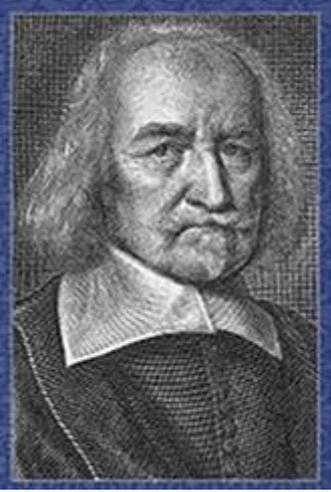


ABSTRACT:

This paper offers a more positive interpretation of the Enlightenment critique of religion. By rereading the contributions of individual thinkers such as Hobbes, Kant, Hegel, and Marx, it suggests respects in which the Enlightenment critique of religion may be relevant to future organisations of human spirituality.

At the beginning of the third millennium there is a grudging admission that 'religion' is harder to eliminate than nineteenth century European thinkers believed (Berger 1999). In this context it is useful to revisit some features of the Enlightenment critique of religion and to read them, against the grain, with an eye to contemporary possibilities. The details of this critique from Spinoza to Nietzsche are well-known, and it is often assumed that this critique is essentially correct^[1], the implication being that millions of human beings were unable to grasp the fact that religion was false until Enlightenment thinkers disabused them of their mistake. However, parts of the story can be read differently.



The Enlightenment critique of religion emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, most famously in the work of **Thomas Hobbes** (1588 - 1679) and Spinoza (1632-1677), but also in the works of the writers known to historians as the English deists^[2]. Hobbes has been famous for centuries as an atheist, and was described as such in the seventeenth

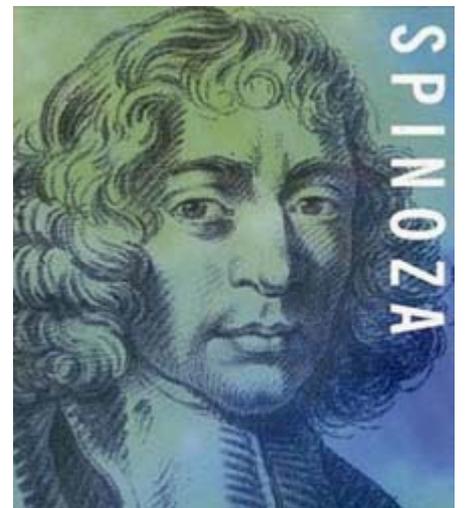
century. Nonetheless, his public posture was quite different, and this reminds us that the critique of religion began as a management problem with many levels, not as an attempt to determine what philosophers of the first rank should privately believe. In the context of the early seventeenth century Hobbes can be read as a political Calvinist who unquestionably supported a Christian Commonwealth, provided it was regulated by the state.^[3] Although he regarded popular religion as superstition based on fear, he was happy to acknowledge the existence of God, provided God was interpreted as a corporeal spirit (Hobbes 1839-45, vol iv, 306). Similarly, Hobbes admitted that revelation had occurred, provided this revelation was read down to agree with reason. To foster this process Hobbes subjected the Scriptures to rational criticism and insisted on the need for naturalist explanations of apparently supernatural phenomena such as miracles. He was concerned with how to manage religious activities within the state, not with the necessity of replacing religion altogether.

In Holland Spinoza also found himself opposed to the popular religion of his time, although his personal beliefs remain contested, as his links with Jewish millenarianism serve to remind us (Popkin 1992). Spinoza's critique of religion in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) was not designed to overthrow the authority of revealed religion, as his critics claimed, but to establish and promote a critical reception of the scriptures which distinguished between *truths of the understanding*, arrived at by a priori reason, and *truths based on the reading of sacred works*, which were important for their law – giving power to exalt obedience and preserve ties of communal and religious obligation. Spinoza's aim was to limit the harm done by revealed religion. Accordingly he argued that universal natural reason was the rule by

which the scriptures should be interpreted; that miracles which implied that God could break the laws of nature should be rejected, and that passages which were illogical or confused should be downgraded. Although Spinoza's rationalist hermeneutics implied that true religion was natural religion, he did not deny the importance of 'laws' or 'prophecy,' provided a clear distinction was made between eternal and necessary truths of reason and the laws derived from sacred books. In modern terms, he insisted on a distinction between reason and imaginative interpretations, relevant to the world of practical experience in which we must act (cf. Norris 1991).

