

MARX AND RELIGION

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I. MARX'S ENGAGEMENT WITH RELIGION

Religion is one of the issues on which the Marxian corpus – the writings authored or coauthored by Karl Marx himself – is deficient. Although there are plenty of references to religion in Marx's oeuvre, his most quoted statements on the topic belong to the initial transitional phase in his intellectual trajectory during which his break with the Young Hegelians unfolded.

Thus, there is no *Marxian* theory of religion – a theoretical lacuna that contributed to the fact that, to this day, there is no reference work or body of work that can be regarded as providing a comprehensive *Marxist* theory of religion.¹ The major reason for that, of course, is the high complexity of religion compared to plainly political ideologies. The theoretical tools developed by Marx cannot account alone for the multidimensional aspect of the question. Historical materialism is a necessary but insufficient explanans of religion, a topic that requires the input of all major human sciences such as anthropology, sociology or psychoanalysis. Moreover, Marx wrote quite less than Friedrich Engels about religion, probably because of a more limited interest in the topic determined by the limits of his personal religious experience compared to his friend's.

Yet, there are, of course, numerous analytical comments on religious matters in Marx's writings beyond the famous statements of his youth. They can be classified under two categories: on the one hand, elements of a materialist interpretation of religion – scattered theoretical insights more than a full-fledged theory; on the other hand, religious metaphors

¹ In her *Le Statut de la Religion chez Marx et Engels* (Paris: Editions sociales, 1979), pp. 76-77, Michèle Bertrand rightly asserts that 'Marx's and Engels's analysis of religion does not take the form of a full-fledged and complete theory of religion in general.' A Marxist herself, she found in Marxism no valid answer to the question of 'the permanence of religion' (p. 184). For a wide-angle overview of Western Marxist and para-Marxist engagements with religion, see R. Boer's five-volume *On Marxism and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2007-2014).

and analogies – the most famous is that of ‘fetishism’,² but there are several others – with which Marx’s economic writings are riddled and which are of little use for a study of religion per se.³

Besides, Marx’s writings include several political statements that constitute a coherent Marxian political attitude towards religion. Much less attention has been paid to this dimension of Marx’s thinking, largely subsumed under the Bolsheviks’ political stances on religion.⁴

II. MARX’ LEFT-HEGELIAN CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

The young Marx set most clearly the Left-Hegelian atheistic and anti-religious tenor of his doctoral dissertation (1840-41) in its foreword, where after quoting ‘the cry of Epicurus’ – ‘Not the man who denies the gods worshipped by the multitude, but he who affirms of the gods what the multitude believes about them, is truly impious.’ – he presented the ‘confession of Prometheus’ – ‘I hate the pack of gods’ – as philosophy’s ‘own aphorism against all heavenly and earthly gods who do not acknowledge human self-consciousness as the highest divinity’.⁵

However, it is only after finishing his dissertation – judging from the notebooks he wrote during his 1842 sojourn in Bonn⁶ – that Marx read some major works on religion, taking

² With commodities,

it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities...
(K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Book I, in MECW, vol. 35, p. 83.)

³ See F. Bellue, ‘Typologie des métaphores religieuses dans *Le Capital* de K. Marx’, in G. Labica and J. Robelin (eds.), *Politique et Religion*, (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1994), pp. 61-91. This study will not deal with the religious metaphors used by Marx, but only retrace the development of his historical materialist perspective on religion itself.

⁴ Two recent works on the Bolsheviks and religion are P. Gabel, *And God Created Lenin: Marxism vs. Religion in Russia, 1917-1929* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005) and R. Boer, *Lenin, Religion and Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁵ K. Marx, *Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, ‘Foreword’, in MECW, vol. 1, p. 30. Marx ended his dissertation likewise with a pugnaciously antireligious quote of Lucretius praising Epicurus, whom the young doctorand described as ‘the greatest representative of Greek Enlightenment’ (Ibid., p. 73).

⁶ The *Bonner Hefte* are published in the MEGA2, IV/1.

extensive notes. Two works had an outstanding impact on him: Charles de Brosses's *On the Worship of Fetish Gods* (*Du Culte des Dieux Fétiches*, 1760), which Marx read in German translation, and Benjamin Constant's *De la Religion* (1824-1831).

