

Atheism of Karl Marx

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Abstract

Marx not only affirmed to be an atheist but also fought against religion. This study is an attempt to find some answers to the following questions: 1. What were the philosophical bases of his atheism? 2. Why did he consider religion an alienation? 3. What did he propose to overcome religious alienation, and 4. What was the final reason for his atheism: absolute humanism? Karl Marx's reflection and action were always focused on social and political problems, based on a specific philosophical anthropology. His adherence to atheism was in function of anthropology and an ethic. After affirming what constitutes man and his happiness, and the way that leads to his fulfillment and happiness, Marx rejects all, including religion, that are harmful or opposed to man's realization as a human being. Religion as self-alienation will disappear once man reaches his economic liberation by overthrowing through a radical revolution the basic alienation of private property upheld by capitalism and by ushering in communism.

Keywords: Marxism, Atheism, Religion, Alienation, Humanism

Marx not only affirmed to be an atheist but also fought against religion and all it involves. What were the reasons for his atheism? This study consists in seeking some answers to the following questions: 1. Was Karl Marx an atheist? 2. What were the philosophical / theoretical bases of his atheism? 3. Why did he consider religion an alienation? 4. What did he propose to overcome alienation? 5. What would be the final reason for his atheism: absolute humanism?

Karl Marx's reflection, writing and action were always focused on social and political problems, based on a specific philosophical anthropology. His concept of man and his atheism are evidenced in his early writings (young Marx) from the beginning to his Manifesto of 1848. Even in his later writings as well (mature Marx), the same themes are taken up or continued. For example, Das Kapitalis filled with moral evaluations.

His adherence to atheism is in function of an anthropology and an ethic. After affirming what constitutes man and his happiness, and the way that leads to his fulfillment and happiness, he rejects all that is harmful or opposes his realization as a human being. Marx opposes and rejects religion with all that constitutes it, because religion is one of those phenomena that prevents man from his true realization as a human being. Religion is self-alienation. The whole complex of religious activities and behaviors are "psychopathological" from which one has to be liberated in order to realize his true nature as human being. Such liberation will take place once one becomes aware of the fact that religion is alienation, that the problem of God is a false

problem, that it prevents him from affirming and fulfilling his real self. Hence, it is necessary to deny and do away with religion. However, such denial or opposition is only provisional, because religion will automatically disappear once man reaches his economic liberation - from hunger, destitution, poverty, misery, depression and all forms of economic exploitation - the basis for social, political and religious liberation as well. In fact, Marx was dominated by one idea: how to help the exploited masses! What impoverishes them according to him is capitalism. Once this system, sustained and promoted by politics and State, is overthrown through a revolution brought about by the proletariat (the working class) a new society (communism) will emerge in which everyone will be free to work according to his/her abilities and will be given according to his/her needs. In that society, there will be no state, no rulers over individuals, no wars, and no revolution, only everlasting and universal brotherhood.

Karl Marx an Atheist

The first question that naturally arises is, was Marx an atheist. If so, why? Gianbattista Mondin and others (Vanni Rovighi) are of the opinion that Marx was an atheist from his childhood and remained such for the whole of the rest of his life. According to them, atheism was for Marx a starting point, and hence one can conclude that Marxism (Marxian Communism) is naturally atheistic.¹

Did Marx deny the existence of God? Let us consider his personal itinerary of atheism. Some historians are of the opinion that the fact that his father together with family (Jews) was forced to convert to Christianity (Protestantism) in order not to be excluded from his profession, as an advocate did not go down well with young Marx.² Hence, he was an atheist from the very beginning of his childhood.

Others, however, are of the opinion that in his early youth, Marx did profess and knew well the teachings of the Christian religion: love of God and love of one's neighbor. In one of his earliest compositions, *Die Vereinigung der Gläubigen mit Christo* (The Union of the Faithful with Christ), Marx writes:

Through love of Christ we turn our hearts at the same time toward our brethren who are inwardly bound to us and for whom He gave Himself in sacrifice ...

Union [*Vereinigung*] with Christ could give an inner elevation, comfort in sorrow, calm trust, and a heart susceptible to human love, to everything noble and great, not for the sake of ambition and glory, but only for the sake of Christ.³

¹ Gianbattista Mondin, *The Atheism of Karl Marx*; <https://www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/athemarx.htm> (September 2015).

² Giovanni Reale - Dario Antiseri, *Il pensiero occidentale dalle origini ad oggi*, vol. 3, Brescia, La scuola, 1994, p. 139.

³ Karl Marx, *Die Vereinigung der Gläubigen mit Christo* (The Union of the Faithful with Christ); quoted by Richard Wurmbrand, *Marx and Satan*, Illinois, Crossway Books, 1986, p. 11; https://archive.org/stream/MarxAndSatan/Marx-AndSatan_djvu.txt.

Marx professed that religion (Christian) offers us the Ideal, Jesus Christ himself, towards whom we strive and He will never disappoint us. In another of his early write-ups, *Betrachtung eines Junglings bei der Wahl eines Berufes* (Considerations of a Young Man on Choosing His Career), Marx states:

Religion itself teaches us that the Ideal [Ideal] toward which all strive sacrificed Himself for humanity, and who shall dare contradict such claims? If we have chosen the position in which we can accomplish the most for Him, then we can never be crushed by burdens, because they are only sacrifices made for the sake of all.⁴

However, later as a young man he not only gave up his belief and adherence to Christian religion but even went to the extent of denying, deriding, opposing and tenaciously fighting against Christian faith.

In one of his earliest poems entitled *Menschenstolz* (Human Pride) composed by him for his fiancé, clearly demonstrates Marx's pride and desire to be like the Creator himself:

Then, like the gods, drunk with victory I will go walking among its ruins - of the world that collapses - and, giving my words the force of action, I'll feel like the Creator.⁵

With disdain I will throw my gauntlet full in the face of the world, And see the collapse of this pygmy giant whose fall will not stifle my ardor.

Then will I wander godlike and victorious through the ruins of the world And, giving my words an active force, I will feel equal to the Creator".⁶

In one of his earliest poems, *Des Verzweifelnden Gebet* (Invocation of a Desperate), he writes: "I wish to avenge myself against the One who rules above".⁷ Therefore, he was convinced that there is One above who rules....

What would have been the reason(s) for this transformation from Theism to Atheism? What could have produced in him such terrible hatred against God? No personal motive was given by him nor known to anyone. Staunch enemies of Marx (especially those who suffered under Marxist regime) consider him not only an atheist but also a Satanist. A Satanist does not deny the existence of God, but hates him. His enemies are of the opinion that Marx might have fallen in with the tenets of the highly secret Satanist church and received the rites of initiation.

⁴ Karl Marx, Marx, *Betrachtung eines Junglings bei der Wahl eines Berufes* (Considerations of a Young Man on Choosing His Career); quoted by Richard Wurmbrand, op. cit., p.7.

⁵ *Deutsche Tagespost*, 31. Dezember 1982.

⁶ Karl Marx, *Menschenstolz* (Human Pride), MEGA, I, 1 (2), p.50. Quoted by Richard Wurmbrand, op. cit., p. 24.

⁷ K. Marx, *Des Verzweifelnden Gebet* (Invocation of a Desperate); quoted by Richard Wurmbrand, op. cit. p.7.

In fact, in some of the early works of Karl Marx, we come across some verses like the following invocation of one in despair, which demonstrate one's great pride as well, typical of Satan himself. For example, we find the following verses in his *Des Verzweifelnden Gebet* (Invocation of a Desperate), which testify Marx's dream about ruining the world created by God. Referring to Isaiah 14:13, like Satan he intended to build his own throne, high above God's own throne.

