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

Van A. Harvey

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*FEUERBACH AND THE SUSPICIOUS INTERPRETATION OF  
RELIGION

In the initial pages of his book on Freud, Paul Ricoeur made a now familiar distinction between two types of interpretation of religion to which he then attached the formidable labels “the hermeneutics of recollection,” on the one hand, and “the hermeneutics of suspicion,” on the other.<sup>1</sup> The former type is basically sympathetic to religion because it assumes that the religious consciousness is in touch with something real and contains, therefore, a message that can be retrieved or “recollected.” The hermeneutics of suspicion, by contrast, assumes that there is no religious object and that the religious consciousness is bewitched by an illusion. Consequently, the aim of interpretation is not to retrieve but to explain; not to “recollect” but to demystify.

Ricoeur claimed that the charitable mode of interpretation is now most systematically practiced by phenomenologists of religion who argue that it is only possible to understand religion by bracketing one’s own assumptions and attempting to “get inside” the religious consciousness and to apprehend what it apprehends albeit “in a neutralized mode.”<sup>2</sup> The interpreter of religion must take the religious consciousness and its object, the sacred, with the utmost seriousness; so much so, that he/she must be willing to accept the possibility not only that there is a message imbedded in the symbolic utterances of religion but that this message may even have relevance for the interpreter himself/herself. To use the language of Protestant theology, the religious interpreter must be capable of living in the

<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 28–36.

<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p. 29.

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“expectancy of a new Word.”<sup>3</sup> One might even say that the “hermeneutics of recollection” aims at achieving a type of faith, a “second naïveté” which has passed through the fires of criticism.

The practitioners of suspicion, by contrast, are basically skeptical about religion. They regard the religious consciousness as a false consciousness; therefore, they do not regard the aim of interpretation to be the retrieval of a message but the discovery of a latent and hidden meaning lying behind the conscious expressions. Their aim is to explain and to demystify. And in order to do this, the most influential practitioners of suspicion have developed what Ricoeur has called “a mediate science of meaning,” which is to say, they have devised various sorts of psychological and sociological theories that explain the way in which the manifest or expressed meaning is a function of an unconscious, hidden meaning. They have approached religious symbolic systems as if they were codes that require deciphering, and the theories they have devised provide the keys to breaking these codes.

There have been many suspicious interpreters of religion in the history of the West, but Ricoeur elevated three of them to the rank of “masters of suspicion”: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Each of them believed that the religious consciousness should not be taken at face value because it has been influenced or determined by powerful forces of which the believers themselves are unaware. And each of them developed a conceptually elaborate “mediate science” or theory that provided the key to deciphering the religious code by systematically connecting the symbols of religion with these powerful, unconscious forces. And although Ricoeur himself did not make much of the fact, at the core of these three suspicious theories of religion is the notion that religion is a “projection,” which is to say that the gods are regarded as “objectifications” or “externalizations” or “reifications” – the language varies – of some internal or subjective trait or attribute that has then been (mistakenly) taken to be real. The gods, as it were, are internally generated superhuman “others,” and religion is the attempt to cajole, appease, mollify, and worship these “others.”

To understand this concept of projection – its meaning and uses – is to understand why the interpreter of religion must practice suspicion. It dictates that religious expressions cannot be taken at face value because they have been generated by unconscious causes of some

<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p. 31.

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kind. To be sure, each of the three masters of suspicion conceived of projection in his own way, but the concept itself was crucial as an explanatory and interpretative tool. As an explanatory tool, projection accounted for the way in which the gods came into existence as both superhuman yet anthropomorphically conceived powers. As an hermeneutical device, projection provided the bridge that could link the consciously entertained symbols with the unconscious psychological or sociological forces determining them. For Marx, the gods were created by the deepest longings of a human being deprived of his/her own authentic powers by a repressive economic order. They were, in his language, expressions of the “*inverted consciousness of the world . . . the fantastic realization of the human essence.*”<sup>4</sup> For Nietzsche, the gods were generated by what he called “the psychology of error,” the inveterate tendency of the human mind to see conscious agency behind everything in nature and then to reify the results of this tendency.<sup>5</sup> And for Freud, the gods were seen as the objectified unconscious drives and wishes of the human psyche that have been shaped by the turbulent and incestuous drama he called the “family romance.”