From de Brosses, Marx borrowed the notion of fetishism (also discussed in Constant's work, albeit in different terms).⁷ His earliest use of this notion – a recurrent theme in his writings thereafter – appeared in a July 1842 article in the *Rheinische Zeitung*,⁸ which is Marx's first extensive public comment on religion. It includes his first materialist inversion of the idealist interpretation of the role of religion in history: 'It was not the downfall of the old religions that caused the downfall of the ancient states, but the downfall of the ancient states that caused the downfall of the old religions.'⁹ A few months later, in a letter to Arnold Ruge, Marx displayed a rather simplistic conception of religion along with the conviction that it will eventually fade away: 'religion in itself is without content, it owes its being not to heaven but to the earth, and with the abolition of distorted reality, of which it is the *theory*, it will collapse of itself.'¹⁰

The materialist inversion lies at the heart of Marx's 1843 essays criticizing two writings by the Young Hegelian Bruno Bauer on the 'Jewish question'. In that twofold rebuttal entitled 'On the Jewish Question', Marx had not completely broken yet with an essentialist appraisal of religion – Judaism and Christianity in that case – in the vein of Feuerbach's half-baked assessment of the Christian religion, characteristically titled *The Essence of Christianity*.¹¹ Thus, Marx was still discussing the 'essence' of each of Judaism and Christianity in idealisations called 'the Jew' and 'the Christian'. He saw the essence of 'the Jew' and 'Judaism' as defined by monetary relations and contended that this essence is the result not of

⁷ For a discussion of Marx's borrowing from de Brosses, see R. Boer, *Criticism of Earth: On Marxism and Theology IV* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 177-206, and *In the Vale of Tears: On Marxism and Theology V* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 289-309. For a comparison between Constant's and Marx's notion of fetishism, see B. Garsten, 'Religion and the Case Against Ancient Liberty: Benjamin Constant's Other Lectures', *Political Theory*, 38:1 (2010), pp. 4-33.

⁸ K. Marx, 'The Leading Article in No. 179 of the *Kölnische Zeitung*', in MECW, vol. 1, p. 189.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ K. Marx, 'Letter to Arnold Ruge', November 30, 1842, in MECW, vol. 1, p. 395.

¹¹ See L. Althusser's critical discussion of Feuerbach and his influence on the early Marx in his *For Marx*, trans. B. Brewster, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1969.

the Jewish religion per se, but of the Jews' actual historical insertion 'in the interstices' of medieval European societies, as he put it in his economic manuscripts of later years.¹²

Let us not look for the secret of the Jew in his religion, but let us look for the secret of his religion in the real Jew. ...

The Jew has emancipated himself in a Jewish manner, not only because he has acquired financial power, but also because, through him and also apart from him, *money* has become a world power and the practical Jewish spirit has become the practical spirit of the Christian nations. The Jews have emancipated themselves insofar as the Christians have become Jews. ...

Judaism continues to exist not in spite of history, but owing to history. ... The god of the Jews has become secularized and has become the god of the world.¹³

It is in the wake of these essays that Marx wrote the much-quoted and very lyrical 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction', published in 1844 in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*.

The basis of irreligious criticism is: The *human being makes religion*; religion does not make the human being. Religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of the human who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But the *human* is no abstract being encamped outside the world. The human is *the world of the human* — state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, an *inverted world-consciousness*, because they are an *inverted world*. Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in a popular form, its spiritualistic *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realisation* of the human essence because the *human essence* has no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against *the world* of which religion is the spiritual *aroma*.¹⁴

¹² Here are three statements from Marx's *Grundrisse* (K. Marx, *Economic Manuscripts 1857-1861*, MECW, vols. 28 and 29) on the economic role of Jews in history: 'Special trading peoples could play this mediating role between peoples whose mode of production did not yet presuppose exchange value as its basis. Thus in antiquity, and later the Lombards, thus the Jews within the old Polish society or in medieval society in general.' (vol. 28, p. 184.) 'Wealth as an end-in-itself appears only among a few trading peoples – monopolists of the carrying trade – who live in the pores of the ancient world like the Jews in medieval society.' (vol. 28, p. 411.) '[T]he Semites in the interstices of the ancient world, and the Jews, Lombards and Normans in the interstices of the medieval society, alternately represent ... the different moments of circulation – money and commodity. They are the mediators of the social exchange of matter.' (vol. 29, p. 481.) On Marxist discussions of 'the Jewish question' from Marx to Abram Leon, see E. Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate (1843-1943)*, trans. B. Gibbons (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993).

¹³ K. Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', in MECW, vol. 3, pp. 169-72. Here and in all subsequent quotes, emphasis is in the original.

¹⁴ K. Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction', in MECW, vol. 3, p. 175. Here and in further quotations, 'man' has been replaced with 'human' in translating the German *Mensch* after verification of the original in the *Marx Engels Werke*.