For Spinoza a critique of religion was essential in order to prevent true religion from being confused with irrational and superstitious beliefs, but he did not deny that materials associated with 'religion' had their uses, provided they were discerningly interpreted. Spinoza did not deny that revealed religion could serve a useful educational purpose by presenting natural religion to ordinary people in dramatic forms, appropriate to their level of understanding. Similarly, although Spinoza identified God with Nature, and so relativised the anthropomorphic conception of deity found in the Old Testament, he accepted that popular conceptions of deity were useful to the extent that they functioned as practical imaginative posits in people's lives.

Whereas Spinoza sought to limit harm done by religion, the English deists sought to show that revealed religion could not differ from natural religion and that there were no rational grounds for accepting mysterious doctrines or miraculous stories simply because it was claimed that were revealed. To this end, they produced an epistemological critique of revelation which implied that no positive doctrine could be shown to be revealed. They also argued however that the



accepted evidences for the truth of Christianity – the evidence of miracles and the evidence of prophecy – were unsound. They The English deists made a sharp distinction between true religion, or the natural religion arrived at by reason, and false religion which filled human beings with superstitious fears and persuaded them to accept credulous and absurd beliefs. Thus Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648), the alleged ‘father of English deism,’ combined epistemological scepticism about revealed religion with sharply critical claims about the history of religion. Herbert advanced a theory of the history of religion according to which an original pure natural religion had been corrupted by the invention of priestcraft or a system by which ‘the sacerdotal order’ made religion into a trade by making it ‘mysterious’; he also introduced the elements of a critique of miracles and prophecies as evidence for the truth of revealed religion.^[4] Herbert’s main contribution to the critique of religion, however, was a transcendental cognitive theology according to which a proper account of the faculties revealed that there were certain common notions, including ten common notions concerning religion. This theology implied that whatever religious fantasies human beings devised, all human beings had the capacity to grasp certain religious truths because they were implanted in the operation of their faculties. It was only necessary to argue, as Herbert did not, that these truths *were* operations of human faculties, and not hypotheses about the structure of the cosmos, in order to arrive at an interpretation of the anthropological significance of religion which went beyond Herbert’s own thought. When Herbert implied that the layman could never be certain that any positive religion was revealed by God, he laid the foundation for eighteenth century debates. But in opening up the possibility of a transcendental cognitional analysis of religious fantasies he laid a possible foundation for an altogether different understanding of at least some religious materials.

Later writers extended the critique of revealed religion. The Irish radical Protestant John Toland, for example, reasserted Herbert’s critique of the possibility of any revealed religion in *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696), using an epistemology which combined Herbert and

Descartes with Locke's new 'Way of Ideas'. Other 'English deists' such as Anthony Collins and Thomas Woolston demolished the arguments for the 'evidence' of Christianity from prophecy and miracles respectively. Many of the English deists argued the transcendental thesis that true religion had to be natural because God could not possibly make a specific revelation of positive doctrines which differed from the religion of reason and nature. In so far as positive or revealed religion did differ from the religion of reason and nature, it was false or corrupted and accordingly should be disregarded. The cognitional theology developed by Herbert was occasionally mentioned, but not developed in any systematic way.

The French Enlightenment critique of religion was more diverse, and it is possible to argue that Catholicism rather than Christianity was often the object of attack. Nonetheless, the French Enlightenment's critique of religion was indebted to the work of the English deists, even though it admixed their ideas with material found in clandestine manuscripts (Brett 1974). The dominant pattern of thought in France, to which even those who disagreed with it tended to respond, alleged that natural religion taught every human being some conception of a Supreme Being and also the rudiments of morality, whereas Christianity, in the sense of a positive religion based on priestcraft, was contrary to reason, harmful to society, and discredited by the discoveries of historians, travellers and natural scientists. This pattern of thought influenced many later European thinkers who were not themselves self-proclaimed atheists or deists, including **David Hume** in Scotland. Indeed, there was a widespread consensus that positive religion was a mistake, and more radical writers such as Holbach went further and implied that all religion was superstitious and based on the illusion that human beings could rely on a power outside themselves for help.[\[5\]](#)



The Enlightenment critique of religion reached its peak in the Critical Philosophy of the famous German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant's Critical Philosophy set aside all traditional metaphysical theology, but preserved a transcendental theology based on moral faith, for which God and immortality were necessary postulates of practical but not theoretical reason. Kant sought to show how religion could be reconciled with reason and morality. He accepted the force of a transcendental critique of revelation of the kind the English deists proposed, and argued instead for a modern synthesis which accommodated the critique of positive religion. Kant's Critical Philosophy demolished any dogmatic or pre-critical metaphysics, but only in order to establish a metaphysics which was 'transcendental' in the sense of derived from the universal architecture of human cognition. Moreover, Kant argued that human beings had to accept certain 'postulates of practical reason' for the purposes of practical life (God, the soul, immortality, the unity of the world) which they could not show to be true by resort to theoretical reason. Similarly, in *Religion within the Limits of Reason*

Alone (1793) and in other works, Kant defended a transcendental theology based on moral faith, a theology that posed no threat to scientific inquiry since it made no strong ontological claims about reality itself, but nonetheless secured the basic Christian insights on transcendental principles. Kant's approach, however, did not account for the historical development of human beings, their cultures and their institutions, even though Kant had his own sophisticated philosophy of history (Yovel 1980, 1987). It was therefore open to challenge from a more historical approach which associated 'religion' with changes of ethical content and with forms of political, social and legal organization.

