearls into the light of day." (CWI, 1975: 18).

Religion in the Context of Marx's Critique

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to clarify our definition of religion in accordance with the kind of understanding which Marx himself presupposed. Undoubtedly as presupposed in the Marxian quotation at the beginning of this paper, what Marx had in mind was the religion of his contemporary Germany. It was, writes McLellan, 'a religion dominated by a dogmatic and over-spiritual Lutheranism,' (McLellan, 1973:89).

Moreover, it was a religion that emphasized the quality of transcendence and dichotomizes the supernatural and the natural, the *other* world and *this* world. Ultimately, the religion which Marx sought to repudiate is the religion that was promoted and protected by the Prussian state, a religion which in turn was legitimized, sanctified and perpetuated by the socially and economically exploitative Prussian state.

In a sense, religion is a form of an "inverted world-consciousness" produced by a society or state that was an "inverted world." In the typical, stinging Marxian statement 'Religion is the general theory of that [inverted] world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source of consolation and justification ... The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against *the world* of which religion is the spiritual *aroma*,' (CWI, 1975:175).

A careful textual analysis of Marx's early writings up to 1844 would provide us with three distinct stages in the development of his attitude towards religion.

The first stage was that of conventional acceptance of Christian ideas as transmitted through Marx's family and the dominant Christian culture. This is clearly seen in Marx's "gymnasium" days, particularly in two of his final examination essays, namely, "Reflections of a Young Man on a Choice of Profession," and "The Union of Believers with Christ According to John 15:1-14, Showing its Basis and Essence, its Absolute Necessity and its Effects." (CWI, 1975: 3-9; 636-639).

The second stage in Marx's attitude towards religion was diametrically opposed to the first: an outright rejection on philosophical grounds of Christian and all theistic beliefs. This attitude was developed during Marx's studies in the universities of Bonn and Berlin. It was

a thoroughly atheistic attitude. While at Berlin University, Marx could not escape the seductive appeal of Hegel's philosophy. Hegel had been a professor there till his death in 1831. The influence of Hegel continued to be a very strong through his young and radical disciples who were known as left-wing Hegelians.

The third stage in Marx's attitude towards religion is seen in his radical critique of the use of religion by the state. Coupled with this radical critique was Marx's profound socio-economic analysis of the interests represented by the state. This stage is seen in his work as a journalist in 1842 and lasted for the rest of his life.

Marx's Philosophical Patron Saints

We will now have a detailed textual analysis of the three Marxian primary texts mentioned earlier. By doing this exegetical exercise, we hope to draw out the identity of the philosophical patron saints whose names Marx invoked in his elemental revolt against religion. In the "Foreword" to his dissertation, Marx cited the words that Aeschylus put into the mouth of Prometheus: "I hate the packs of gods." The resolution decision not to give up his having been chained to a rock in exchange for the offer of servitude to "Father Zeus" earned for Prometheus, according to Marx, the singular accolade of "the most eminent saint and martyr of the philosophical calendar." (CWI, 1975:31).

Let us begin with Marx's letter to his father. This unusually lengthy letter (10 pages) gives us a glimpse of Marx's philosophical and spiritual pilgrimage.

One of the most characteristic features of Marx's life and thinking, even at this early stage, was an intense sense of history. This is immediately obvious in the letter to his father. The first paragraph states: "There are moments in one's life which are like frontier posts marking the completion of a period but at the same time clearly indicating a new direction." (CWI, 1975: 10).

This tremendous sense of history, which pervades in most of Marx's writings, points to a convergence of world history in an individual's biography. This certainly is a Hegelian notion which Marx had recently been absorbing in his studies. As Marx put it: "Individual life, like a movement of world history, reveals the inner activity of the spirit. The essence of objective and subjective reality is action."

During these formative years of his academic career, Marx sharpened his sword of reason and engaged himself in intellectual fencing with prominent philosophers. He was driven by an unrestricted desire for knowledge, as he continuously made excerpts of literary-historical and philosophical works, until he became completely exhausted in body and mind. He fell ill. His doctor prescribed a long rest in the countryside.