Restating in the passage above a central idea of Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of religion ('The human being makes religion'), Marx went one step further in his materialist critique. The statement that 'the human is no abstract being' is a direct rebuff to Feuerbach. Like the latter, however, and with Christianity mainly in mind, the young Marx fully acknowledged the spiritual role played by religion, alongside its essence as a vulgar 'false consciousness'. He formulated this insight in admirable terms:

Religious distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.

To sublimate religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is to demand their *real* happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions*. The criticism of religion is therefore *in embryo the criticism of the vale of tears*, the *halo* of which is religion.¹⁵

To describe religion as both a sublimated 'expression' of 'real distress' and a 'protest' against it was a very perceptive statement, but Marx did unfortunately not pursue the 'protest' dimension. He did not give thought to the fact that Christianity – as Engels would later acknowledge in his 1850 *The Peasant War in Germany*, albeit in a limited way¹⁶ – had proved 'its ability to shoulder the aspirations of the oppressed and the poor' in the words of Michèle Bertrand.¹⁷ Hence Marx's unqualified diatribe in 1847 against 'the social principles of Christianity' which he presented as completely antithetic with communism.¹⁸

The opium metaphor is widely regarded as epitomizing Marx's view of religion. It became one of his most quoted phrases, although he was merely resorting to an analogy used by several authors before him, from Immanuel Kant to Heinrich Heine, to illustrate a view that is 'not at all specifically Marxist' as Michael Löwy emphasized.¹⁹ Marx's description of the

¹⁵ K. Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction', in MECW, vol. 3, p. 175-6. Here and in one more quotation, 'abolition' has been replaced with 'sublation' in translating the German *Aufhebung* after verification of the original in the *Marx Engels Werke*.

¹⁶ F. Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, in MECW, vol. 10. For a critique of Engels's views, see G. Achcar, 'Religion and Politics Today from a Marxian Perspective', in Achcar, *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism* (London: Saqi and Chicago: Haymarket, 2013), pp. 10-39.

¹⁷ Bertrand, *Le Statut de la Religion*, p. 34.

¹⁸ K. Marx, 'The Communism of the *Rheinischer Beobachter*', in MECW, vol. 6, p. 231.

¹⁹ M. Löwy, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 5.

consoling virtue of religion was also in tune with the first chapter of Constant's *De la Religion*.²⁰

In the context of the battle waged by 20th century's Communism against religion, this famous statement came to be interpreted as more pejorative than intended. This was also related to a negative shift in the perception of opium compared to the 19th century when it was still commonly used medically as sedative and tranquillizer.²¹ Yet, the pendulum of historical interpretations shifted again in recent years towards overemphasis on the seemingly positive connotation of Marx's description of religion as 'the sigh of the oppressed', seen as denoting empathy.

The young Marx, however, was only stating the obvious: religion acts as a tranquillizer against the deep anxiety provoked by the modern world. It provides an 'illusory happiness' that, he believed, could be superseded by the realization of 'real happiness', which would make illusions superfluous. The criticism of religion should therefore lead to the criticism of the down-to-earth world.

The immediate *task of philosophy*, which is at the service of history, once the *holy form* of human self-estrangement has been unmasked, is to unmask self-estrangement in its *unholy forms*. Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of the earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law* and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*.²²

Marx went on for a while pursuing the philosophic task of unmasking 'unholy' alienation as a necessary complement to his former comrades' unmasking of religious alienation. In this endeavour, he made an analogy between both types of alienation, thus providing a clue to the later mutation of his philosophical critique into a political-economic critique of capitalism and highlighting the methodological continuity between them.

[T]he more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself – his inner

²⁰ B. Constant, *De la Religion* (Arles: Actes Sud), 1999, 'Du sentiment religieux', pp. 39-52.

²¹ See A. McKinnon, 'Reading "Opium of the People": Expression, Protest and the Dialectics of Religion', *Critical Sociology*, 31:1-2 (2005), pp. 15-38.

²² K. Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction', in MECW, vol. 3, p. 176. In the German original, *Selbstentfremdung*, here translated as 'self-estrangement', refers to the concept of alienation, *Entfremdung*.

world – becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. It is the same in religion. The more humans put into God, the less they retain in themselves. ... Religious estrangement as such occurs only in the realm of *consciousness*, of the human's inner life, but economic estrangement is that of *real life*; its transcendence therefore embraces both aspects.²³

This led Marx to supersede the atheistic critique of religion as a foregone moment. He no longer felt the need to engage in it, thus distancing himself from his former Young Hegelian comrades.