Granted that the Enlightenment was right to attack superstition and priestcraft and to promote rationality, personal autonomy and social reform, it was arguably mistaken to view religion as a matter of *false beliefs*, and wrong to reject religious doctrines, symbols, rituals and traditions as outmoded and of little value for future social development. It therefore could not envisage that religious materials are not primarily statements of ordinary though very odd facts, but imaginative productions which require a quite different hermeneutic. To this extent, the Enlightenment critique of religion was uncritical. In addition, the Enlightenment took a rather optimistic view of the possibility of liberating human beings from religious illusions through education. It also failed, at least until Lessing, to understand positive religions as historically emergent, just as it was unable to generate a convincing account of either their histories or their importance. Finally, in so far as it culminated in a transcendental critique of religion, it was open to the challenge of more historically oriented philosophy leading to very different conclusions.



The German philosopher **Hegel** made a crucial advance beyond the Enlightenment critique of religion because he assumed that 'religion' was substantially historical. Hegel overcomes Kant's philosophy by making God, in the sense of the Absolute, the object of philosophical inquiry, while integrating this transcendental philosophy with historical change and with the emergence of political, social and legal organizational forms and institutions. Hegel also deployed a highly sophisticated conception of religion, one which was not open to Enlightenment--type objections.^[6] He defined religion in speculative terms as the consciousness of the true 'in and for itself':

Now religion itself is the standpoint of the consciousness of the true; ([it is] the consciousness of the most completely universal speculative content as such), not of *something* that is true, not of this or that, not of something that on one side is still finite and untrue, but rather of the absolutely true, of the universal, of the absolutely self-determining true that has being in and for itself.^[7]

For Hegel religion was the self-knowing and the self-relationship of spirit (*Geist*). It was not merely the relationship of the finite consciousness to the infinite, but the self-consciousness of absolute spirit mediated in and through finite consciousness: "The simple concept that we have established is *the self-consciousness of the absolute spirit*, its self-consciousness of being *for itself* as spirit".^[8]

As is well-known, Hegel envisaged 'the end of religion' in the sense that his speculative philosophy of religion produced a level of reflexivity beyond that proper to religion and provided religion with categories which enabled it to present its intelligibility in philosophical terms. Indeed, Hegel's philosophy of religion implied that the end of 'religion' had already occurred in principle, if not in empirical reality. Nonetheless, the 'end of religion' for Hegel did not mean that religion declined, or ceased to be important. For Hegel, philosophy does not *replace* religion, for philosophy is also *within religion and dependent on it* 'as the leaven that makes the whole mass rise' (1987). Religion remains as a form of representation (*Vorstellung*), but philosophy makes possible a new level of comprehension of it.^[9] And religion survives the transformation, in the sense that it remains within philosophy as something preserved at a higher level (*aufhebt*), not something left behind or cancelled. Hence Hegel wrote that 'religion can exist without philosophy, but philosophy cannot exist without religion, for it includes religion in itself' (*Enz., Vorrede zur zweiten Ausgabe, 12*). It is true that Hegel claimed that what religion presented imaginatively in representations (*Vorstellungen*) could be grasped by philosophy in terms of 'pure thought' (*reines Denken*), but there was no implication that presenting the truth about the infinite in imaginative terms was undesirable, unimportant or dispensable. On the contrary, doing so was highly desirable and one of the ways in which the human spirit (*Geist*) intersubjectively embodied the Absolute.

Similarly, for Hegel the 'truth of religion' did not only depend on the literal truth of its representations, but on how it changed the 'ethical substance' of human beings and their socio-economic development. Hegel conceptualised religion as *the domain in which individual spirit relates to itself as its own substance*. Consistent with this, and in direct contradiction to the European Enlightenment, Hegel placed a high value on the history of positive religion, in so far as positive religion could be related to changes of ethical substance, especially through changes in the state, law, and government. Moreover, by integrating his philosophy of religion with the technical study of institutions and law, Hegel pioneered a

breakthrough with which contemporary theologians are only just starting to catch up, as they consider the tensions between forms of philosophy which project existing social institutions in theoretical terms and theological doctrines (for example, the Trinity) which can be construed as expressing future social relations (La Cugna 1973, Williams 1999, Milbank 1990).