I shall build my throne high overhead,
Cold, tremendous shall its summit be.
For its bulwark-- superstitious dread,
For its Marshall--blackest agony.
Who looks on it with a healthy eye,
Shall turn back, struck deathly pale and dumb;
Clutched by blind and chill Mortality
May his happiness prepare its tomb.⁸

In one of his letters to his father, Marx writes where he expresses his great pride in himself:

"My holy of holies was rent asunder and new gods had to be installed."⁹

On March 2, 1837, Marx's father writes to his son:

Your advancement, the dear hope to see your name being once of great repute and your earthly well-being are not the only desires of my heart.... Only if your heart remains pure and beats humanly and if no demon will be able to alienate your heart from better feelings, only then will I be happy.¹⁰

On his father's 55th birthday, son Marx presented the following poem

"Words I teach all mixed up into a devilish muddle.
Thus, anyone may think just what he chooses to think."¹¹
Or again, in his poem *Das bleiche Mädchen* (The Pale Maiden), he writes:
"Thus heaven I've forfeited, I know it full well./ My soul, once true to God, is chosen for hell."¹²

Marx admits that his aim is not to improve the world, reform or revolutionize it, but simply to ruin it and enjoy it being ruined.

⁸ Quoted by Richard Wurmbrand, *Marx and Satan*, op. cit., pp. 30-31.

⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Taken from Marx's poem on Hegel. p.17.

¹² Ibid., p. 20.

When he wrote these things, Marx was around eighteen. His life's program had already been established. There was no word about serving mankind, the proletariat, or socialism. He wished to bring the world to ruin. He wished to build for himself a throne whose bulwark should be human shudder.

Even some of his contemporaries and associates, like Moses Hess, who made Marx embrace the Socialist idea, called him "Dr. Marx--my idol, who will give the last kick to medieval religion and politics."¹³ Georg Jung, another friend of Marx at that time, wrote in 1841¹⁴ that Marx will surely chase the capitalists and God from his heaven.... Marx detested and declared that Christianity is one of the most immoral religions. One of his partners in the First International was Mikhail Bakunin, a Russian anarchist, wrote: "...here steps in Satan, the eternal rebel, the first freethinker and the emancipator of worlds...[urges] him to disobey and eat the fruit of knowledge. ... In this revolution, we will have to awaken the devil in the people, to stir up the basest passions."¹⁵ Bakunin revealed that Proudhon, another major Socialist thinker and at that time a friend of Karl Marx "worshipped Satan". Proudhon declared that God was the prototype for injustice. "... Every step forward is a victory in which we overcome the Divine".¹⁶

Atheism is evident even in his more scientific works beginning with his Doctoral Dissertation. In a fragment of the Appendix of his doctoral thesis *Differenz der demokratischen und epikureischen Naturphilosophie. Doktordissertation* (1841) [The Difference between Democritus' and Epicures' Philosophy of Nature, 1841], Marx proclaims in no uncertain terms that "in the country of reason" the existence of God cannot have any meaning.

"Take paper money to a country in which this use of paper money is not known, and everyone will laugh at your subjective representation. Go with your gods to a country in which other gods are worshipped, and you will be shown that you are the victim of fancies and abstractions. And rightly. Anyone who had brought a migrant god to the ancient Greeks, would have found the proof of the non-existence of this god, because it did not exist for the Greeks. What is the case in a certain country for certain foreign gods, takes place for god in general in the country of reason: it is an area in which his existence ceases"¹⁷

In the Preface of his doctoral thesis, the young Marx evokes the figure of Prometheus and declares the reason for his hatred and denial of God, viz. God does not recognize human self-consciousness as the supreme divinity.

¹³ cf. Moses Hess, Letter of September 2, 1841 to Berthold Auerbach, MEGA, I, 1 (2), p. 261.

¹⁴ (cf. *ibid.*, Georg Jung, letter of October 18, 1841 to Arnold Ruge, pp. 261, 262)

¹⁵ Mikhail Bakunin, *God and the State*, New York, Dover Publications, 1970, p. 112

¹⁶ P.-J. Proudhon, *Philosophie de la Misere, Parigi*, Hans Enzensberger, *Gespräche mit Marx und Engels* (Conversations with Marx and Engels Union Generale d'Éditions, 1964, pp. 200-201 *ibid.*, pp. 16 - 23.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Differenz der demokratischen und epikureischen Naturphilosophie. Doktordissertation*; E-Book, p.51; <http://www.zeno.org/Lesesaal/N/9781495461248?page=50&ps=%21>

“Philosophy makes no secret of it. The profession of faith of Prometheus is her profession of faith... her only statement [I hate all gods] against all the gods of heaven and earth that do not recognize human self-consciousness as supreme godhead. This divinity is unrivaled”.¹⁸

For Marx, to admit the existence of God is a sign of weakness on the part of reason (Vernunft). Marx wants to proclaim the freedom of the spirit and teach man to stop crying over the loss of chains that bind him. Marx was zealously determined to uphold the autonomy of reason and freedom for which every reference to transcendence was to be excluded. In fact, according to him, all the elaborated proofs to affirm the existence of God prove the fact of the existence of human conscience, human reason. In fact, “if thought does not exist, God does not exist”. God does not exist except for one who considers the world as non-reasonable (*unvernünftig*) and the one who considers the world as non-reasonable is himself non-reasonable: “The non-reason is the existence of God”. Faith in God / Transcendent is an offence against reason and freedom, and hence an offence against human dignity.¹⁹

His concern, however, was not to prove or disprove God’s existence, nor aimed at a violent overthrow of religion and freedom of worship, but on religion and religious belief that play an important role in human beings and human history, and whether such role is positive or negative in his progress and realization as human beings. According to him, religion plays a negative role, and just as philosophy (Hegelian), politics (based on Hegelianism), economics (based on private property) are (self) alienations, so too religion is self-alienation, which has to be overcome for man’s full self-realization.

Philosophical / Theoretical Basis of His Atheism

The question naturally arises, what is the philosophical or theoretical reason for his atheism? His theoretical atheism is due primarily to philosophical reasons and only secondarily to historical, social and political reasons.²⁰ Marx’s theoretical atheism is the consequence of the following postulates: 1) dialectical materialism: matter as the supreme and unique cause of everything; 2) historical materialism: man as the center and creator of history and 3) absolute humanism, by overcoming all forms of self-alienation (socio-economic-political and religious) through a total revolution – praxis.

At the outset, we have to make the following premise, that for Marx theory alone is not enough but has to be realized in concrete action – praxis. During the period (1842 - 1843) as editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* Marx, got into closer contact with political, social and economic problems, and he became convinced that theory is not enough but has to be

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Differenz der demokratischen und epikureischen Naturphilosophie*. Doktordissertation. E-Book, p. 2; <http://www.zeno.org/Lesesaal/N/9781495461248?page=2>

¹⁹ Georges M. M. Cottier, *Ateismo e Marxismo*, in Karl Marx, (cura di) Facoltà Filosofica della Pontificia Università Salesiana di Roma, *L’Ateismo Contemporaneo*, SEI, Torino, 1968, vol. 2, p. 96.

²⁰ Gianbattista Mondin, op. cit.

concretized in practical activity, in action (praxis), if it is to be effective. It is not enough simply to understand the world, as the working out of the Idea or of Reason, opinion held by Hegel and Idealists in general, nor is it sufficient to criticize the traditional ideas and existing institutions (opinion held by the Left Hegelians) to change them. They should be concretized in social and political action (revolution). In fact, according to Marx, the German Philosophy (Idealism, Hegelianism in particular) is ideology, is man's alienation, divorces man from reality and makes him a mere spectator, just as religion signifies man's alienation from himself. Similarly, Marx criticizes the Hegelian theory of the State on which was founded and sustained the political and economic systems of the Prussian State. In the Political State (Prussia), as conceived by Hegel, man alienates his true nature, just as religion is man's self-alienation.²¹ Revolution (praxis) will bring about the liberation from all forms of socio-economic-religious and political alienations.