[A]theism is a *negation of God*, and postulates the *existence of the human being* through this negation; but socialism as socialism no longer stands in any need of such a mediation. It proceeds from the *theoretically and practically sensuous consciousness* of the human being and of nature as the *essence*. Socialism is man's *positive self-consciousness*, no longer mediated through the sublation of religion...²⁴

In *The Holy Family*, the first work that Marx cowrote with Engels, Bruno Bauer is attacked for keeping the debate on the terrain of religion. The book constitutes a useful complement to Marx's essays 'On the Jewish Question' in that it clarifies the latter's arguments and sheds a useful light on the issue of its alleged antisemitism. Bauer shared Hegel's brand of anti-Judaism combined with no hostility to the Jews as citizens, and Hegel's view of Christianity as the absolute religion. He dealt with the 'Jewish question' in such religious-philosophical terms, while Marx and Engels strived to bring the issue down to the earth of material determinants.

... Herr Bauer has no inkling that real *secular Jewry*, and hence *religious Jewry too*, is being continually produced by the *present-day civil life* and finds its final development in the *money system*. ... For Herr Bauer, as a theologian of the *Christian faith*, the *world-historic* significance of Jewry had to cease the *moment* Christianity was *born*. Hence he had to repeat the old orthodox view that it has maintained itself *in spite* of history...²⁵

²³ K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in MECW, vol. 3, pp. 272, 297.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 306. Compare to Engels's much later assertion about 'German Social Democratic workers' that 'atheism has already outlived its usefulness for them; this pure negation does not apply to them, since they no longer stand in theoretical, but only in practical opposition to all belief in God: they are *simply through with God*, they live and think in the real world and are, therefore, materialists.' (F. Engels, 'Programme of the Blanquist Commune Refugees', in MECW, vol. 24, pp. 15-16.)

²⁵ K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism: Against Bruno Bauer and Company*, in MECW, vol. 4, p. 109.

The Holy Family reinstated in clearer form the key theses of Marx's essays. Rather than targeting the Jews singled out by Bauer's 'theological' approach, which it characterized as 'theological fanaticism', the book asserted that the material basis of the Jews' historical specificity within Christian society, i.e. their function as agents of the monetary economy, has become universal.

The existence of the *present-day* Jew was not explained by his religion – as though this religion were something apart, independently existing – but the tenacious survival of the Jewish religion was explained by practical features of civil society which are *fantastically* reflected in that religion. The emancipation of the Jews into human beings, or the human emancipation of Jewry, was therefore not conceived, as by Herr Bauer, as the special task of the Jews, but as a general practical task of the present-day world, which is *Jewish* to the core. It was proved that the task of abolishing the essence of Jewry is actually the task of abolishing the *Jewish character of civil society*, abolishing the inhumanity of the present-day practice of life, the most extreme expression of which is the *money system*.²⁶

Marx distanced himself further from the Young Hegelians as his political radicalization progressed. His 1845 'Theses on Feuerbach', with their conclusion on revolutionary praxis – 'revolutionary, practical-critical, activity' – represented a new step towards overcoming the essentialism inherent in Feuerbach's 'contemplative materialism':

Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-estrangement, of the duplication of the world into a religious world and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. But that the secular basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must, therefore, itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionised in practice.²⁷

III. TOWARDS A MATERIALIST INTERPRETATION OF RELIGION

Marx and Engels completed their break with the Young Hegelians and expounded main tenets of their new materialist conception of history in *The German Ideology*, which they drafted in 1845-46 and ended renouncing to publish. The issue of religion was still central to that final engagement with their former companions:

The Young Hegelians *criticised* everything by ascribing religious conceptions to it or by declaring that it is a theological matter. The Young Hegelians are in agreement

²⁶ Ibid., p. 109-10.

²⁷ K. Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', in MECW, vol. 5, p. 4.

with the Old Hegelians in their belief in the rule of religion, of concepts, of a universal principle in the existing world. Except that the one party attacks this rule as usurpation, while the other extols it as legitimate.²⁸

This time, however, the two co-thinkers went beyond their philosophical ‘critique of critical criticism’, as they had called it ironically, into laying out the foundations of their new conception of history with a radical inversion of perspective leading to the elaboration of historical materialism.

The phantoms formed in the brains of the humans are ..., necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence.²⁹

The *materialist conception of history* was thus born along with its dialectical dimension:

This conception of history thus relies on expounding the real process of production – starting from the material production of life itself – and comprehending the form of intercourse connected with and created by this mode of production, i.e., civil society in its various stages, as the basis of all history; describing it in its action as the state, and also explaining how all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, morality, etc., etc., arise from it, and tracing the process of their formation from that basis; thus the whole thing can, of course, be depicted in its totality (and therefore, too, the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another).³⁰

The manuscript included an interesting insight on religion – ‘Religion is from the outset *consciousness of the transcendental* arising from *actually existing* forces.’ – which the authors did unfortunately not develop ‘more popularly’ as they intended to do.³¹ What they provided about the materialist explanation of religion were essentially leads into a research programme.