The Hegelian legacy can be summed up as a very strong cognitional account of religious imaginative representations (*Vorstellungen*), the integration of religious phenomena with the study of human institutions and law, and the claim that the 'ethical substance' of human beings and their communities changes ontologically in the course of history. Hegel's philosophy of religion implied that human beings are shaped and reshaped through the course of history by developments in positive religion in ways which change their 'ethical substance'. It also implied that religious representations and symbols have complex cognitive meanings (of which believers may be largely unaware) which can be re-expressed in philosophical terms and even, to a degree, realised in actual social and legal organizations. Hence these representations and symbols were not, or not always, mystified expressions of what secular intellectuals understood without them. Rather, in key areas they were pictorial expressions of contents with the capacity to form and shape social life and *ahead* of what could be reached solely by relying on discursive reason. Hence Hegel's celebrated incarnational Christology was about the actual social organizational formation of Western institutions (Küng 1987). Unsurprisingly, Hegel's response to the Enlightenment critique of religion was open to both logical and historical objections. To some it seemed that Hegel sought to restore theological mystifications in the form of impenetrable metaphysics in an attempt to avoid the disenchantment which contemporary Enlightenment demanded. Certainly it is easy for a contemporary reader to criticise Hegel's grasp of world history, to question his identification of Christianity as 'the absolute religion', and to note, with disapproval, that Hegel had little interest in any non-Western religious tradition. However, it is harder to reject out of hand Hegel's claim that *Geist*, spirit in a technical intersubjective sense,



develops in the course of history in human institutions and laws in such a way that subjective freedom becomes the principle of modern social organization, even though it was lacking in pagan Greek and Roman antiquity. No doubt a contemporary critic can object that Hegel's philosophical system embodies uplift in high technical language rather than a coherent set of theoretical explanations. And there is a related danger that Hegel's conceptual language makes it impossible to grasp factual contingency at all. But Hegel was unquestionably right to point out that religions, and especially Christianity, had partially formed the modern political, social and legal order in essential respects, and should therefore be judged by the historical institutions and the subjectivities they help to make possible, and not merely by the pictorial narratives presented in sermons.

The two most influential replies to Hegel's philosophy of religion came from **Ludwig Feuerbach** and Karl Marx, both of whom offered more positive evaluations of the role of religion than the popular expositions of their work suggest. In opposition to Hegel's idealism, Feuerbach (1804-1872) advanced an anthropological materialism, but his attacks on 'dogmatic belief' did not imply that religion had no value. Religion for Feuerbach was the self-alienation of human consciousness, the projection of the human essence as other (Wartofsky 1977: 217). However, once the emphasis fell on the concrete sensuous individual with passionate needs as the 'real existent', Feuerbach admitted that the representation of feeling in religious consciousness produced the most fundamental access of the human being to knowledge of its own species nature. That fact that for Feuerbach the object of religion was understood to be primarily an object of feeling did not mean that religion was unimportant. On the contrary, Feuerbach recognised that the human essence needed to be objectified in an alienated form *before* it could be returned to the human being in a corrected and developed form. To this extent, the happy fault of Christian theology survived in Feuerbach's atheistic humanism, and Feuerbach's famous claim that God was only a projection of the deepest dimension of human

subjectivity had the radical implication that it might be necessary to make this projection before human beings could recognise their own nonmundane being for the first time.

Similarly, Feuerbach was clear, where most of his later admirers were not, that philosophy itself was not an uncontaminated source by which religion could be criticised. According to Feuerbach, philosophy was *an inverted consciousness the secret of which was 'theology'*. Hence, according to Feuerbach the critique of religion had to lead on to the critique of philosophy, *and not vice versa*, as Enlightenment thinkers often assumed. Once religion was demythologised, philosophy was to be demythologised next, but religion could not be fully demythologised by any philosophy which itself still occupied a theological position and merely replaced religious categories with philosophical ones. Again, for Feuerbach there was no question that religion retained a privileged status as a moment in the unfolding of consciousness. Indeed, his critique of religion implied that some degree of projection into ethereal realms and some degree of ecstatic over-interpretation might remain even in the longer term and need philosophical reinterpretation after any possible enlightenment. Hence, consistent with these disillusioned and consciously dialectical views, Feuerbach wrote in his significantly titled *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (1843): “The new philosophy takes the place of religion; it has within itself the *essence* of religion; in truth it is *itself religion*”.[\[10\]](#)

Subsequently, in the 1840s, as everyone knows, Marx replied to Hegel in terms that reflected Feuerbach's influence. Specifically, Marx accused Hegel of idealist mystifications and attempted to transpose what he (mistakenly) took to be Hegel's views into a materialist form. In the process he advanced a major critique of religion, albeit one with implications that are little understood even now.