Dialectical Materialism

Marx criticizes the basic principle of Hegelian Idealism: That which is rational is real, and that which is real is rational.²² These words, which occur in the Preface to his *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Philosophy of Right), may be regarded as the keynote of his system. "All reality is the expression of reason, and all being the realization of thought. The world itself is the evolution of the thinking Spirit"²³ and substitutes it with "that which is real is rational and should be made rational". Marx set out "to seek for the idea in the real itself", endeavoring to evolve it from reality. For Hegel the real was not the object for reason; for him the world of experience, the real, was self-disclosure of the idea. Marx revolted against such formalism and the abstract speculations of the traditional idealist philosophy. The idealist philosophy (especially Hegelianism) had isolated thought from objective happenings of nature. Against this, Marx's whole nature rebelled. His interest was, instead, the real.²⁴

Marx's criticism of Idealism and the affirmation of the real is very evident in the following famous example given in *The Holy Family* (1845):

If from real apples, pears, strawberries and almonds I form the general idea "Fruit", if I go further and imagine that my abstract idea "Fruit," derived from real fruit, is an entity existing outside me, is indeed the true essence of the pear, the apple, etc.; then, in the language of speculative philosophy I am declaring that "Fruit" is the substance of the pear, the apple, the almond, etc. I am saying, therefore, that to be a pear is not essential to the pear, that to be an apple is not essential to the

²¹ Giovanni Reale - Dario Antiseri, *Il Pensiero occidentale dalle origini ad oggi*, vol. 3, Brescia, La Scuola 1994, pp. 305-308.

²² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* („Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig“); <http://www.zeno.org/Philosophie/M/Hegel,+Georg+Wilhelm+Friedrich/Grundlinien+der+Philosophie+des+Rechts/Vorrede>

²³ G. W. F Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*. tr. by S. W Dyde, Batoche Books, Ontario, 2001, p. 18 ("What is rational is real; And what is real is rational"); <http://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/hegel/right.pdf>

²⁴ Otto Ruehle, *Karl Marx. His Life and Work*, Routledge, Oxon, 2011, pp. 25-26.

apple; that what is essential to these things is not their real being, perceptible to the senses, but the essence that I have extracted from them and then foisted on them, the essence of my idea – “Fruit.” I therefore declare apples, pears, almonds, etc. to be mere forms of existence, *moduli*, of “Fruit.” My finite understanding supported by my senses does, of course, distinguish an apple from a pear and a pear from an almond; but my speculative reason declares these sensuous differences unessential, indifferent. It sees in the apple the same as in the pear, and in the pear the same as in the almond, namely “Fruit.” Particular real fruits are no more than semblances whose true essence is “the Substance” – Fruit.²⁵

That is to say, while for the common man and the realist philosopher first exist apples, pears, strawberries, almonds that are perceptible to the senses and then the concept of fruit, Hegel instead thinks that first exists the concept of fruit and then the concrete fruit as its necessary manifestations and derivatives.

The fundamental reality, therefore, for Marx, is the real, Nature and not the Idea or *Logos* (Absolute Spirit/Reason) as for Hegel. Marx accepts Feuerbach’s thesis of the primacy of nature (Essence of Christianity).

Nature exists independently of all philosophy; it is the basis on which we human beings, ourselves products of Nature, have grown. Apart from Nature and human beings, nothing exists; and the higher beings which our religious fantasy created are only the fantastic reflection of our own essence...²⁶

Nature / Matter is not only the fundamental reality but is the only reality and human beings are the fruit evolved from nature. What then is the essence of human being, evolved from matter, according to Feuerbach and Marx? Man is reason, will and heart. The power to think, to will and to love are characteristics of a man growing up in the realization of his essence. Reason, Love, Will are man’s highest powers and they are the absolute essence of man.²⁷

Marx opposes Hegel’s primacy of idea and his idealistic concept of man as self-consciousness and his primary activity as ‘thought’ and replaces it with the primacy of the sensible reality. “It is not the consciousness of human beings which determines their being, but it is, on the contrary, their social being [sensible social relationships] which

²⁵ K. Marx – Engels, *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Critique*, tr. from German by R. Dixon, Moscow, Foreign Language Publishing House, 1956, p. 78-79; <https://archive.org/details/holyfamily00marx>.

²⁶ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, p. 12 (Stuttgart, 1888); Ludwig Feuerbach, edited by C. P. Dutt with an introduction by L. Rudas, London, no date, p. 28; cfr. also Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. Part 1: Hegel; <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/ch01.htm>

²⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*; <http://www.zeno.org/Lesesaal/N/9781484031025?page=24>, E-book, p. 25.

determines their consciousness”,²⁸ and human ‘thought’ is no more than a reflection of the material economic conditions or of the processes of Nature.

The fundamental form of human existence according to Marx is not ‘thought’ but ‘manual labor’ in which man alienates himself in the objective product of his labor (private property), a product which, in society as at present constituted, does not belong to the producer (proletariat/worker), instead belongs to the capitalist (bourgeois class). The producer in his work as well as in what he produces lives in a state of alienation. This alienation, according to Marx, cannot be overcome only by thought or through analysis of the situation only but through a social revolution, which abolishes private property and effects the transition to communism.²⁹

Marx criticizes the “logical mysticism” of Hegel, which ends up becoming too conservative in political terms because it tends to justify the fact that the door to acceptance of existing institutions which could not be changed as inherently rational and positive. Marx, however, recognizes in Hegel the merit of having developed a dialectical view of reality. Hegel’s dialectic however has to be inverted from head to feet, has to be made to stand on feet, because reality is not Idea or the Absolute spirit but Man in dialectical relation with nature. There is no synthesis of opposites, as held by Hegel, because in reality there exists only conflict or exclusion between the opposites.

The mystification which the dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general forms of motion in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.³⁰

My dialectical method [affirms Marx] is, in its foundations, not only different from the Hegelian, but exactly opposite to it. For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of ‘the idea’, is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea. With me, the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought.³¹

²⁸ Marx-Engels, *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Stuttgart, 1897 p. xii, in Selected Works, I, London 1958, p. 363.

²⁹ Karl Marx, *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, Vollständige Neuausgabe, Herausgegeben von Karl-Maria Guth, Berlin 2014. Tr. Karl Marx – Frederick Engels, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Start Publishing LLC, 2012.

³⁰ Karl Marx, *Das Capital* Band. 1, Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, Hamburg, Verlag von Otto Meissner, 1872. Tr. Karl Marx, *Capital*. Vol. 1. A Critique of Political Economy. Translated by Ben Fowkes, Penguin Books in Association with New Left Review, U.K., 1976, p. 103; https://archive.org/stream/MarxCapitalVolume1ACritiqueOfPoliticalEconomy/Marx%20%20Capital_Volume_1_A_Critique_of_Political_Economy#page/n1/mode/2up.

³¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*. Vol. 1. A Critique of Political Economy, tr. by Ben Fowkes, Penguin Books in Association with New Left Review, U.K., 1976, p. 102; https://archive.org/stream/MarxCapitalVolume1ACritiqueOfPoliticalEconomy/Marx%20-%20Capital_Volume_1_A_Critique_of_Political_Economy#page/n1/mode/2up

Dialectics allows Marx to understand the real movement of history and therefore also the state of existing things. Marx reverses the Hegelian dialectic, places it on “its feet”; transports it from ideas to history, from “the mind to facts”, from “unhappy consciousness” to “social reality in contradiction”. In substance, every historical moment generates in its womb contradictions: these are the moles of historical development. Marx argues that the dialectic is the law of development of historical reality and that this law expresses the unavoidableness of the transition from capitalist society to communist society, with the consequent termination of exploitation and alienation.³²

Finally, for Marx, nothing exists apart from the material sensible world (Nature); man is nothing but a product of matter. Dialectic is the law of development of material and historical reality. Such process is entirely in the hands of man and there is no place for God or for his involvement. God is entirely absent!