To anyone familiar with the various suspicious interpretations of religion that have been proposed in Western culture, it seems odd that Ricoeur neglected to include the name of Ludwig Feuerbach among his master practitioners because there has never been a thinker in this culture so preoccupied with and devoted to the critique of religion. Within six years in the 1840s, he wrote four important books on the subject, one of them being the famous and influential *The Essence of Christianity*.<sup>6</sup> These books, in turn, are flanked by two works that stand like book ends to his entire corpus: *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*,<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” in Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, trans. with an intro. by Lucio Colletti, *Karl Marx Early Writings* (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 244.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. with an intro., prefaces, and notes by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954).

<sup>6</sup> *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot, with an introductory essay by Karl Barth and foreword by H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Harper & Row, 1957). See also *Das Wesen des Christentums*, ed. Werner Schuffenhauer and Wolfgang Harich, *Gesammelte Werke*, 19 vols., vol. v (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> *Thoughts on Death and Immortality from the Papers of a Thinker, along with an Appendix of Theological-Satirical Epigrams*, Edited by One of his Friends, trans. with intro. and notes by James A. Massey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). *Frühe Schriften, Kritiken und Reflexionen (1828–1834)*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Werner Schuffenhauer and Wolfgang Harich, with a foreword to the *Gesammelte Werke* by Werner Schuffenhauer, 19 vols. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1981), 1:175–515.

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his first major work, published in 1830, and *Theogonie*, his last work, published in 1857.<sup>8</sup> All of them are powerful exercises in the suspicious interpretation of religion.

These various works exhibit the four features that may be said to be characteristic of the hermeneutics of suspicion. There is, first of all, a theory of the origin of the gods. In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach's best-known work, these origins are explained in terms of a complex and subtle theory of consciousness. In the process of self-differentiation, it is claimed, the subject first projects its essential nature and then misconstrues this as an objective being. Feuerbach, of course, was not the first person to conceive of the idea of projection. As early as the sixth century bc, the Greek Xenophanes had cynically observed that the gods of the Ethiopians were inevitably black with flat noses while those of the Thracians were blond with blue eyes. So, too, many centuries later both Giambattista Vico and David Hume had argued that it was a universal tendency among humans to explain unknown events in terms of other beings like themselves. But Feuerbach was the first to employ the concept as the basis for a systematic critique of religion.

The second characteristic feature of most suspicious theories of religion is that the projection which explains the origin of the gods is part of a larger theoretical structure, something like what Ricoeur has called a "mediate science." In the early Feuerbach's case, the theory of consciousness which explains how projection occurred is heavily indebted to Hegel's philosophy of Spirit. In his later works, as I shall demonstrate in the chapters that follow, his explanations are part of a theory of the embodied self and its relationship to nature. These theories profess to explain not only how religious belief is generated but why it continues to have such a hold on the religious imagination. They also help to explain why religious beliefs take the form that they do.

A third and important structural feature of suspicious interpretations is that the underlying theories cast up a set of guiding interpretative principles that dictate the type of approach the investigator will take to religious symbols as well as providing a key to the relationship between their conscious and their unconscious meanings. And this, in turn, is closely related to the reason why these religious symbols and beliefs are so emotionally powerful.

And finally, Feuerbach's suspicious hermeneutics exemplifies that

<sup>8</sup> *Theogonie, nach den Quellen des klassischen, hebräischen und christlichen Altertums*, ed. Wolfgang Harich, *Gesammelte Werke*, 19 vols., vol. vii (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1969).

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feature which is at one and the same time so embarrassing to the objective scholar of religion and infuriating to the religious believer: a fervor for atheism that might itself be considered evangelical. The masters of suspicion did not regard their demystifying work primarily as an intellectual exercise; rather, they saw it as therapy. They thought of themselves as liberators of the human spirit, and their zeal was grounded in the assumption that belief in the gods was an illness, that it was stultifying to human beings. For Marx, religion was “false consciousness,” an expression of an estranged social existence. For Nietzsche, it was a disorder of the instincts, a reaction to suffering and the longing for another, morally better, world. For Freud, religion was a collective neurosis. For Feuerbach, religion is the “alienation” produced when the self, in the process of differentiation from others, makes its own essential nature another objectified being. For all of these atheists, as Ricoeur has observed, their aim was not solely to destroy religion; rather, they wanted to “clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth, not only by means of a ‘destructive’ critique, but by the invention of an art of *interpreting*.”<sup>9</sup> Consequently, they viewed themselves in quasi-religious terms: as prophets and evangels, as denouncers of mystification and heralds of good news.