Clearly it is not useful to 'theologise' Marx, as liberation theologians sometimes did (Gutierrez 1973, Bonino 1976, Segundo 1975), or to attribute to him a sympathy for religion which he clearly lacked. It is important to be clear that for Marx religion is harmful because it postulates non-existent entities and realms, and treats as realistic possibilities which have no

basis in reality. Religion conceals from human beings the real tasks that confront them; it also reconciles human beings to the world in which they suffer and sanctions it. Even worse, religion robs human beings of their dignity and renders them sheep-like; it also perverts the natural relationships and proportions of human life by repressing and transposing into a heavenly mode important human dimensions such as sexuality.

On the other hand, Marx offers the elements of a more positive evaluation of religion, largely against his own intentions. In his early allegedly 'anthropological' works he does so by identifying religion not simply with illusion or error, as an Enlightenment thinker might have done, but with true humanity present in an alienated form, and he develops this Feuerbachian theme in extremely strong terms. Religion, Marx argued, was a form of human self-estrangement: an objectification of the human being's own humanity which has become alien to him and capable of influencing his behaviour in a heteronomous manner,^[11] the illusory sun around which man revolves as long as he does not revolve around himself. Through religion, man loses his own humanity to an objectification which is itself the product of his own activity. The more humanity man puts into God, Marx argued, the less he puts into himself.^[12] But by the same logic religion is the human being's self-recognition through an intermediary.^[13] Like Feuerbach, Marx argued that religion was the *fantastic realisation* of the human essence (*Wesen*) which had no true reality.^[14] If, however, religion is the fantastic realisation of the not yet actualised human essence, then it might follow:

- that religion provides a possible source of knowledge about what that essence is;
- that religion is futuristic *vis-a-vis* the manifest forms of the historical process, both because the human essence has not yet been actualised in them, and, more controversially, because the human essence pre-appears in religion when it still only possesses a weak degree of development in the human being.



Marx himself would have recoiled from this interpretation. Against Feuerbach, he insisted that there was no abstract 'human essence', that the human essence was only the ensemble of social relations, and that religious feeling was always a social product.^[15] Later he argued that the 'essence' of religion was not to be found in any 'essence of man' but in the material world which was already in existence.^[16] Nonetheless Marx's claim that religion is the fantastic realisation of the human essence need not be read as meaning that religion is entirely reducible to manifest social forms. On the contrary, it is possible that religious projections are reflections of the existing social world which embody contents not yet found in it in a developed form. Likewise, it might be argued that if, as Marx claimed, future relations of production are present in revolutionary periods as 'impeded tendencies,' then it is conceivable that future social relations might appear in religious projections reflecting such impeded tendencies in such periods. Indeed, Marx himself claimed that fantastic anticipations of communist social relations appeared in societies in which communist social relations were not present. He also conceded the complexity of the relevant mediations or causal connections when he wrote that:

It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion than, conversely, it is to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestial forms of those relations.^[17]

Of course, as is well known, Marx characterised religion as the opiate (not opium) of the people, the illusory happiness which consoles and comforts them in their sufferings. But again Marx elucidated this claim in ways which arguably give religion a positive status. Religion, Marx goes on, is the 'heart of a heartless world', 'the sigh of a distressed creature', a protest against misery, and, most important of all, 'the spirit of a spiritless condition'.^[18] Granted that there is no simple normative move for Marx from religion to the 'heart' and 'spirit' which need to be realised in a humanised world, there is an implication *that religion provides an analogical indication of a possible true content*: an indication of heart

and spirit which are needed and lacking in the real world, in which, however, they would need to assume a corrected, no longer alienated form. Indeed, Marx himself admitted a loose analogy between the 'imaginary flowers' of religion and the 'living flower' of that which is needed;

Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain, not to enable man to wear the existing chain without fantasy or consolation, but to make him cast off the chain and pluck the living flower.[\[19\]](#)

The 'happiness', 'heart' and 'spirit' of man's human existence will not be the 'happiness', 'heart' or 'spirit' of religion, but there is a certain analogical continuity, as indeed the word alienated itself implies. Moreover, Marx implies that religion has a certain 'truth' in relation to the inverted world (of human beings, the state, society) which is reflected in it as an inverted consciousness:[\[20\]](#)

Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopedic compendium, its popular logic, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its general ground of consolation and justification.[\[21\]](#)

Marx himself was reluctant to allow the positive implications of this argument, and stressed (against Hegel) that man's true self-consciousness was not to be found in religion, but in its critical transcendence (*Aufhebung*). But even granted the implication that true humanity is to be found after religion is critically transcended when it is conditioned by new social relationships, religion can be described as the revelation of man's humanity in an alienated form.