It was there, while recovering, that Marx 'got to know Hegel from beginning to end, together with most of his disciples,' (CWI, 1975:19). Marx recognized his being ever more firmly bound to the modern world of philosophy, from which he sought, unsuccessfully, to escape. The invigorating taste of Hegel's philosophy allured him 'to dive [deeper] into the sea ... with the definite intention of establishing that the nature of the mind is just as necessary, concrete and firmly based as the nature of the body. My aim was no longer to practice tricks of swordsmanship, but to bring genuine pearls into the light of the day,' (CWI, 1975:18).

His launching into the deep resulted in a 24-page work — "Cleanthes, or The Starting Point and Necessary Continuation of Philosophy" — which united art and science. This work gives a "philosophical-dialectical account of divinity ... as religion, and nature, as history." Marx referred to this work as "my dearest child, reared by moonlight," which had caused him endless headaches 'until for some days my vexation made me quite incapable of thinking.' (CWI, 1975: 18).

Marx continues his report to his father by mentioning the names of philosophers and legal luminaries whom he had been studying. Among them, besides Hegel, were Feuerbach, Aristotle, Kant, Kessing, Fichte, etc. He concluded the letter with the mention of domestic family affairs and a request for fatherly forgiveness on account of 'my much agitated state of mind ... overwhelmed by my militant spirit,' (CWI, 1975:21).

In assessing the import of this revelatory letter, I would like to cite two reliable Marxian literary guides. One, Father Joel Tabora, who, after thoroughly dissecting the letter in the original German, discovers "a temporal dichotomy in Marx's thought between the real and the ought." Marx himself recognized the untenability of the dichotomy and sought to overcome it by interpreting the "side of the ought to be emergent from the side of the real." Tabora concludes that the philosophical thought of the young Marx could be described as 'dialectical realism or dialectical materialism [which] must yet unfold in detail. But the seeds that are to unfold are, uncannily, already recognizable in this letter,' (Tabora, 1983:21).

Another reliable guide says that the letter reveals Marx's state of mind which is "torn between two contradictory ideas and passions." It embodies the inextricable entanglement of Marx's 'philosophical reflections, artistic enthusiasm, and the ardour of a consuming love. It is this particular mixture which makes the letter a true revelation of Marx's inner development.' (See end note 1 esp. Van Leeuwen p.64).

Marx's encounter with Hegel's philosophy as reflected in the letter leads to an intimate "conversion-story with a depth of a confession of faith." This encounter, says Van Leeuwen 'is permeated by all the blissful and terrifying features which make the water symbolism such a striking expression of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the tremendous and fascinating mystery of religion,' (See end note 1 esp. Van Leeuwen p.65). In brief, there was both fear and fascination felt by Marx. Fear, because the strong impact of Hegelian thought threatened his own freedom of thought; fascination, because he was challenged to dive

deeper into the sea (Hegel's thought) in an heroic effort to bring the "genuine pearls" of truth into the light of reason.

Seeds of Atheism in Epicurean Philosophy

It is at this point where Marx's dissertation would concern us. His diving and immersing himself into the ocean depths of Hegel's philosophical system culminated in the precious pearl of truth contained in his dissertation.

The work was completed in March 1841, and his degree was conferred on him *in absentia* a month after by the University of Jena. The dissertation provides us with a key to understanding the philosophical foundations of Marx's thinking, its methodology and its structure. It is unfortunate that not the whole manuscript is preserved. What is preserved, however, gives us an adequate profile of Marx's philosophical thought, specifically his critique of religion. Happily, seven books of exercises filled with notes on Epicurean philosophy, which Marx used in preparing the dissertation, have been preserved.

Marx announces in the Foreword that his dissertation had solved a particular problem in Greek philosophy. It is obvious that Epicurus stands out prominently among Marx's philosophical patron saints.

Marx begins by asserting that Epicurean theory of the heavenly bodies and their movement is radically opposed to the postulate of Greek philosophers as a whole. Then, he launches an attack on "the religious attitude of the Pythagoreans, Plato and Aristotle." Worship of the celestial bodies is a cult practiced by all Greek philosophers. The system of the celestial bodies is the first naive and nature-determined existence of true reason [*Vernunft*]. The same position is taken by Greek self-consciousness in the domain of the mind [*Geist*]. It is the solar system of the mind. The Greek philosophers therefore worshipped their own mind in the celestial bodies. (CWI, 1975:66).