Feuerbach’s critique of religion is even more fervently evangelical than those of the other masters of suspicion, not because he hated religion more passionately but, paradoxically, because he felt that when religion was properly understood it would be seen to contain a liberating truth. In his early work he believed that atheism was the secret of religion. Consequently, his approach was more dialectical than those of the other masters of suspicion. Unlike Nietzsche, who rejected the substance of Christianity even when it was demystified, or Freud, who regarded theism as infantile and neurotic, Feuerbach believed that religion encoded the deepest and most profound insights into human nature and existence. Consequently, he did not think that it should be dismissed simply as false consciousness. For the author of *The Essence of Christianity*, as Karl Löwith has pointed out, religion was the detour (*Umweg*) by means of which humankind comes to self-awareness regarding its true nature.<sup>10</sup> This is why Feuerbach could make the otherwise paradoxical claim that he was

<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, with an afterword by Karl Löwith (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam Jun., 1969), p. 528.

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basically a friend and not an enemy of religion. However mystified the form of religion, the substance of it, he believed, was profound, even true; hence, the importance of a mode of interpretation that would uncover and lay bare this truth. His sole concern, he once wrote, was not to invent but to unveil existence, to “extricate its true meaning from the web of contradictions and delusions called theology.”<sup>11</sup> One might say that he believed that religion was too important a subject to leave to the theologians.

#### SOME REASONS WHY FEUERBACH IS NOT RANKED AMONG THE MASTERS OF SUSPICION

Despite all of the above, there are intelligible if not always valid reasons why not only Ricoeur but many other scholars of religion do not rank Feuerbach among the masters of suspicion; indeed, why some even regard him as a marginal figure whose philosophy of religion is not worthy of serious consideration.

In the first place, he simply did not have the massive impact on modern Western culture that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud did. It could not be said of him, as it could be said of them, that our present culture cannot be made fully intelligible without reference to his work. If, for example, there were intelligent creatures from Mars who, landing in our midst, were to ask us to explain the course of history in the West since 1848 – the rise of Fascism and Communism, the Cold War, and the emergence of certain institutions such as psychotherapy, not to mention the ethos of the modern university – we would be unable to give them an adequate account of this history without making some reference to Marx and Freud and, to a lesser extent, perhaps, Nietzsche. But we would not need to mention the name of Feuerbach. There is no perduring and influential Feuerbachian school of thought with its own discursive practices as there are Marxist or Freudian schools. Although Feuerbach, it is true, flashed like a comet across the cultural horizon of Continental Europe in the 1840s and 1850s, he had virtually disappeared by the 1870s. And although his book *The Essence of Christianity* was a sensation and immediately translated into English by no less than the famous novelist George Eliot, and although it is still considered a nineteenth-century classic and still read by countless university students, his

<sup>11</sup> Feuerbach, *Christianity*, p. xxxvi; *Christentums*, p. 17.

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subsequent works have been largely unread and untranslated. When his name is mentioned, it is usually added that his significance lies in having helped to bring about the transition from Hegel to Marx. And if he is said to have had important ideas, it is noted that they have been absorbed into the thoughts of others such as Marx and Freud. To use the language of Ricoeur, Feuerbach is not an author one reads in the expectation of being addressed.

A second reason for not ranking Feuerbach among the masters is closely related to the first. Unlike the religious critiques of Marx or Freud, Feuerbach's was not part of a larger theoretical framework that was widely appropriated by secular intellectuals and integrated into what we now call the behavioral sciences. Marx's theory of religion, for example, was in fact only a minor element in a comprehensive sociological and economic theory, just as Freud's was only a small part of a larger psychological theory. Both of these more comprehensive theories have not only given rise to revolutionary practices but have spawned a number of research programs of a conventional intellectual sort.