[D]efinite relations of industry and intercourse are necessarily connected with a definite form of society, hence, with a definite form of state and hence with a definite form of religious consciousness. If [Max] Stirner had looked at the real history of the

²⁸ K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, in MECW, vol. 5, p. 30.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Middle Ages, he could have found why the Christian's notion of the world took precisely this form in the Middle Ages, and how it happened that it subsequently passed into a different one; he could have found that '*Christianity*' has no history whatever and that all the different forms in which it was visualised at various times were not 'self-determinations' and 'further developments' 'of the religious spirit', but were brought about by wholly empirical causes in no way dependent on any influence of the religious spirit.³²

In their *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels further discussed the view of the intimate connection of religion, as a form of consciousness, and the material conditions of society. They formulated a heuristic, albeit rather crude, explanation of the historical persistence of religions and other ideological forms, attributing it to the permanence of class division:

'Undoubtedly,' it will be said, 'religious, moral, philosophical and juridical ideas have been modified in the course of historical development. But religion, morality, philosophy, political science, and law, constantly survived this change. ...'
... The history of all past society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms at different epochs. But whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages, *viz*, the exploitation of one part of society by the other. No wonder, then, that the social consciousness of past ages, despite all the multiplicity and variety it displays, moves within certain common forms, or general ideas, which cannot completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonisms.³³

The dialectics of religious permanence and change – the transmutation of religions along with the historical change of material conditions while retaining some forms, which is the key to religions' historical persistence – is a theme that is recurrent in the two co-thinkers' comments on Christianity in particular. Thus, in the sharp critique of Georg Friedrich Daumer's *Die Religion des neuen Weltalters* that they published in 1850, they stressed 'that after the Germanic invasion the "new world conditions" did not adapt themselves to Christianity but that Christianity itself changed with every new phase of these world conditions.'³⁴

³² Ibid., p. 154.

³³ K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in MECW, vol. 6, p. 504.

³⁴ K. Marx and F. Engels, 'Reviews from the Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Politisch-Ökonomische Revue No. 2', in MECW, vol. 10, p. 244.

In Marx's later economic writings, Christianity is portrayed as the religion of capital *par excellence*. As he put it ironically in his 1861-63 economic manuscripts, capitalism is

as truly cosmopolitan as Christianity. This is why Christianity is likewise the special religion of capital. In both it is only humans who count. One human in the abstract is worth just as much or as little as the next human. In the one case, all depends on whether or not the human has faith, in the other, on whether or not the human has credit. In addition, however, in the one case, predestination has to be added, and in the other case, the accident of whether or not a human is born with a silver spoon in mouth.³⁵

Marx expanded upon this idea in *Capital* in the famous section on 'The Fetishism of Commodities':

The religious world is but the reflex of the real world. And for a society based upon the production of commodities, in which the producers in general enter into social relations with one another by treating their products as commodities and values, whereby they reduce their individual private labour to the standard of homogeneous human labour – for such a society, Christianity with its *cultus* of abstract man, more especially in its bourgeois developments, Protestantism, Deism, &c, is the most fitting form of religion.³⁶

A footnote in *Capital* also includes a brief methodological statement that Marx did alas not elaborate:

Technology discloses the human's mode of dealing with Nature, the process of production by which, the human sustains the human's life, and thereby also lays bare the mode of formation of the human's social relations, and of the mental conceptions that flow from them. Every history of religion, even, that fails to take account of this material basis, is uncritical. It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion, than, conversely, it is, to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestialised forms of those relations. The latter method is the only materialistic, and therefore the only scientific one.³⁷

There are scattered insights informed by this perspective in Marx's economic writings. They mostly deal with Protestantism as the version of Christianity that is correlative with

³⁵ K. Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63*, in MECW, vol. 33, p. 369.

³⁶ K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Book I, in MECW, vol. 35, p. 90.