Historical Materialism

Marx states that there exists only one single science and that is the science of history, which has two sides, which are inseparable and depend on each other: history of nature (natural science) and history of men. For him, the center of history is the real, active man in flesh and blood, and it is he who makes his own history, he is his own creator.

We know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the history of men. The two sides are, HOWEVER, inseparable; The History of nature and the history of men are dependent on each other so long as men exist. The history of nature, called natural science, does not concern us here; but we will have to examine the history of men, since almost the whole ideology amounts either to a distorted conception of this history or to a complete abstraction from it. Ideology is itself only one of the aspects of this history.³³

In the German Ideology, Marx writes:

In direct contrast to German philosophy, which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, or imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men and on the basis of their real life process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process.³⁴

³² Cfr. Giovanni Reale – Dario Antiseri, op. cit., p. 149.

³³ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*. 1845; <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm>.

³⁴ Karl Marx – F. Engels, *German Ideology*, Edited with an introduction by R. Pascal, New York, International Publishers, Inc., 1939, p. 14. Quoted by Erich Fromm 1961, *Marx's Concept of Man*, First published, New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1961. pp. 1 – 85.

The premises from which Karl Marx – F. Engels begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those that they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way. Man is born from nature, from mater. History begins with the existence of living human beings who are involved in the process of their own self-creation in relationship to nature. In relationship with nature, they produce their means of subsistence, thus realizing their own material life. In the process of evolution they transform their relationship to nature, and hence themselves.³⁵

The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals... Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.³⁶

Men are what they are in the way and in what they produce. Their life depends and is limited by the material conditions, and in the production of means of subsistence.

The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather, it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.³⁷

Production constitutes the economic structure of society. Economy is the real foundation of society and all the rest (politics, ethics, law, etc.) are superstructures. The production of material life conditions all the other aspects of life.

[...]: in the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure

³⁵ Cfr. Capital I, 1.c. p. 406, in Erich Fromm 1961, *Marx's Concept of Man*, op. cit.

³⁶ German Ideology, 1.c. p. 7; quoted by Erich Fromm 1961, *Marx's Concept of Man*, op. cit.

³⁷ Ibid.

and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their social being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.³⁸

For Marx, hence, the economic factor is the principal and decisive factor, and the economic structure is the carrying structure of all the other structures that compose society. Marx wrote:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behavior. The same applies to mental production expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc. ... Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. – real, active men... Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process.³⁹

Man is the center of nature; he is the creator and center of history. History consists in the sum total of relations of productions which constitutes the economic structure of society (the real foundation of society), on which rises all other superstructures, legal, political, etc. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. In Marx's concept of history, God has no place; he does not enter in the history of man. He is entirely absent.

Religion is Alienation

According to Marx, in the present moment of history (his time) man lives in a state of alienation at all levels, socio-economic, political and religious. Therefore, it is important to understand his concept of alienation, especially religious alienation and the way to overcome alienation necessary for the development and full realization of man.

Alienation

For Marx, man is the creator of history and history is a history of increasing development, but at the same time a history of increasing his own alienation. Only through a radical revolution of the socio-economic-political of the existing system can true communism can be realized and only then man can be emancipated from alienation ('expropriation') and thus return to himself through 'appropriation' and reach his self-realization.⁴⁰

³⁸ Preface to a *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, Marx, Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. I, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1955, p. 362-4.

³⁹ Karl Marx – F. Engels. *The German Ideology*, 1.c. p. 13-4; Ed. with an introduction by R. Pascal, New York, International Publishers, Inc., 1939. Quoted by E. Fromm in <https://www.marxists.org/archive/fromm/works/1961/man/index.htm>

⁴⁰ Erich Fromm, op. cit; <https://www.marxists.org/archive/fromm/works/1961/man/index.htm>

Marx Proceeds from Nature and from Actual Economic Fact.

The worker can create nothing without nature, without the sensuous external world. It is the material on which his labor is realized, in which it is active, from which, and by means of which it produces.

But just as nature provides labor with [the] means of life in the sense that labor cannot live without objects on which to operate, on the other hand, it also provides the means of life in the more restricted sense, i.e., the means for the physical subsistence of the worker himself.

However, the actual economic fact is that the worker (the class of proletariat) becomes poorer the more wealth he produces; the more his production increases in power and size the more poor he becomes. The more commodities he produces, the worker becomes an ever-cheaper commodity, an 'object'. His devaluation is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things. Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity – and this at the same rate at which it produces commodities in general.

This fact expresses that the object which labor produces confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labor is embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labor. Labor's realization is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as loss of realization for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation.⁴¹

Thus the more the worker by his labor appropriates the external world, sensuous nature, the more he deprives himself of the means of life in two respects: first, in that the sensuous external world more and more ceases to be an object belonging to his labor – to be his labor's means of life; and, second, in that it more and more ceases to be a means of life in the immediate sense, means for the physical subsistence of the worker.

In both respects, therefore, the worker becomes a servant of his object, first, in that he receives an object of labor, i.e., in that he receives work, and, secondly, in that he receives means of subsistence. This enables him to exist, first as a worker, and second, as a physical subject. The height of this servitude is that it is only as a worker that he can maintain himself as a physical subject and that it is only as a physical subject that he is a worker.⁴²

⁴¹ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, no.XXII;
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>

⁴² Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, no.XXIII;
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>

For Marx,

alienation [estrangement] means that man does not experience himself as the acting agent in his grasp of the world, but that the world (nature, others, and he himself) remains alien to him. They stand above and against him as objects, even though they may be objects of his own creation. Alienation is essentially experiencing the world and oneself passively, receptively, as the subject separated from the object.⁴³

In the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), Marx gives the reason for this alienation. After offering his own definitions of salary, profit, capital, etc., concludes that, the maximum production of richness coincides with the maximum impoverishment of the worker. This, because, the worker gets more and more alienated from himself, from his work and from the product of his work, viz., private property.⁴⁴ With the division of work and increase of private property in the capitalistic socio-political society, the worker gets alienated even more from himself, from the product of his work (private property) and from others. Work is no more an expression of his own powers, work and its products assume an existence separate from him.

For Marx Private Property is the Alienation of Human Labor:

The object produced by labor [private property], its product, now stands opposed to it as an alien being, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object and turned into a physical thing; this product is an objectification of labor.⁴⁵

The worker alienates himself from his activity (work) because work has ceased to be a part of his nature and “consequently, he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased. The worker therefore feels himself at home only during his leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless.”⁴⁶ The worker with his work – which is proper of his human nature – alienates from his own nature as man. In the act of production the relationship of the worker to his own activity is experienced “as something alien and not belonging to him, activity as suffering (passivity), strength as powerlessness, creation as emasculation.”⁴⁷ Work becomes only a means for survival, for conserving his life as animal, instead of being the characteristic activity of man in as much as man. Even in his relationship with

⁴³ Erich Fromm, op. cit.

⁴⁴ “Private property is therefore the product, the necessary result, of alienated labor, of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself. Private property is thus derived from the analysis of the concept of alienated labor; that is, alienated man, alienated labor, alienated life, and estranged man.” [E.P. MSS., pp. 105-6, quoted by E. Fromm, op. cit.]

⁴⁵ E.P. MSS., p. 99., quoted by Erich Fromm, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Capital I, l.c. p. 536., quoted by Erich Fromm, op. cit.

⁴⁷ E.P. MSS., p. 98., quoted by Erich Fromm, op. cit.

others (workers), he experiences alienation. In his relationship with the other workers too he experiences alienation, because in as much as he is 'estranged' / alienated from his specific nature, he is alienated from others as well; in fact he considers the others according to the measure and the relationship in which he finds himself as worker.