Feuerbach, by contrast, was primarily interested in religion and philosophy, to which he turned again and again, and to the extent that his conception of religion was part of a larger intellectual system, it was Hegelianism. But however fruitful this intellectual system has proved to be in social and political theory,<sup>12</sup> the theory of self-consciousness which was at its core and to which Feuerbach's projection theory was linked has seemed to most contemporaries dated and arcane. At any rate, it has not given rise to a research program or therapeutic intervention such as psychoanalysis.

Feuerbach's failure to construct a larger intellectual system of his own has naturally aroused the suspicion that he was incapable of doing so, that unlike Marx and Freud he simply lacked the synthetic intellectual powers of his teacher Hegel. As evidence for this, one might point to his tendency to write short programmatic essays, or his penchant for aphorisms in contrast to sustained argument. How else can one explain his failure to meet the expectations of his own generation which had been stimulated by *The Essence of Christianity*? At the time, it was widely believed to be a work of genius. It was thought that it demonstrated not only his critical capacities but his

<sup>12</sup> Charles Taylor argues that Hegel's political philosophy remains interesting and relevant today even though his ontology of *Geist* is "close to incredible." See his *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 69.



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capacity to lay the foundations for a new philosophical program based on naturalism that would supplant Hegelianism.

There are even indications that Feuerbach also felt that he had been prompted by fate to accomplish this historic task, because he immediately poured his considerable energies into the writing of a small book with the very pretentious title *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*.<sup>13</sup> This book was clearly intended to be a harbinger of a larger project that would constitute the revolutionary breakthrough to a new philosophical era. But the greater part of it, unfortunately, is merely an analysis of the failure of the old idealism, and when the author finally and adventuresomely turned to enunciating the principles of this new philosophy, he was only able to create some imaginative but vague aphorisms. Even if these aphorisms had proved to be pregnant with meaning, it was vain to hope that they could constitute the basis of an intellectual program of the scope found in the works of the other masters of suspicion.

Some commentators have even argued that Feuerbach was a tragic figure because he did not ascend to the intellectual heights that were expected of him and which he might easily have achieved.<sup>14</sup> They note that just when he was at the height of his powers, he was denied an academic position that might have provided the institutional structure and the incentives he needed in order to develop philosophically. Retreating to the countryside, where he was supported by the profits of a porcelain factory owned by his wife, he turned away from philosophy. Convinced that science was the wave of the future, he dissipated his intellectual energies, delving into geology and mineralogy under the guidance of his close friend Christian Kapp. But as Saul Rawidowicz has pointed out, he could at most have become a gifted amateur in these sciences, and he never achieved the deep knowledge of nature which he so desired.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> I have used the English translation by Manfred H. Vogel, Library of Liberal Arts (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966). Because Vogel translated the first and not the second edition, there is a slight discrepancy between the paragraphs in the English translation and those of the critical edition. Consequently, I have cited the page number of the German critical edition. There is also a translation of the *Grundsätze* in *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings of Ludwig Feuerbach*, trans. with an intro. by Zawar Hanfi (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 175–245.

<sup>14</sup> S. Rawidowicz notes that while Windelband thought the tragedy lay in his development toward radicalism, it really lay deeper in his philosophical being itself. A divided mind, he could never push his thoughts to their logical completion. *Ludwig Feuerbachs Philosophie: Ursprung und Schicksal*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1964), p. 307.

<sup>15</sup> Rawidowicz, *Ludwig Feuerbachs Philosophie*, p. 199.