³⁷ K. Marx, *Ibid.*, p. 375, note 2.

capitalism, in the historical materialist vein that Max Weber famously discussed in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Here are two such comments:

The cult of money has its corresponding asceticism, its renunciation, its self-sacrifice – thrift and frugality, contempt for the worldly, temporary and transient pleasures; the pursuit of *eternal* treasure. Hence the connection of English Puritanism or also Dutch Protestantism with money-making.³⁸

The monetary system is essentially a Catholic institution, the credit system essentially Protestant. ‘The Scotch hate gold.’ In the form of paper the monetary existence of commodities is only a social one. It is *Faith* that brings salvation. Faith in money value as the immanent spirit of commodities, faith in the mode of production and its predestined order, faith in the individual agents of production as mere personifications of self-expanding capital. But the credit system does not emancipate itself from the basis of the monetary system any more than Protestantism has emancipated itself from the foundations of Catholicism.³⁹

One aspect of the capitalist function of Protestantism is that it ‘*was also a means for increasing surplus labour*’:⁴⁰ ‘Protestantism, by changing almost all the traditional holidays into workdays, plays an important part in the genesis of capital.’⁴¹ Marx also emphasized the correlation between Malthusianism and Protestantism: ‘It is characteristic that the economic fall of man, the Adam’s apple, the urgent appetite, ... that this delicate question was and is monopolised by the Reverends of Protestant Theology, or rather of the Protestant Church.’⁴² He mocked Protestantism’s lack of empathy for the poor: ‘If the Venetian monk found in the fatal destiny that makes misery eternal, the *raison d’être* of Christian charity ..., the Protestant prebendary finds in it a pretext for condemning the laws in virtue of which the poor possessed a right to a miserable public relief.’⁴³ This, Marx called ‘the “spirit” of Protestantism’.⁴⁴

³⁸ K. Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858*, in MECW, vol. 28, p. 164.

³⁹ K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Book III, in MECW, vol. 37, p. 587.

⁴⁰ K. Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63*, in MECW, vol. 34, p. 300.

⁴¹ K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Book I, in MECW, vol. 35, p. 281, note 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 612.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 641.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 712, note 2.

Much less, and much less interesting, comments on other religions are found among Marx's writings.⁴⁵ His most apposite observation in this regard is the not so 'easily answerable' question that he formulated about the Orient in a 1853 letter to Engels: 'So far as religion is concerned, the question may be reduced to a general and hence easily answerable one: Why does the history of the East *appear* as a history of religions?'⁴⁶ Marx's emphasis on 'appear' here sounds as a clue to the fact that the problem lies primarily in the Western perception of the East, i.e. the problem of Orientalism in the sense popularized by Edward Said. It is highly unlikely though that this was Marx's intent.⁴⁷

III. THE MARXIAN POLITICAL ATTITUDE ON RELIGION

Marx's political attitude toward religion took shape at the confluence of two influences: the anticlerical atheism that he inherited from his time with the Young Hegelians was tempered with the liberal-secular attitude that he found in Benjamin Constant, whose influence on Marx is generally underrated if mentioned at all.⁴⁸ That the young Marx, in his 1842 article on censorship, should defend the freedom to criticize religion, Christianity included, is not surprising.⁴⁹ He construed this freedom as part of the general freedom of opinion in the liberal-secular vein, as he did in his first long engagement with the topic of religion where he rejected any privilege to any dogma or creed.⁵⁰

Marx went on to develop a strong argument for a strict separation of religion and state, vigorously denouncing those who want to 'make religion into a theory of constitutional law':⁵¹

The truly religious state is the theocratic state; the head of such states must be either the God of religion, Jehovah himself, as in the Jewish state, or God's representative, the Dalai Lama, as in Tibet, or finally, ... all the Christian states must subordinate themselves to a church which is an 'infallible church'. For where, as under Protestantism, there is no supreme head of the church, the rule of religion is nothing but the religion of rule, the cult of the government's will.

⁴⁵ See K. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*, 2nd edn (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016).

⁴⁶ K. Marx, 'Marx to Engels', 2 June 1853, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 332.

⁴⁷ See G. Achcar, 'Marx, Engels and 'Orientalism': On Marx's Epistemological Evolution', in Achcar, *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism*, pp. 68-102.

⁴⁸ One almost confidential exception is P. Higonnet, 'Marx, disciple de Constant?', *Annales Benjamin Constant*, 6 (1986), pp. 11-16.

⁴⁹ K. Marx, 'Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction', in MECW, vol. 1, especially pp. 116-19.

⁵⁰ K. Marx, 'The Leading Article in No. 179 of the *Kölnische Zeitung*', in MECW, vol. 1, p. 191.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

Once a state includes several creeds having equal rights, it can no longer be a religious state without being a violation of the rights of the particular creeds, a church which condemns all adherents of a different creed as heretics, which makes every morsel of bread depend on one's faith, and which makes dogma the link between individuals and their existence as citizens of the state.⁵²

Yet, by the end of 1842, Marx, whose communist political views were maturing, was also clearly taking his distance from the fixation with religion of some of the Young Hegelians.⁵³ He reported to Arnold Ruge his reply to a query from Eduard Meyen, a prominent member of the Berlin circle of 'The Free':