While man thus becomes alienated from himself, the product of labor becomes "an alien object which dominates him. This relationship is at the same time the relationship to the sensuous external world, to natural objects, as an alien and hostile world."⁴⁸ "The laborer exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the laborer."⁴⁹

Such a situation becomes intolerable for the worker and he begins to react. In fact, Marx states that history has been one of continuous conflict between those who have (the rich) and those who have not (the poor). In the Manifesto Marx states that the history of every society has been a history of continuous conflict between classes, between the oppressors and the oppressed, between the rich and the poor.⁵⁰ In the modern society, the conflict is between the capitalist (bourgeois) and the proletariat.

The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production -- antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from the social conditions of life of the individual; at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism. This social formation brings, therefore, the prehistory of human society to a close.⁵¹

According to the law of dialectic, the proletariat is the internal contradiction (anti-thesis) of capitalistic bourgeois society. As and in the measure the capitalist society nourishes and develops itself, it nourishes and develops the proletariat, the modern alienated workers, who will one day destroy the capitalist society through a social revolution and usher in a new society, socialism / communism, where there will not exist anymore any class distinction.

According to Marx, the only way to break the chain of alienation is through a radical social revolution brought about by the workers who will overthrow the capitalistic society and usher in communism. In the communist society every form of alienation will be overcome, everyone re-appropriates his true nature, where the motto will be: "from everyone according to his capacity and to everyone according to his needs".

⁴⁸ Erich Fromm: "Marx stresses two points: 1) in the process of work, and especially of work under the conditions of capitalism, man is estranged from his own creative powers, and 2) the objects of his own work become alien beings, and eventually rule over him, become powers independent of the producer", op. cit.

⁴⁹ E.P. MSS., p. 99, quoted by Erich Fromm, op. cit.

⁵⁰ K. Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, referred to by Erich Fromm, op. cit.

⁵¹ Preface to a *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, Marx, Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. I, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1955, p. 362-4; quoted by Erich Fromm, op. cit.

Marx's Criticism of Religion

In the beginning of his philosophical reflection, Marx was more involved in the theoretical controversy between the Right and Left Hegelians on religious problem than political. For Hegel philosophy and religion have the same content, but he also said that religion expresses this content in the form of representation while philosophy expresses in the form of concept. According to Hegel, the true content of religion was to be taken up by philosophy, transformed in concepts, and by doing so, what is truly religious would disappear and become philosophical reason. In this manner, the Left Hegelians substituted religion (in particular Christian) with philosophy and both are incompatible, thus denying any element of transcendence and reducing religion from divine message to essentially human fact. Through religion one can come to know many things, however not regarding God but regarding man, his profound aspirations and his history.

Since religion is representation (Hegel), the Left Hegelians reduced it to a "myth". David Strauss, for example, (*Life of Jesus*, 1835) stated that the Gospel narration is not history but "myth"; the Gospel is not a chronicle of facts scientifically verifiable but presents "the Christ of faith". For Feuerbach, "religion is man's self-estrangement: man posits God over against himself as a separate being. God is not what man is; - man is not what God is. God is infinite, man is finite; God is fully realized, man is not; God is eternal, man is temporal; God is all-powerful, man powerless; God is holy, man sinful. God and man are extremes... But man objectifies his own secret essence in religion. It must therefore be shown that this opposition, this dichotomy of God and man, which is the starting point of religion, is a dichotomy within man, of man with his own essence."⁵² Bauer professed explicit atheism.

Religion is the passivity of man elevated to its essence – fixed, objectified, willed and constructed. It is the most intense suffering that he could inflict on himself; it is the quintessence of man's fear and the poverty and emptiness of his spirit, the wretchedness of the world become concrete, willed and objectified. The perfection of religion is the perfection of the world's wretchedness.⁵³

Marx agrees with Feuerbach, Bauer and the Left Hegelians who criticized Hegel for having substituted the Transcendent God of Christian tradition with the Spirit, the human reality in its abstraction, the Idea of humanity. But "the truth is man and not abstract reason, truth is life and not thought ..." Hence it is necessary to deny Idealism which is but loss of the concrete man. For greater reason it is necessary to deny theism, since it is not God who creates man but is man who creates God.⁵⁴

⁵² Marx W. Wartofsky, *Feuerbach*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

⁵³ Bruno Bauer, *Christianity exposed*, *International Archives of the History of Ideas*, 105, in R. Gascoigne, *Religion, Rationality and Community*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 1985, p. 105.

⁵⁴ The idea that religion is not something instituted by God, but rather is man-made, can be traced back (to) ancient Greece. It was not until the 18th century; however, that it began to seem possible to finally prove what had previously been mere speculation. L. Feuerbach, drawing on Hegelian philosophy, set out the idea that the process by which

Marx agrees and affirms with Feuerbach that in the history of man religion always played a fundamental role. Philosophy, therefore, does not have the right to deny or ridicule this great human fact; instead, man has to understand it. When one really understands it, he concludes, "The conscience which man has of God is the conscience which man has of himself". "In the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious subject has for his object the infinity of his own nature."⁵⁵ For him, God is nothing more than the outward projection of the human being's own infinite nature. Thus, man creates God, not the other way around.

In other words, man puts his qualities, his aspirations, his desires outside of himself, and builds his divinity, which stands as foreign and alien to him. "Religion, therefore, is projection of the essence of man". "God is the mirror of man" (Feuerbach). Man in prayer loves his own heart; the miracle is "a supernatural desire fulfilled"; and "the fundamental dogmas of Christianity are realized wishes of the heart."

The predicates that religious believers apply to God are predicates that properly apply to the human species-essence of which God is an imaginary representation.⁵⁶ For Feuerbach, religion is the dream of the human spirit. He maintains that all religious belief is essentially based on and derived from human error and misunderstanding, maintaining that all religious belief is a product of anthropomorphic projectionism. The concept of God is an anthropomorphic projection of the human mind, and as such embodies man's conception of his own nature. The danger, as Feuerbach sees it, is that we are denying our own nature and thus alienating ourselves from what is truly human, by believing that our values are derived from a moral order, which is divine in nature. The superhuman deities of religion are in fact involuntary projections of the essential attributes of human nature.

The idea of deity coincides with the idea of humanity. All divine attributes, all the attributes which make God, are attributes of the species - attributes which in the individual are limited, but the limits of which are abolished in the essence of the species, and even in its existence, in so far as it has its complete existence only in all men taken together. All the attributes of God are attributes of the essence of man. The only divine reality is man.⁵⁷

For Marx, as for Feuerbach, religion is a human, fully human fact.

religion was invented was wish-fulfillment. God, according to Feuerbach, is projection, is the strongest desires of humanity.

⁵⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums (The Essence of Christianity, 1821)*. Religion as Projection: sophia-project.org, p. 147.

⁵⁶ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums (The Essence of Christianity)*; <http://www.zeno.org/Lesesaal/N/9781484031025?page=24>, E-book, p. 75.

⁵⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, chapter 16: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/feuerbach/works/essence/index.htm>

As a man thinks, what his principles are, this is his god: what man is, and not much more is his God [...]. You know the man by his God, and, reciprocally, God from man, the one and the other are identified [...]. God has revealed the intimate, expressed the essence of man, religion is the solemn revelation of hidden treasures from man, the public profession of his secrets of love.

Feuerbach sees it as “a turning point in history.”

Finally, in history, *homo homini deus est*.⁵⁸

Religion is Self-alienation

The turning point in history is “*homo hominideusest*”. If so one who believes in an external, Transcendent Being (God) and projects his qualities and aspirations on him, actually denies himself, his true nature and thus alienates himself.