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Although Feuerbach himself acknowledged that he lacked the synthetic and constructive philosophical talents of a Hegel, and that he had disappointed the expectations of many of his friends and colleagues, he did not think of himself as a tragic figure. Rather, he believed that his own calling was not to systematize but to clarify. “My own spiritual nature,” he once wrote, “does not consist in systematization but in clarification” (“Mein geistiges Wesen ist kein ‘System’ sondern eine Erklärungsweise”).<sup>16</sup> And what he felt compelled to clarify was the phenomenon of religion, to which he returned again and again, modifying and refining what he had just previously written and published. His first major book, *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* (1830), written while he was still deeply influenced by Hegel, was about religion. And after the sensational success of *Christianity*, he turned back to religion again in 1845 with *Das Wesen der Religion*.<sup>17</sup> Then again, in 1848, when invited by the students of the University of Heidelberg to give a series of public lectures, he expanded further on the themes of the little book he had written in 1845. There followed still more essays during the 1850s, culminating in a last major effort in 1857, *Theogonie*, to come to terms with the subject matter. It is not surprising that he once said that despite the classification of his various writings, which included histories of modern philosophy, his one and only theme was “religion or theology and everything connected with it.”<sup>18</sup> And it is for this same reason that the Protestant theologian Karl Barth could write that this ferocious atheist, Feuerbach, was in reality an unhappy lover of theology.<sup>19</sup>

But perhaps the greatest obstacle contemporaries have to taking Feuerbach seriously as a master of the suspicious interpretation of religion is an interrelated series of conventional scholarly judgments about him that have gone uncontested for several generations. First of all, his name and work are virtually identified with *The Essence of Christianity* and the concept of projection that is found in it. After 1846, it is sometimes claimed, his work ceases to be interesting.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted from the *Nachlass* by Rawidowicz, *Ludwig Feuerbachs Philosophie*, p. 116.

<sup>17</sup> Wolfgang Harich (ed.), *Kleinere Schriften III (1846–1850)*, *Gesammelte Werke*, 19 vols., vol. x (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1971), pp. 3–79.

<sup>18</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 5. See also Feuerbach, *Vorlesungen über das Wesen der Religion: Nebst Zusätzen und Anmerkungen*, ed. Wolfgang Harich, *Gesammelte Werke*, 19 vols., vol. vi (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1967), p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Barth in “An Introductory Essay,” in Feuerbach, *Christianity*, p. x.

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Consequently, his later books on religion, especially *The Essence of Faith According to Luther*,<sup>20</sup> *Das Wesen der Religion*, and the *Lectures*, have been virtually ignored because it has been assumed that they were merely minor revisions of *Christianity* and have no lasting significance in themselves. Little or no consideration has been given to the possibility that these books not only are not a refinement of the views in *Christianity* but propose a much more interesting and persuasive theory of religion.

Second, even the early Feuerbach is regarded as significant primarily because of his creation of the “transformative method,” which had such a profound influence on Karl Marx. This “transformative method” refers to Feuerbach’s clever inversion of Hegel’s philosophy of Spirit. Hegel, Feuerbach claimed, suffered from the inveterate tendency to treat abstract predicates as entities, especially the predicates of reason. Having construed some attribute as the essence of human existence, Hegel then converted this attribute into an individual being, this idea into a subject. Since this was the clue to understanding Hegel, it follows that whatever is valid in Hegel can be extracted simply by inverting the subject and the predicate and restoring them to their proper relationship. Instead of construing the predicate “thinking” as an entity, one simply transforms the equation and asserts that thinking is the activity of existing individuals. Feuerbach used this transformative method as the basis of his theory of projection, but Marx was impressed by this method because he could appropriate certain features of Hegel’s philosophy – that the self objectified itself in its activity – without accepting Hegel’s idealism. “Feuerbach,” Marx wrote, “is the only person who has a *serious* and a *critical* attitude to the Hegelian dialectic and who has made real discoveries in this field. He is the true conqueror of the old philosophy.”<sup>21</sup> And since Marx has proved to be one of the most influential figures in modern history, Feuerbach’s significance for most historians lies in his having provided the bridge from Hegel to Marx.

This conventional view is, of course, not without its partial truths. Feuerbach’s first book was indeed a masterpiece, a *tour de force*, and much of its impact on his own generation was due to his transformative

<sup>20</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith According to Luther*, trans. with an intro. by Melvin Chernob (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). The German text is found in Werner Schuffenhauer and Wolfgang Harich (eds.), *Kleinere Schriften II (1839–1846)*, *Gesammelte Werke*, 19 vols., vol. ix (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1970), pp. 353–412.

<sup>21</sup> Livingstone and Benton (trans.), *Karl Marx Early Writings*, p. 381.