I replied at once and frankly expressed my opinion about the defects of their writings, which find freedom in a licentious, sans-culotte-like, and at the same time convenient, form, rather than in a *free*, i.e., independent and profound, content. ... I requested further that religion should be criticised in the framework of criticism of political conditions rather than that political conditions should be criticised in the framework of religion... Finally, I desired that, if there is to be talk about philosophy, there should be less trifling with the *label* 'atheism' (which reminds one of children, assuring everyone who is ready to listen to them that they are not afraid of the boggy man), and that instead the content of philosophy should be brought to the people.⁵⁴

Constant's impassionate defence of the freedom of religion, unrestricted individual religious freedom, as being the most effective guarantee against the power of any single religion, had left its mark on the young Marx.⁵⁵ The clarification of his polemics with Bauer in *The Holy Family* confirmed this inspiration, including a repudiation of the 'terroristic attitude' that emerged during the French Revolution:

Herr Bauer was shown that when the Jew demands freedom and nevertheless refuses to renounce his religion, he '*is engaging in politics*' and sets no condition that is contrary to *political* freedom. Herr Bauer was shown that it is by no means contrary to political emancipation to *divide* the human into the non-religious *citizen* and the religious *private individual*. He was shown that just as the state emancipates itself from religion by emancipating itself from *state religion* and leaving religion to itself within civil society, so the individual emancipates himself *politically* from religion by

⁵² K. Marx, 'The Leading Article in No. 179 of the *Kölnische Zeitung*', in MECW, vol. 1, p. 199.

⁵³ See A. Toscano, 'Beyond Abstraction: Marx and the Critique of the Critique of Religion', *Historical Materialism*, 18 (2010), pp. 3-29.

⁵⁴ K. Marx, 'To Arnold Ruge', 30 November 1842, in MECW, vol. 1, pp. 394-5.

⁵⁵ This was the powerful conclusion of Constant's *De la Religion*: 'In every epoch then, we should demand religious freedom, unlimited, infinite, individual... It will multiply religious forms ... A single sect is always a fearsome rival. ... Divide the torrent or, more accurately, let it split into a thousand streams. They will fertilise the soil that the torrent would have devastated.' (B. Constant, *De la Religion*, pp. 576-7.)

regarding it no longer as a *public* matter but as a *private matter*. Finally, it was shown that the *terroristic* attitude of the French *Revolution* to *religion*, far from refuting this conception, bears it out.⁵⁶

Thus, Marx and Engels emphasized that ‘the *right* to believe what one wishes, the right to practise any religion, is explicitly recognised as a *universal human right*’ and reminded Bauer that Jacques Hébert’s faction was defeated during the French Revolution under the accusation that ‘it attacked human rights by attacking *freedom of religion*’.⁵⁷ Furthermore, in their *The German Ideology*, the two friends ridiculed Bruno Bauer with mordant irony for his pretence to have ‘smashed’ religion and the state.⁵⁸

Yet Marx and Engels kept advocating within the communist movement a relentless struggle to debunk bourgeois ideology under all its guises, religion included. ‘Law, morality, religion, are to [the proletariat] so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests.’⁵⁹ However, Marx must have bitterly regretted the blunder he made in November 1847, in his report to the London German Workers’ Educational Society, when he praised Georg Friedrich Daumer’s book *The Secrets of Christian Antiquity* (*Die Geheimnisse des christlichen Altertums*, 1847). Daumer, the same author whom Marx and Engels harshly criticized three years later,⁶⁰ had tried to give new currency to the ancient Roman legend according to which the persecuted early Christians practised anthropophagic rites. ‘This story’, explained Marx to his audience, ‘as presented in Daumer’s work, deals Christianity the last blow... It gives us the certainty that the old society is coming to an end and that the edifice of fraud and prejudice is collapsing.’⁶¹

Marx’s and Engels’s attitude towards religion remained fundamentally dual: defence of unhindered individual freedom of belief against state interference, combined with emancipatory fight by the workers’ party against religious beliefs. It is this same position that Marx forcefully reiterated in his 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Programme*:

⁵⁶ K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism: Against Bruno Bauer and Company*, in MECW, vol. 4, p. 111.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁵⁸ K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, in MECW, vol. 5, p. 94.

⁵⁹ K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in MECW, vol. 6, pp. 494-5.

⁶⁰ See above.

⁶¹ ‘Minutes of Marx’s Report to the London German Workers’ Educational Society on November 30, 1847’, in MECW, vol. 6, p. 631.