Marx's critique of religion was weakened by his lack of clarity about how religion related to the world that produced it. In practice, Marx equivocated between the reductionist claim that the religious world is but the reflex of the real world, which opens up the possibility that the

falsehood in religion is found in the world,^[22] the claim that religion inverts the real world and misrepresents it, and the more Hegelian insight, expressed more clearly in his critique of earth than in his critique of heaven, that religion and the real world are not distinct, since the inverted world consists of a dialectical unity of consciousness and base, and not a dualism of consciousness and reality, as some of Marx's dicta imply. Marx himself was confident that religion was declining and would eventually disappear. Once again, however, significantly he set stringent conditions for its demise:

The religious reflex of the real world can only vanish, when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible, reasonable relations with regard to his fellow men and to Nature.^[23]

But this opens up the possibility, *contra* Marx, that it may be just too difficult to get rid of religion, at least in some form, especially since religious behaviour might *reappear* if perfectly intelligible reasonable relations cease to obtain.

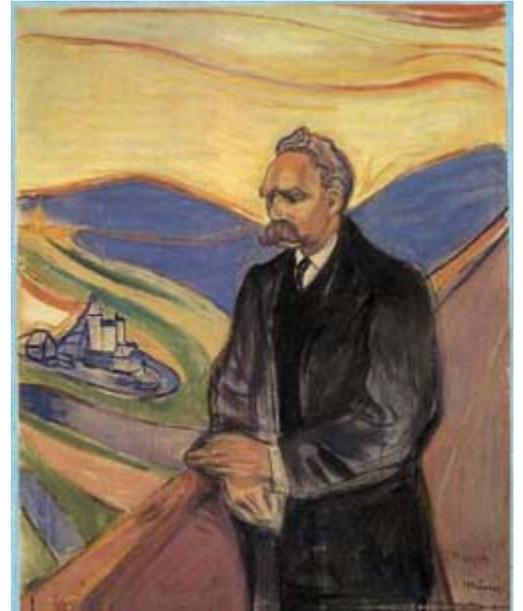
Marx's contribution was to shift the focus from the critique of religion itself to the critique of the world in which religion arises. Against Feuerbach, he argued that it was not enough to resolve religion into its secular base: it was also necessary to understand why this secular base separated itself from itself and established an independent realm for itself in the clouds, to grasp that this phenomenon can only be explained by the self-contradictory character of the secular basis, and to revolutionise this secular base so that it is no longer self-contradictory.^[24] Here, however, Marx undermined the Enlightenment critique of religion in so far as it claimed that religion was the result of mistaken belief, ignorance and superstition encouraged by a professional caste out of self-interest. For Marx the history of religion is to be explained in terms of socioeconomic developments and in terms of the changing interests of social classes.^[25] Conversely, other phenomena are not to be explained by religion: the secret of the religion of the Jew is to be found in the actual Jew, the secret of the actual Jew is

not to be found in his religion, but in the place which he occupies in the socioeconomic structure of society. [\[26\]](#)

Marx's shift implies that religion arises from objective rather than subjective causes, and not out of free but mistaken decisions of human beings. It also implies that the traditional kind of criticism of religion will prove ineffective as long as such conditions continue to exist, and that the true overcoming of religion results from transforming its secular basis, not from criticisms of religious ideas and institutions. But this in turn raises the possibility that the transposition of earthly realities into the clouds cannot be entirely overcome in the period in which the task of transforming the secular base is being undertaken. If so, there is a persisting need to manage the human tendency to project earthly conditions with a non-earthly beyond, and this need cannot, as the enlightenment sometimes seems to imply, be reduced to refuting literal interpretations of religious doctrines. Likewise, Marx's claim that religion is epiphenomenal in so far as it is determined by the socio-economic structure in which it is found, does not exclude the possibility that the negative character of religion results from the negativity of contexts that condition it, and not from the practice of transcendent projection.

But this means that Marx leaves the need to clarify how religious projections are related to human projections more generally unresolved. [\[27\]](#) The question arises as to whether the projectivism in religion could be put to better uses if different determining causal factors obtained. After Marx, it is clear that any adequate critique of religion will need to clarify the socio-historical specificity of 'religion' in distinct senses, to clarify how religious projections are related to human projectivism in general, and to discover whether the content of religion is separable from the forms in which it has manifested so far. None of these questions is resolved by the Enlightenment critique of religion.