Marx then makes a detailed presentation of the conflicting positions of Aristotle and Epicurus, and ends with the judgment that those who fail to recognize the contradictions between the two positions are greatly confused. Then with his mastery of juxtaposition, he declares: 'Aristotle reproached the ancients for their belief that heaven required the support of Atlas who ... with his shoulders [supports] the pillar of heaven and earth. Epicurus, on the other hand, blames those who believe that man needs heaven. He finds the Atlas by whom heaven is supported in human stupidity and superstition. Stupidity and superstition also are Titans,' (CWI, 1975: 67-68).

Marx cites the letter of Epicurus to both Pythocles and Herodotus as supportive of the Epicurean position against Aristotle who held on to certain absolute "axioms and laws" in explaining the reality and movements of heavenly bodies. Epicurus insisted that the "myth

[i.e., heavenly bodies are eternal and immortal because they behave in the same way according to Aristotle] be removed." Marx argues in support of Epicurus:

'The great number of explanations, the multitude of possibilities, should not only tranquillise our minds and remove causes for fear, but also at the same time negate in the heavenly bodies their very unity, the absolute law that is always equal to itself. These heavenly bodies may behave sometimes in one way, sometimes in another; this possibility of conforming to no law is the characteristic of their reality; everything in them is declared to be impermanent and unstable. The multitude of the explanations should at the same time remove ... the unity of the object,' (CWI, 1975:69).

Marx's exposition of Epicurean philosophy closes with the following revolutionary statement as far as philosophy of nature is concerned. 'Since eternity of the heavenly bodies would disturb the ataraxy of self-consciousness, it is necessary, a stringent consequence that they are not eternal. The heavenly bodies are therefore the atoms become real,' (CWI 1975:70).

This conclusion, says Marx, is the apex, the culminating point of Epicurean philosophy of nature. It is this conclusion that led Epicurus to oppose "the most glaring contradiction," and thus "turns vehemently against those who worship an independent nature containing in itself the quality of individuality." It is at this point where Epicurus achieved the "profoundest" knowledge of his system, the point where he, finally, resolved the contradiction between essence and existence, between form and matter. Here follows Marx's magisterial formulation of the materialist philosophy of nature based on Epicurus: 'Matter, having received into itself individuality, form, as is the case with the heavenly bodies, has ceased to be abstract with individuality; it has become concrete individuality, universality. In the meteor, therefore, abstract individual self-consciousness is met by its contradiction, shining in its materialised form, the universal which has become existence and nature. ... Thus as long as nature as atom and appearance expresses individual self-consciousness and its contradiction the subjectivity of self-consciousness appears only in the form of matter itself. Where, on the other hand, it becomes independent, it reflects itself in itself, confronts matter in its own shape as independent form,' (CWI, 1975:72).

Thus Marx acclaims Epicurus as "the greatest representative of Greek enlightenment," another patron saint in the atheistic calendar. He quotes the poem of Lucretius and ascribes it to Epicurus:

'Fables of the gods did not crush him
nor the lightning flash and the growling
menace of the sky. ...

Therefore, religion in its turn
crushed beneath its feet, and we by his
triumph are lifted level with the skies.

This is a powerful poem that makes the last summative paragraph of the chapter appear anti-climactic.

Marx's Kerygmatic Paradigm in Paradox

We shall now come to the third work, "Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," a work which contains the sharpest expression of Marx's critique of religion. Written in early 1844, this article is the distillation and culmination of a decade of intense intellectual praxis. For as Professor Van Leeuwen says, 'at the root of Marx's critique of religion, as this took shape during his ten formative years between 1836 to 1846, there is a fundamental paradox.' (See end note 1 esp. Van Leeuwen p.184).

Marx's critique of religion as articulated in the 1844 work is a paradox in two senses. First, in the context of the entire Marxian literary works, it is both a point of arrival and a point of departure. Secondly, it is a paradox in the deeper sense, because while he considers criticism of religion as already completed, he is still impelled to undertake it in his work as a journalist.

Being the editor of *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1842, Marx made a remark about his intention to criticize religion by criticizing political conditions rather than vice-versa. He gives three reasons for this. First, it is in keeping with the character of the newspaper and the need of enlightening the public. Second, it is because religion "draws its life from this earth and not from heaven and will disappear of its own accord, once the perverted reality whose theory it represents is dissolved." Third, "one should flirt less with the idea of atheism and do more to acquaint people with its meaning." (See end note 1 esp. Van Leeuwen p.185 and also Hans Kung, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, 1980:221). These remarks seem to indicate that, for Marx, the critique of religion is a futile exercise.

