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978-0-521-58630-6 - Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion

Van A. Harvey

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Ludwig Feuerbach is traditionally regarded as a significant but transitional figure in the development of nineteenth-century German thought. Readings of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* tend to focus on those features which made it seem liberating to the Young Hegelians; namely, its criticism of reification as abstraction, and its interpretation of religion as alienation. In short, Feuerbach is seen primarily as a precursor to the true "masters of suspicion" in religious studies: Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. In this long-awaited book, the first of an important new series, Van A. Harvey claims that this is a limited and inadequate view of Feuerbach's work, especially of his critique of religion. The author argues that Feuerbach's philosophical development led him to a much more complex and interesting theory of religion, which he expounded in works that have been virtually ignored hitherto. By exploring these works, Harvey gives them a significant contemporary restatement, and brings Feuerbach into conversation with a number of modern theorists of religion.

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CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN RELIGION AND
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CRITICAL THOUGHTEdited by Wayne Proudfoot (Columbia University), Jeffrey L. Stout
(Princeton University), and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Yale University)

Since the Enlightenment, there has been debate, at times heated, over the implications of critical thought for our understanding of religious ideas and institutions. Disciplinary boundaries have always mattered less to the debate than certain acknowledged exemplars of critical thinking. Locke, Hume, Kant, Marx, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Freud, and Durkheim long ago became canonical figures, but the list of model critics has never been stable, and continues to proliferate. Struggles against sexism, racism, and imperialism have all produced prominent critics of their own. Now, complicating matters further, the idea of critical thought is itself under attack. At the same time, many scholars are returning to religious traditions in search of resources for their critique of contemporary society and culture. Cambridge Studies in Religion and Critical Thought is a series of books intended to address the various interactions of critical thinking and religious tradition in this rapidly changing context. The series will take up the following questions, either by reflecting on them philosophically or by pursuing their ramifications in studies of specific figures and movements: Is a coherent critical perspective on religion desirable or even possible? If so, what would it look like, and how might it answer charges of reductionism, relativism, and nihilism? Should it aspire to take the form of a systematic theory? What sort of relationship to religious tradition ought a critic to have? One of detachment? Of active opposition? Of empathy? Of identification? What, if anything, is worth saving from the Enlightenment legacy or from critics of religion like Hume and Feuerbach? Where else should we look for guidance in critically appraising religious traditions? To premodern philosophers? To postmodern texts? To the religious traditions themselves? When we turn to specific religious traditions, what resources for criticizing modern society and culture do we find? The answers offered will be varied, but will uniformly constitute distinguished, philosophically informed, critical analyses of particular religious topics.

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Acknowledgments

I first encountered Feuerbach in a graduate seminar led by H. Richard Niebuhr in Yale Divinity School in the early fifties, when I was preparing to become a Christian theologian. Niebuhr had assigned me to present a report on *The Essence of Christianity*. While writing my report, I cannot claim to have experienced a disturbing premonition about Feuerbach's atheism rather like that which the young Anglican John Henry Newman confessed to having about Roman Catholicism – that it would be proved to be correct after all. Nevertheless, I can remember being strangely disturbed by the nineteenth-century atheist; and in the succeeding years, I have found myself returning to him again and again. So in this sense, my first expression of indebtedness for this book must go to H. Richard Niebuhr and to the members of that remarkably stimulating seminar which included James Gustafson, Gordon Kaufman, Art McGill, and Richard R. Niebuhr.

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Note on the text and abbreviations

The reader should consult the Select Bibliography for the full details concerning the works cited. For Feuerbach's works, I have used the critical edition, *Gesammelte Werke* (19 volumes), edited under the supervision of Werner Schuffenhauer and published by Akademie-Verlag in Berlin. In the footnotes, my practice is to list the full bibliographic data at the first mention of a text. Thereafter, all subsequent references to it will be to a shortened title. In the case of the most often used of Feuerbach's works, I have used the abbreviations listed below.

German texts

<i>GW</i>	(plus volume and page number) <i>Gesammelte Werke</i>
<i>Christentums</i>	<i>Das Wesen des Christentums</i> (<i>GW</i> v)
<i>Religion</i>	<i>Das Wesen der Religion</i> , in <i>Kleinere Schriften III</i> (1846–1850) (<i>GW</i> x)
<i>Luther</i>	<i>Das Wesen des Glaubens im Sinne Luthers</i> , in <i>Kleinere Schriften II</i> (1839–1846) (<i>GW</i> ix)
<i>Gedanken</i>	<i>Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit</i> , in <i>Frühe Schriften, Kritiken und Reflexionen</i> (1828–1834) (<i>GW</i> i)
<i>Grundsätze</i>	<i>Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft</i> , in <i>Kleinere Schriften II</i> (1839–1846) (<i>GW</i> ix)
<i>Vorlesungen</i>	<i>Vorlesungen über das Wesen der Religion</i> (<i>GW</i> vi)

English translations

<i>Christianity</i>	<i>The Essence of Christianity</i>
<i>Luther</i>	<i>The Essence of Faith According to Luther</i>
<i>Lectures</i>	<i>Lectures on the Essence of Religion</i>
<i>Principles</i>	<i>Principles of the Philosophy of the Future</i>
<i>Thoughts</i>	<i>Thoughts on Death and Immortality</i>