Finally, the critique of religion advanced by the German philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900), which has influenced so many of those who have argued for the end of religion. Religion, also has neglected positive implications. Nietzsche was a bitter critic of superstitious belief in other-worldly powers. He was certainly a bitter critic of religion in the sense of superstition and belief in other-worldly powers. He notoriously announced the death of God and attacked Christianity as a form of nihilism and decadence.



Nonetheless, secular readings of Nietzsche are misleading. For Nietzsche was too shrewd to imagine the ills of humanity could be eliminated. Unlike Feuerbach, Nietzsche was critical of the idealised rationality of the Enlightenment and had no confidence that a life could be produced that would not be characterised by tensions, conflicts and the constraints of some rather than other possibilities. Similarly, for Nietzsche, humanity projected its impossibilities, and not its possibilities, into the God *topos*, and this *topos* then made humanity ashamed of its own finitude. Hence, for Nietzsche, religion was not, as it was for Feuerbach, a necessary form of alienation on the way to a future reconciliation. For Nietzsche there was no possibility that human alienation could ever be overcome. Equally, Nietzsche rejected all forms of moralism and recognised that negative or anti-ideal developments such as bad conscience could lead on to positive ones. In this respect, as Freud and Weber later acknowledged, he provided a major corrective to the superego illusions of the Western religious mind. But there is more.

Despite his critique of religion, Nietzsche can also be read as a prophet of a new type of religious consciousness for 'free spirits', a consciousness which rejects theism and any other-worldly faith, but which accepts the need for transformation (*Verklarung*). Accepting that in Nietzsche this consciousness is body-based, and hostile to conventional morality,

Nietzsche can be read as producing a non-metaphysical this-worldly religious outlook which says yes to life and affirms the eternal joy of becoming[28]. For Nietzsche ordinary reality speaks of unheard of things and there is a need for reverence in the face of what is other in oneself and in others. Likewise, Nietzsche celebrated the raising of the body to 'spirit', or the capacity for conscious intelligence to shape and beautify self and world (Roberts 1998 70). And in this context accepted the need for practices of self-denial in order to enhance the spirit. This non-secular Nietzsche manifested in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in his doctrine of the Moment (*das Augenblick*) in which eternity flashes, and in his doctrine of the Eternal Return – to give only the most obvious examples.

Once again Nietzsche's relationship to the Enlightenment critique of religion has unexpected implications. On the one hand, he provided reasons to reject the Enlightenment critique as relatively shallow, with the implication that a more radical critique of religion is needed based on a genealogy of morals and an honest recognition of the extent to which human beings may always have need of illusions. On the other hand, Nietzsche gestured towards a new type of religious consciousness and practice based on transformation (*Verklarung*), consciousness and practice which would not be other-worldly or theistic. Here the crucial implication is that getting rid of all enchantment would be a mistake, because raising the body to 'spirit' requires some form of disciplined practice, if not 'religion' of a traditional kind.

Conclusion

This paper has offered a positive interpretation of the Enlightenment critique of religion designed to bring out its relevance to future organizations of human spirituality. The European critique of religion was inadequate to the degree that it attempted to explain religion:

- as intellectual falsehood, the result of bad reasoning and wrong premises;
- in terms of the credulity, ignorance and superstition of human beings;

- as an imposture maintained by a professional clerical caste out of self-interest; or
- as functional error arising out of the needs of princes, society or the state.

Nonetheless, the same critique signals considerations which may be relevant to future organizations of human spirituality, including:

- possible tensions between what individuals need to awaken their life orientations and what is needed to maintain a strong state and public institutions (Hobbes);
- the possibility that truths of imagination may have social uses, even though it is crucial to distinguish such truths from truths of reason or understanding (Spinoza);
- the possibility that some forms of religion are 'natural', even 'transcendental', in the sense of products of the operation of the faculties or reason (the English deists);
- the possibility of a religion based on postulates of practical reason not conflicting with a scientific understanding of the universe because these postulates relate only to practical life (Kant);
- the possibility that religion can be construed as the self-knowing and self-relating of spirit, as historically positive in ways which impact on human ethical substance, and as bound up with political, social and legal organization (Hegel);
- the possibility that human beings can only access some aspects of their own nature if they first pass through alienated religious forms of consciousness (Feuerbach);
- the possibility that religious projections are ahead of the actually existing world and that aspects of the not yet existing human essence are realised in them (Marx).

Of course, each of these possible readings is against the grain and, to a degree, controversial. However, they do suggest that the Enlightenment critique of religion deserves another look.

[1] For a more traditional reading along these lines, see L. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965). Strauss's reading is now widely contested but he provides useful background, especially in the Marrano Portuguese scholar Uriel Da Costa.