Towards an Exegetical-Hermeneutical Exercise

What follows is an exegetical and hermeneutical attempt at three of the Marxian statements on critique of religion.

- I. "For Germany criticism of religion is in the complete, and the criticism of religion is in the presupposition of all criticism."

In this statement, Marx is referring to Ludwig Feuerbach, who had completed the task of criticizing religion in Germany.

Feuerbach is the philosophical and theological father of Marx's criticism of religion. Fourteen years older than Marx, Feuerbach spent his whole life working on the critique of religion. He is considered as one of the most influential philosophers of the 19th and 20th

centuries. In his famous work, *The Essence of Christianity*, he explains religion by way of psychology. He uses "projection theory" to explain the phenomenon of religion. This could be illustrated by means of a slide projector, where the image in a small slide could be projected and enlarged on a wide screen.

Similarly, God is seen to be nothing other than the image of man and his attributes projected and enlarged onto the celestial screen. To Feuerbach, God is the expression of the essence of humanity, stripped of all earthly limitations. Feuerbach's basic thesis is as follows: 'Religion ... is the relation of man to himself, or more correctly to his own nature ... but a relation to it, viewed as a nature ... apart from his own. The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective — i.e., contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature,' (Feuerbach 1957:14).

In this major work, Feuerbach consistently reduced divine attributes to human qualities. He did this to all the central creedal affirmations of the Christian faith. For instance, the statement "God created man in his own image" is reversed as "Man created God in his own image." Or the statement, "God is living-in-community" is transposed into "Living in community is godly." In other words, theology is reduced to anthropology, whereas anthropology is elevated to theology.

The substance of Marx's critique of religion is derived from Feuerbach. Marx, writes Hans Kung, 'was firmly convinced that with Feuerbach the critique of religion has been completed and atheism solidly established. Marx as a critic of religion does not really go beyond Feuerbach [so] the reasons that had to be cited against Feuerbach's atheism are valid also against Marx's atheism.' (See end note 1 esp. Kung, 1980:244).

The second part of the statement means that criticism of religion is of pivotal importance in Marx's philosophy. In fact, it is the foundation stone of the entire Marxist edifice which contains economic, political, legal and all other Marxist critiques. Klaus Bockmuehl comments that this statement is 'valid in terms of his biography, his methodology and his motivations. The phrase is true in the sense that atheism is already a fact before the philosophy of dialectical materialism is born. Marx was an atheist before he became a dialectical materialist,' (Bockmuehl, 1980:51).

Another meaning of the statement is that atheism has a methodological priority in the philosophy of Marx. All other critiques are methodologically preceded by the critique of religion. It provides the needed push and pressure for all other critiques. Thus, for Marx, the elimination of religion is necessary for the development of true humanity. Atheism and critique of religion are integral parts of Marx's philosophical system, the abrogation of which is tantamount to the dismantling of its historical materialism, its anthropology, its eschatology and ethics.

- II. "The foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion; religion does not make man. ... Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur* ..."

This paragraph stresses the centrality of man in Marx's philosophy. It is man that makes religion. Man here means the world of man, the state, society; man as the ensemble of social relationships. It is this state or society that produces religion, a perverted world-consciousness derived from a perverted world.

There are two distinct aspects of this religion: one stresses the theoretical and philosophical aspects; the other deals with the ethical and emotive element in religion. Under the first aspect, religion is characterized as general theory, as encyclopedic compendium, as logic in popular form, as spiritual *point d'honneur*. Whereas under the second aspect, religion is characterized as "the enthusiasm of a perverted world, its moral sanction, its solemn completion, its universal ground for consolation and justification." The mentioning of these characteristics leads to the conclusion that 'the struggle against religion is therefore the fight against the world ... of which religion is the spiritual aroma.' (See end note 1 esp. Leeuwen p.190).

Furthermore, all these have reference to Hegel's view of religion as "a representation of absolute philosophical truth in a popular form." Essential to Marx's description is the focus on "the relationship of religion and the world of man, state, society. This is the only relationship in which he is interested. In so far as religion has reality, it owes its reality to this world." (See end note 1 esp. Van Leeuwen p.190).