The following phrase from Feuerbach condenses the theory of religious alienation (Entfremdung): “The emptier is [one’s] life, the fuller, more concrete is [his] God. It’s with one act that the real world is emptied and divinity finds its fullness. Only the poor man has a rich God.”⁵⁹ The formula of Marx is similar: “The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself.”⁶⁰

Entfremdung (alienation) describes the estrangement of people from aspects of their Gattungswesen (“species-essence”) as a consequence of living in a society stratified into social or religious classes. The alienated man is the man alienated from himself, in as much as he is frustrated and deprived of that, which is part of him.

As mentioned above, according to Marx, there is no other reality than the “sensible”, “material” reality at the level of man. The world of religion is a product of imagination. God, immortal soul, are ‘irreal’ beings, in whom man places an illusory happiness, in the measure in which he is frustrated in relation to the possession of real happiness. The illusory ‘above’ has a role of compensation for the unhappiness lived ‘here’, the only that is real. The unhappy man dreams of happiness of which he is deprived. Consequently, Trennung (separation), Spannung (tension) Absonderung (seclusion), Zerrissenheit (division) are characteristics of unhappiness. Man’s illusory happiness has to be replaced with real happiness and that occurs when he is freed of religious alienation.

⁵⁸ Ludwig Feuerbach, *L'essenza del cristianesimo*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1971, pp. 286-288.

⁵⁹ “Je leerer das Leben, desto voller, desto konkreter ist Gott. Die Entleerung der wirklichen Welt und die Erfüllung der Gottheit ist ein Act. Nur der arme Mensch hat einen reichen Gott”. [Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, S. W., Leipzig, 1846, vol. 2, p. 115]

⁶⁰ “Je mehr der Mensch in Gott setzt, je weniger behält er in sich”. [In *Buecherei*, vol. 42, p. 99. Cfr. MEGA, I, 3, p. 83]

In his two earlier writings of 1843 and 1844, *Zur Judenfrage (La Questione EBRAICA)*⁶¹ and *Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie, Einführung* (Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction) Marx affirms that critique of religion is presupposed for every critique. If religion is a pathological illusion, it is not sufficient to confute it placing it at its own level (plane), but it is necessary to abolish it.

For Germany, the criticism of religion has been essentially completed, and the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism.

The profane existence of error is compromised as soon as its heavenly oratio pro arisetfocis ["speech for the altars and hearths," i.e., for God and country] has been refuted. Man, who has found only the reflection of himself in the fantastic reality of heaven, where he sought a superman, will no longer feel disposed to find the mere appearance of himself, the non-man [*Unmensch*], where he seeks and must seek his true reality.

The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point *d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.⁶²

Marx's opposition to religion was based especially upon this view in that he believed religion alienated humans from reality and held them back from their true potential. He therefore considered that religion needed to be removed from society.

⁶¹ Riproduced in Bucherei, vol. 41, pp. 28-66; cfr. MEGA, I, I, 1, pp. 576-606, 607-621

⁶² Quoted from Karl Marx, Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1843). Introduction; cf. Joseph O'Malley (ed.), Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 1; <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/>

Overcoming Religious Alienation

How to abolish or overcome religious alienation? First, Marx considered the contributions of religion over the centuries to be unimportant and irrelevant to the future of humanity. The autonomy of humanity from the realm of supernatural forces was considered by Marx as an axiomatic ontological truth that had been developed since ancient times, and he considered it to have an even more respectable tradition than Christianity. Second, he argued that religious belief had been invented as a reaction against the suffering and injustice of the world. In Marx's view, the poor and oppressed were the original creators of religion, and they used it as a way to reassure themselves that they would have a better life in the future, after death. Thus, it served as a kind of "opium," or a way to escape the harsh realities of the world.⁶³ Although this was its origin with the oppressed classes, the ruling classes had taken control of religion and used it as a tool of emotional and intellectual control of the masses. Marx considered Christianity to have been like this, in its origin as a religion for slaves hoping for a reward after their harsh existence, but in later becoming a kind of deceptive ideology that the ruling classes used to maintain the status quo.

Referring to Feuerbach's analysis of religion as a self-alienation on man's part Marx asks why it occurs (cf. article 1 in *Deutsch-franzoesische Jahrbuecher*, 1843). Why does man create the illusory world of the supernatural (religion) and project into it his own true self? The answer is, states Marx, that religion reflects or expresses the distortion in human society. Man's political, social and economic life is incapable of fulfilling his true self, and he creates the illusory world of religion and seeks his happiness therein, so that religion is man's self-administered opium. He considered that religion was an opiate that people needed in order to support themselves in the harsh conditions of life, and he furthermore held the view that these harsh conditions were kept in place with the support of religion. In order to eliminate religion, what is needed is to eliminate the harsh conditions that caused people to hold illusory superstitions that comforted them, and in order to eliminate these conditions he concluded that religion, since it supported the existence of such conditions, needed to be attacked and eliminated.

Marx was convinced that the economic superstructure determined and sustained religion. He believed that abolishing class society (the capitalistic) based and sustained by economic structure (private property) would lead to an end of religion. Hostility towards religion was in fact the beginning of Marx's philosophical career, as we mentioned above, and it preceded dialectic materialism. It became critically fused with his economic and social ideas in his claim that religion, along with all other forms of thought, was the product of material conditions and the distribution of property. When the economic structures that created religion were destroyed, religion assumedly would disappear

⁶³ Dimitry V. Pospelovsky comments: "The cultural contributions of religion over the centuries were dismissed as unimportant and irrelevant to the well-being of the human mind" in *A History of Soviet Atheism in Theory, and Practice, and the Believer*, vol 1: *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Anti-Religious Policies*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1987, p. 12.

with it. He therefore believed that religion needed to be combated through a pragmatic approach of attacking the economic base of religion and to attack the causes of religion.

But criticism by itself is not enough. We cannot change society simply by criticizing or philosophizing about it. It must leave the plane of theory and penetrate to the masses, and when it does so, it is no longer philosophy but takes the form of a social revolution, which is the work of the most oppressed class, the proletariat. It is by abolishing private property consciously and explicitly that the proletariat will emancipate itself and, together with itself, the whole of society.⁶⁴

Marx's proposal to abolish religion is his practical atheism. "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; now it's their turn to transform it" (11th Thesis on Feuerbach). With this famous statement - also engraved on his tomb - Marx intends to claim that what matters is not only theory or the mere criticism of religion (done by the Left Hegelians, including Feuerbach) but also action, and revolutionary action (praxis) for that matter. Man solves his problems not just with speculation only but with a critically illuminated and direct action. In short, the theory must serve practice. Marx sought to achieve an interpretation of the world and of man, which is, at the same time, commitment to transformation and revolutionary activity. Thus by a radical revolution brought about by the working class will abolish the present day socio-economic and political capitalistic society. The revolution will bring about a socialistic or communist society and when that occurs religious alienation too will be automatically overcome, and religion will not have any more role in the new society: communism.

Absolute Humanism

That which emerges clearly in Marx's earlier pre-philosophical writings and later in his philosophical reflection (dialectical and historical materialism, and criticism of religion) is centered on man, to uphold his dignity, his freedom, his maximum realization, his fulfilment and happiness, and to liberate him from all forms of alienations and exploitations.

In his early pre-philosophical writings, Marx set man at the summit of the cosmos: man is the Supreme Being. Marx abandoned his Christian faith early in life and opted for man instead. He intended to destroy faith in God in order to affirm himself as the Creator. "... like the gods, drunk with victory I will go walking among its ruins ... I'll feel like the Creator" (see above).

Marx sets man at the summit of the cosmos: man is the Supreme Being. As mentioned above Marx leaves the practice of Christian faith early in life and opts for man instead. He intends to destroy faith in God and affirm himself as the Creator. "... Like the gods, drunk with victory I will go walking among its ruins ... I'll feel like the Creator" (see above).