'Freedom of conscience'! If one desired at this time of the *Kulturkampf* to remind liberalism of its old catchwords, it surely could have been done only in the following form: Everyone should be able to attend to his religious as well as his bodily needs without the police sticking their noses in. But the workers' party ought at any rate in this connection to have expressed its awareness of the fact that bourgeois 'freedom of conscience' is nothing but the toleration of all possible kinds of *religious unfreedom of conscience*, and that for its part it endeavours rather to liberate the conscience from the witchery of religion.⁶²

And yet, Marx and Engels firmly and consistently upheld the liberal rejection of state coercion of religious belief and practice in the private sphere. This came out most clearly in their critique of other radical left currents advocating the suppression of religion. In 1868, Marx commented on the margin of the Bakuninist programme promising 'abolition of cults, substitution of science for faith and human justice for divine justice': 'As if one could declare – by decree – the abolition of faith!'⁶³ He reiterated this opinion in the interview he gave in 1879 to the *Chicago Tribune*: 'We know ... that violent measures against religion are nonsense; but this is an opinion: as Socialism grows, religion will disappear. Its disappearance must be done by social development, in which education must play a great part.'⁶⁴

* * *

Socialism, as envisaged by Marx, did not grow in the twentieth century; the regimes that claimed that label and invoked his name across the world did much disservice to both, and most have ended up crumbling miserably. Far from disappearing, religion witnessed a spectacular surge in the century's final decades, most strikingly in fundamentalist versions. To understand this 'revenge of God', as one observer called it,⁶⁵ Marx's reflections on religion provide indispensable clues, along with other key inputs in social sciences such as

⁶² K. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in MECW, vol. 24, pp. 97-8.

⁶³ K. Marx, 'Remarks on the Programme and Rules of the International Alliance of Socialist Democracy', in MECW, vol. 21, p. 208. Engels expressed the same view in 1874 in his critique of the programme of the Blanquist Commune Refugees, which stipulated that 'every religious service, every religious organisation must be banned'. He emphasized that 'persecution is the best way of strengthening undesirable convictions' and that 'the only service that can still be rendered to God today is to make atheism a compulsory dogma' (F. Engels, 'Programme of the Blanquist Commune Refugees', in MECW, vol. 24, p. 16).

⁶⁴ 'Account of Karl Marx's Interview with the *Chicago Tribune* Correspondent', in MECW, vol. 24, p. 576.

⁶⁵ G. Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World*, trans. A. Braley (London: Polity, 1994).

Emile Durkheim's notion of anomie.⁶⁶ The materialist conception of history leads us to explore the socioeconomic background upon which the 'return of the religious', as the phenomenon has been widely designated, did occur. Indeed, its concomitance with the massive degradation of social conditions that resulted from both the neoliberal turn in global capitalism and the terminal crisis of 'really existing socialism' followed by its collapse is certainly not a sheer coincidence. In this regard, even the young Marx's Left-Hegelian conceptualization and formulation of the correspondence between socioeconomic alienation and religious alienation are useful.

The ongoing religious surge lends renewed importance to the Marxian political attitude towards religion. The European heartlands of Enlightenment themselves are confronted anew with this problem, complicated in their case by the fact that the religion in question is Islam, the creed of downtrodden populations of migrant origin. Marx's attitude towards religion should become again a source of inspiration to those who adhere to his general theory.⁶⁷ Religious freedom must be defended even more vigorously when it is curtailed out of racist hatred for the holders of a minority religion. Under such conditions, the defence of this freedom becomes a necessary component of the struggle against racism in addition to being a component of the fight for political freedom in general.

However, as Marx reminded his German comrades, the defence of religious freedom of conscience must not eclipse the struggle against religious unfreedom of conscience as well as religious unfreedom to attend to one's bodily needs, whether it is a matter of state-imposed unfreedom as is still the case in many countries or one of religious chains self-imposed in a desperate attempt to soothe the anxiety generated by the precariousness of social conditions in the neoliberal age. The struggle for the secular separation of religion and state, and in defence of this separation where it is accomplished, remains of immediate relevance in the 21st century, as is the struggle against the broad range of uses of religion for reactionary political purposes.

⁶⁶ For a use of both Marx and Durkheim in understanding the surge of religious fundamentalism in the late 20th century, see G. Achcar, *The Clash of Barbarisms: The Making of the New World Disorder*, trans. P. Drucker, 2nd edn (Boulder, CO: Paradigm and London: Saqi, 2006).

⁶⁷ See for example Gilbert Achcar, 'Marxists and Religion – Yesterday and Today', *International Viewpoint* (online), 16 March 2005, <<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article622>>; Kate Davison, 'Atheism, Secularism and Religious Freedom: Debates within the German Left', *International Socialism* 150 (online), 4 April 2016, <<http://isj.org.uk/atheism-secularism-and-religious-freedom/>>.

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