While Marx is critical of Hegel's dialectical philosophy, he could not disengage himself from this philosophy. It was like an ever present shadow which followed Marx wherever he went. Therefore, an adequate understanding of Marx's critique of religion must start from his critique of Hegel's philosophy as a whole. This, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

- III. "The criticism of religion disenchants man in order to make him think and act and shape his reality like one who has been disenchanted and has come to reason, so that he will revolve around himself and therefore around his true sun. Religion is the illusory sun which revolves around man only so long as he does not revolve around himself."

Anyone who is familiar with Immanuel Kant's idealist and metaphysical philosophy could immediately detect the influence of that 18th century philosopher on the above quoted Marxian declaration. There is an obvious parallelism between the succession of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, followed by his *Critique of Practical Reason*, and Marx's transition from *theory to practice*.

Marx's entire intellectual effort — critique of religion and philosophy during his earlier years and the critique of political economy which absorbed him for the rest of his life — is founded on the whole understanding of the essence and meaning of critique. "Marx had recognized Kant's philosophy," observes Van Leeuwen, "as the German theory of the French Revolution, as contrasted with the historical school of right, which he characterized as the German theory of the French *Ancient Regime*. Marx's *Critique Towards Hegel's Philosophy of Law* is basically a devastating critique of the anachronism of the German state of affairs in 1843, which had not yet arrived at the stage equivalent to that of French history in the year 1789. (See end note 1 esp. Van Leeuwen p. 13).

In a closer analysis of the passages quoted above, two Kantian fundamental principles are discernible. First, Kant's famous notion of a "Copernican Revolution" is alluded to by Marx when he describes religion as the illusory sun which revolves around man until man learns to revolve around himself, which could happen when man is brought to a sense of reality by the critique of religion.

The second principle has something to do with the Kantian "categorical imperative," which is arrived at the transition from theoretical critique to praxis. Marx formulates this profound principle this way: "The critique of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest essence of man, hence with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence."

Before bringing this paper to a close, let me point out that Marx's article of 1844 written in Paris is really a turning point in his life and thought. In the word of the perceptive Dutch professor Van Leeuwen, this article represents "a transition from the critical philosophy to a critique of political economy" in the evolution of Marx's thought. "It was an attempt to reap the harvest of his formative years and at the same time contained the seed of his maturity."

Concluding Statement

We have traced and analyzed the philosophy roots of Marx's radical critique of religion. Our investigation focussed on three of Marx's important works that have bearing on his critique of religion. We did not only explicate the extent of the influence that Epicurus, Kant, Hegel and Feuerbach had on the evolution of Marx's thought. We also focussed on some selected statements in Marx's writings and tried to draw out shades of meaning, not so much as abstract ideas that could neatly explain or describe the reality in our world but as potent, dynamic truth that could, in the right moment and place, transform our history and society.

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_____. *Collected Works, Vol. I*. New York: International Publishers, 1975 pp. 10-12 Henceforth, this work shall be referred to simply as *CWI*.

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End Notes

- 1 I am particularly challenged and motivated to "wade through" these Marxian primary text by the example of my mentor (Father Joel Tabora, S.J.), whose admirable adeptness with the German language enabled him to write his doctoral dissertation, *The Future in the Writings of Karl Marx* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1983), based on the "primary German sources." In writing this paper, I was greatly helped by three secondary sources, namely, 1) Father Tabora's book, 2) Han Kung's *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today* (1980), and 3) Professor A. Th. Van. Leeuwen's two-volume Gifford Lectures series, entitled *Critique of Heaven and Earth* (1972-1974).

- 2 Marx's dissertation is part of a general research project on the history of Greek philosophy, which he planned to undertake as early as 1839. This project has not been carried out, except the collection of these seven notebooks on Epicurean, Stoic and Skeptic philosophies. Cf. CW I, P. 29, 401-509, 734-735. For the purpose of this paper, I focus on Chapter 5 — "The Meteors" — Marx's discussion on the movement of the heavenly bodies has bearing on Marx's critique of religion and theology. Relevant also is a fragment included in the Appendix, entitled "Critique of Plutarch's Polemic Against the Theology of Epicurus," Cf. CW I, 102-105.