[2] Whether these writers were 'deists' and in what sense is disputed. Most of them claimed to be Christians and to believe that God could and perhaps had intervened in the world. For useful recent discussion, see F. Beiser, *The Sovereignty of Reason: The Defense of Rationality in the Early English Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). For a view which places more emphasis on their radicalism, see my *The English Deists Protestant Enlightenment and Disbelief* (forthcoming).

[3] For excellent recent literature on Hobbes, including a discussion of his later radicalism, see Richard Tuck, 'The 'Christian Atheism' of Thomas Hobbes' in M.Hunter and D.Wootton

eds, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) ch 4 and A.P. Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[4] For Herbert of Cherbury's religious thought see R. D. Bedford, *The Defence of Truth Herbert of Cherbury and the Seventeenth Century* (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1979).

[5] For the link between distrusting illusions and the Enlightenment see Geoffrey Hawthorn's classic study *Enlightenment and Despair: A History of Social Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1987) and *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[6] Hegel was arguably the most profound European philosopher of religion and his mature views can now be accessed through excellent translations of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*

[7] Hegel, G.F. *Lectures on Philosophy of Religion*, 2 vols. P.C. Hodgson (ed.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 and 1987) p.205.

[8] *ibid.*, p. 205.

[9] On Hegel, see the new translation of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 and 1987), 2 vols. For political and social issues, see L. Dickey, *Hegel: Religion, Economics and the Politics of Spirit 1770-1807* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and S.B. Smith, *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). For discussion on Hegel's philosophy of religion, see D. Kolb (ed.) *New Perspectives on Hegel's Philosophy of Religion* (Albany: SUNY, 1992).

[10] L. Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, no 64 in *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings of Ludwig Feuerbach* tr. Z. Hanfi (New York: Doubleday, 1972) p. 245.

[11] *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels Collected Works* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), Vol.3, pp.274. All references are to this edition unless otherwise indicated.

[12] *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, Introduction* (1844), in *Collected Works*, Vol.3, p.176.

[13] 'On the Jewish Question' (1844) in *Collected Works*, Vol.3, p.152.

[14] *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, Introduction* in *Collected Works*, 1844, Vol.3, p.174.

[15] 'Theses on Feuerbach', (1845) theses 6 and 7 in the Addenda to *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970) 666-7.

[16] *The German Ideology*, *op.cit.*, pp.170-1.

[17] *Capital*, I (Lawrence and Wishart, 1970) p.372-3, note 3. On religion and imagination, see John Coulson, *Religion and Imagination: In Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); William F. Lynch, *Christ and Apollo: the Dimensions of the Literary*

Imagination (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960); Ray Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination: Toward an Ontology and a Rhetoric of Revelation* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968).

[18] *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, Introduction in Collected Works*, op.cit., p.175.

[19] *ibid.*, p.176.

[20] *ibid.*, p.175.

[21] *ibid.*

[22] *Capital*, I. op.cit., p.79.

[23] *ibid.*

[24] Theses on Feuerbach, (1845) thesis 4, in the Addenda to *The German Ideology*, op. cit., p.666.

[25] See, for example, *Capital*, I, op.cit., pp. 79,82; Marx to Engels, June 2, 1853, in *Marx-Engels, Selected Correspondence* (Foreign Languages Publishing House n.d.), p.99, *The German Ideology*, op.cit., pp.170-1, and Marx's editorial in the New York Daily Tribune, Oct. 24, 1854 in Reader in Marxist Philosophy, op.cit, pp.240-242.

[26] 'On the Jewish Question' (1844) in *Collected Works*, op.cit., p.169.

[27] There are related problems in the critique of religion advanced by the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1854-1855). Kierkegaard also replied to Hegel, arguing that his system was 'abstract' and failed to capture the contingent and radically decisionistic character of human life. Kierkegaard, like Barth later, drew a sharp distinction between natural human religiosity and what might be called the data of revelation which could never be reduced to anthropomorphic terms. Kierkegaard distinguished between a general human religiosity, or heartfelt sense of the numinous, which he called Religion A, and a religious consciousness conditioned by 'a definite something' not included in the deepest sensibility of the human heart, which he called Religion B. Kierkegaard, however, could never explain the possibility of the latter in a way which did not require the former.

[28] For an outstanding study of Nietzsche as a religious thinker, see T.T Roberts *Contesting Spirit Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion* (Princeton:Princeton University Press, 1998).

Professor Wayne Hudson teaches within the School of Arts, Media and Culture at the Nathan Campus of Griffith University, in Brisbane.

Email: Wayne Hudson [w.hudson@griffith.edu.au]





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