⁶⁴ Giovanni Reale - Dario Antiseri, op. cit., p. 308.

He wants to replace God with man. Man is the Supreme Being and hence there is no other superior being, no one greater than man. It is for this reason that Marx considers it necessary to destroy religion and belief in a transcendent God. According to Marx, religion / belief in God prevents him from becoming aware of himself as human being, of his dignity, of his ability, of his capacity. Religion is opium that alienates him from being what he really is and from what he can really become as a fully self-realized human being. Therefore, in order to affirm man and his self-realization to the maximum possible, religion should go, should have no place in his existence. In fact, it is man who makes religion; religion does not make man. Religion is the fantastic realization of the human essence but the human essence has no true reality. Hence, if man is superior to religion and is his creation, he can also do away with it.

In his theory of dialectical materialism, Marx affirms that the only true reality is matter/nature. Man is the highest being of evolved matter and his existence is material. He is in essential relationship with nature and the movement of history and of existing things is dialectical. Conflict between the existing things and their negation is inevitable, and such conflict will be resolved only with the overcoming of the existing state of things. In this dialectical movement of history and of existing things, man is the protagonist. He is the center of dialectical materialism.

Similarly, in his theory of historical materialism, man is the center and creator of history. Marx starts of his reflection from real presupposition (and not from ideas). The basic presupposition is the existing human individuals. They do not find their means of subsistence ready-made, but they have to produce. The way in which men produce their means of subsistence determines their way of life. In this manner, Marx identifies the essence of man with the productive activity of subsistence and every other activity is an 'emanation' of that. Man's history is intimately connected with his productive activity and with what he produces. He realizes his essence in his productive activity and in the product (fruit) of his labor. History consists in the social production of their existence; men enter into determined rapports, in rapports of production, which correspond to a determined grade of development of their material productive powers. The sum total of these rapports constitutes the economic structure of the society, or the real basis on which are raised juridical and political superstructures and to which correspond determined forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions, in general, the social, political and spiritual process of life. Through and by means of his productive activity, in relationship with others, he realizes his essence as man. The true and fundamental history is that of real individuals, of their action in transforming nature and their material conditions of life. Consciousness and ideas follow from this history. Morals, religion, metaphysics and every other form of ideology are not autonomous; they do not have their own proper history and when the economic base changes, also these (ideologies) change with it.

After having established the above-mentioned theory with arguments, Marx criticizes the present state of history. In the present socio-economic situation there exists a huge gulf between the rich and the poor (the proletariat) – the two basic classes of the present-day society. The worker (proletariat) finds himself alienated in his work as well as from what he produces, which becomes the private property of the rich and such a situation of alienation is upheld by the policies of the State. In work as well as in the product of his labor (private property), instead of helping him to realize himself as a human being, leads him more and more into a state of misery and unhappiness. Marx's intent and his life-long involvement were directed to liberate the worker (the present-day class of proletariat) from such a state of alienation and misery, which, according to him, would be possible only through a revolution that will bring about the end of the present socio-economic-political superstructures. The revolution would bring about a new society (communism) where everyone, liberated from all forms of alienation, especially economic, which for Marx is the basic alienation, would live a fulfilled and happy life as true human being. He fought for social and economic justice, for the rights of the worker and of the poor. The worker has every right to work, enjoy his work and enjoy the fruits of his labor. Work should become a liberating act and not enslaving. Herein lies the great humanism of Marx.

In the same way, Marx's criticism of religion had only one scope: to affirm man, his freedom and his dignity against every form of exploitation in the name of religion. He took pains to demonstrate that religion is self-alienation. Religion was used by the bourgeois class (the rich, owners of private property) to exploit the poor, the proletariat and keep them in their miserable state of existence. Marx reacts to such a situation by arguing and demonstrating that religion does not liberate man, does not make him realize his true nature, but keeps him a degraded, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being.

Marx argued that religion is not reality but only a phenomenon. The only reality is man who is a product of nature, of the material world. Religion / God is not the foundation of reality. In *Zur Judenfrage* (On The Jewish Question) we read:

For us religion does not constitute the foundation, but only the phenomenon of worldly limitation. For this reason, we explain the religious subjection of free citizens with their earthly subjection. We affirm that they will suppress their religious limitation as soon as they have suppressed their earthly limits. We do not transform earthly questions into theological questions. We transform theological questions into earthly ones⁶⁵

For Marx, therefore, religion is a phenomenon and not a reality. Religion, therefore, does not justify, does not found man's actual status as a creature. Religion expresses

⁶⁵ K. Marx, *Zur Judenfrage*, 1844. On The Jewish Question; <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/>. [Tr. La questione ebraica, Rome 1966, pp. 81-82; <https://www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/ATHEMARX.HTM>.]

man's failure to reach his own potential greatness. When he achieves it, the religious phenomenon will disappear.

Marx argues that religion prevents man from being free and from realizing himself. Religion in fact stifles man, prevents him from being happy. Religion is misery, is the groan of the poor and the oppressed. Marx is against religion because it takes away happiness from man. Marx, instead, wants to give man true happiness which is earthly and concrete. The suppression of religion is necessary to bring real happiness instead of the illusionary happiness promised by religion - a happiness in future, after man's death. In order to achieve happiness man must eliminate the need for religion. Emancipation of man from religion can occur only with the suppression of bourgeoisie and private property. The positive abolition of private property, through revolution, will bring about the appropriation of human life by which all other forms of alienation will be overcome. When man regains consciousness of himself as the only foundation of himself and of all what he does, then all religious needs are overcome. Since the world of the hereafter is but a reflection of the here now, the problem is to bring the human condition to its real situation and not to a fantasy-reality, as does religion.

Marx's criticism of religion ends with the doctrine that man is the Supreme Being for man and as Supreme Being has the categorical imperative of overthrowing all relationships in which he is degraded or enslaved. He should not only overthrow religion but also the present socio-political and economic structures in which man finds himself alienated and degraded. Marx dreamt of such an utopian society (socialism / communism) where everyone would be free to realize to the maximum his humanness, and in that society there is no place for God. In the communist vision of reality the problem of God does not even arise, because it does not make anymore any sense to look outside of him for a Transcendent God. Man is the only material and sensitive reality who creates his own history in relationship with the sensitive material reality.

In conclusion, we can affirm that from the very beginning of his philosophical reflection (cf. his early articles of 1842-43 appeared in the *Rheinisches Museum* which were based on humanistic, moral and juridical reasoning). He defended the freedom of press, protested against unjust laws, various social injustices and throughout his life of reflection and active social and political involvement, he stood for the poor and the exploited, raised his voice against every form of injustice. His option for man, especially the poor - the exploited and oppressed- speaks volumes of his idea of humanism.

Conclusion

In ancient and modern languages, the term "atheism" derives from the Greek *atheotes*, translated as *Atheismus* in Latin (English *atheism*, French *athéisme*, Germ. *Atheismus*, Sanskrit: *nastika?*). As is known, the alpha privative in Greek as in Sanskrit, expresses both the denial as well as the deprivation of what is stated in the name: á-theos therefore

means negation of theós, negation of God. However, since the relation of the negation takes its meaning from what is denied, it results that atheism can only be defined according to the conception of God that is denied or one intends to deny, and therefore modeled in different ways. Maritain rightly writes in *The meaning of contemporary Atheism* (1949) that often those “who believe they do not believe in God”, actually “unconsciously believe in Him since the God of whom they deny the existence, is not God, but something else. “Many authors observe that under the term “atheism” is hidden often not so much the denial of the true God, but the negation of what is not God and that is believed to be such (God).⁶⁶

Would the observations of Maritain⁶⁷ apply to Marx? Did Marx “unconsciously believe in Him since the God of whom he denied the existence, is not God, but something else?” Does the observation of many critics that under the term “atheism” is hidden often not so much the denial of the true God, but the negation of what God is not and is believed to be such (God)? I think that these observations are applicable to the atheism professed and propagated by Marx.

Marx denied God because he wanted to place man in the place of God. Like F. Nietzsche, he conceived God as someone superior to him, as an autocrat and a tyrant who controlled man and his history, and would not allow him to be free to realize himself as a human being. It was this false notion of God that led him to proclaim himself as atheist. In this sense, we can conclude that Marx did not actually deny the existence of the true God as such but denied a ‘false’ God; he denied what God cannot be and believed to be such by the religious people.

According to Marx religion is self-alienation. Here again he was against religion because he had a false notion of religion or considered religion as the cause for human sufferings. Religion and religious practices could become self-alienation if that belief and practices were to enslave man, diminish his dignity and his realization as a human being. Religion has been made use of in the past as well as in the present, and could become a tool of oppression, enslavement and alienation. History cannot deny persecutions, horrors, pains and despairs of all types and murders inflicted on so many peoples in different nations and cultures in the name of religion. Here we cannot but agree with Marx, but belief in a true religion can never become the source of intolerance or persecution or causing suffering and even death on any human being. The followers of true religion preach, practice tolerance, peace, justice, compassion and love towards all because God the Creator is infinitely merciful, compassionate, and loving towards all his sons and daughters.

Marx has failed to see that religion, in spite of its flaws in the hands of some and in

⁶⁶ Gaspare Mura, *Ateismo*.<http://disf.org/ateismo> (September 2015).

⁶⁷ Jacques Maritain, *The Meaning of Contemporary*, 1949, referred to by Gaspare Mura, *Ateismo*, in <http://disf.org/ateismo>. (September 2015)

spite of wrong interpretations by some, has played a great role and contributed to man's progress and development. No one can deny the immense contribution that religion has offered for the development and well-being of men in their fulfillment and realization as human beings. Faith in God has been a great source of inspiration and deep commitment on the part of many all throughout history, to work for the liberation of men, especially the poor and the suffering from all sorts of injustices, oppressions, conflicts and wars.

Marx started with the basic preposition that matter / nature is the only true reality and man is a product of matter. The anthropological concept of man as only a material being was taken for granted, was for him a presupposition, without offering any reason for holding on to such view. The purely materialistic concept of man is one-sided and faulty. Man is not only matter (body) but also spirit. He is an 'incarnate being' (body-spirit), a subject (person) together with other subjects, in the world, with a vocation to realize himself in knowledge (truth), freedom (will) and love. In his existence he meets with some fundamental limitations (evil): suffering, pain and finally death. But he lives in hope of immortality, guaranteed by his faith in God. He is by nature a religious being, open to the Transcendent. All these aspects are missing or not considered by Marx in his understanding of man.

However, this does not take away or diminish the great contribution that he made for the liberation of man from various types of alienation: false ideologies, socio-political and economic exploitations, false self-alienating religions. However, his concept of communism, the new socialistic society to be brought about through revolution by the proletariat is an utopia. He dreamt of a society (communism) where everyone would be free from all alienations, a society without class distinctions and without a political State. He dreamt of a society where everyone would be free to do any work that one likes and not constricted in any way; where everyone according to his capacity would freely contribute the maximum for the society; and where the society would take care of all his needs. Will such a society ever be realized? It is an utopia based on false anthropological presuppositions.

The followers of Marx took seriously the content of Marx's Manifesto of the Communist Party and worked for the realization of such an utopia, communism. They were convinced that the modern (industrialized) economic-political and religious society upheld and maintained by the bourgeois (oppressor) is not exempt from conflict and class struggle and it will be and has to be overthrown through a revolution brought about by the proletariat (oppressed). Only after such a revolution, can the new society (communism) be born: a society without the right to private property, without class distinction, without division of work, without alienation, without State. Marx, however, does not enlighten us much regarding the configuration of the new society (communism). The new society will not be realized at one stroke or immediately; it is a gradual process and varies from society to society, from country to country.

In his Manifesto, in fact, Marx refers to two types of communism: the authentic and the raw. The raw communism consists in the appropriation of private property by the State. In this manner, all will be reduced to one only class: the proletariat. Marx thought that once the private property is abolished, also the political power would gradually be abolished. However, this again is a process and will be realized gradually. First, there will be a period of dictatorship of the proletariat: the proletariat will become the dominant class. Private property, natural resources, all the instruments of production will be taken over and become monopoly of the State. Abolition of right to succession, nationalization of banks and industries, multiplication of industries and instruments of production, equal obligation to work for all, nationalization of schools, free public education and instruction for all, elimination of child labor, creation of an industrial army, etc. are necessary steps taken by the State run by the proletariat. This process is however temporary and will be followed by the ushering in of the new society, the authentic one. The dictatorship of the proletariat (the raw communism) that took place in many countries of the West after the death of Karl Marx did not go forward to the realization of authentic communism, but ended in 1988 with the Perestrojka policy of Mikhail Gorbačëv and the fall of the wall of Berlin in 1989.

Regarding religion, the followers of Marx's ideology had different opinions and acted differently in different countries. In the western countries, especially in ex-UDSSR, communism (dictatorship of the proletariat) persecuted religion and tried to destroy it and its followers even by persecution, destruction of religious institutions and massacre of believers (regime under Lenin, Stalin, etc.)! It must be remembered that private property (land, industries), educational institutions meant mainly for the elite, etc. were in the hands of religious institutions and individuals. In other countries, including India, Marxist regimes did not directly persecute nor did they try to destroy religion(s);⁶⁸ they were either indifferent or were (are) of the opinion that with the ushering in of communism, religion will not have any more role to play in the society... it would disappear, which was the opinion of Karl Marx himself.

Pope Francis writes that today's is not an epoch of changes but a change of epoch (cf. *Laudato Si*). We are witnessing and living in an epoch of uncertainties and constant transitions. The ideas of the 19th century have become obsolete. Most of the ideologies of the past, including Marxism, have fallen, even though some of them are sources of inspiration even today, for example, the nonviolent socio-political movement of M. Gandhi, the *Magna Carta*, the Manifesto of Karl Marx, the *Pacem in Terris* of Giovanni XXII, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, etc. The globalized and internationalized world of today is in a "liquid" state (*Zygmunt Bauman*). It is a society formed of solitudes

⁶⁸ China is the most populous communist country today. There is no direct persecution of religion (Christian in particular) but the State controls religion. In fact, there exist two churches: the underground church (faithful to Vatican) which is not recognized by the State and the open Church (faithful to the State) controlled and recognized by the State; the Church hierarchy is nominated by the State. In South America, the influence of Marxian ideology is evident in the Theology of Liberation movement, by standing up for the poor, in their struggle for social justice and political liberation, which forms an essential part of Jesus' message.

and exclusions. We live in a world of unimaginable opportunities, which however ends up with the fewer rich becoming richer (in socio-economic and political power) and the majority poor becoming poorer. It is a world of unimaginable opportunities for our future generations and at the same time pervaded by inequality and injustices for so many. The question is how to remain tranquil in front of such a situation? Why today the majority arrive at the conclusion that every attempt to change the actual situation is impossible, useless, or even damaging? In front of such pessimism expressed by many political leaders, economists, sociologists and others, we opt for positivism and optimism. A holistic and interdisciplinary approach to reality is the need of the hour, as well as the necessity of finding of a coherent ethical direction in every field: economics, politics, laws, education, etc. The world leaders have the grave responsibility of finding out new models of globalized economic development, based on solidarity, peace and justice for all. Only in this manner, we will be able to usher in a new humanism. In this globalized, cross-cultural and interrelated journey towards the realization of new humanism, participated by every human being, education has a fundamental role. Only through education, can one become aware of his/her human dignity and his/her rights and duties, and participate actively in the journey of the realization of the new humanism.