

Ludwig feuerbach the essence of christianity religion essay



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Feuerbach's own introduction to the second print of his *The Essence of Christianity* is as good an exposé as any of both his intentions and the content of his book. His own comments on the style of his writing are insightful both with regard to the content of the book as of the Young Hegelian movement as a whole. Form, it seems, encapsulates the direction which Hegelian thought seem to have taken. This sense of style seems both as a device by which Feuerbach distances himself from the at times tiresome and elaborate musings of the German philosophical tradition and as a means by which to demonstrate the immediate and down-to-earth conclusion he himself has drawn from studying the Christian faith. In doing so Feuerbach claims to walk a path wholly of his own making, far removed from the obfuscation associated with Hegel's work. Style, then, is as much content as it is on the surface of things. It tells us both to whom the message is addressed and the context in which it is written. Feuerbach is, perhaps as a result of his awareness of the to be resolved Hegelian dichotomy between form and content, highly self-conscious of the form he is taking in addressing his audience:

" I have never held, surely, the scholars to be the measure of true learning and of the art of writing; not those abstract and particular academic philosophers, but universal man instead. (...) and I have made a law of the highest level of clarity, simplicity and determinacy to the extent to which the subject matter allows it. I have done so in all my writing, including this one, in order that every educated and thinking man can at the very least understand the main point of my work." [2]

Feuerbach's style is inherently democratic and adverse to the prevalent mandarinism of the German intelligentsia. It is a statement in and by itself. The suggestion Feuerbach is making is that this is the language of science. These are not subjective utterances of a particular individual but irrefutable truth arrived at by virtue of strict application of a thoroughly rational methodology. Feuerbach's posture is one of a levelheaded thinker who aspires to the elementary truth. A truth that is, as we shall see, not shrouded in the abstract mysteries of abstract thought, but instead claims to be commonplace. One only needs to look clearly at the world in order for the ghosts of speculative idealism to dissipate. Feuerbach is practising the art of artlessness.

Many of those influenced by Feuerbach have tried to emulate this posture and it is probable that a large part of the success of *The Essence of Christianity* is due to its tone. Its tone must have been seductive to an ever increasing contingent of thinkers barred from having a place within the established order. The author of *The Essence*, so it seems, took a certain pride in his lack of social stature. After all, such rogue thinkers might well be more inclined to think outside the box, not needing to adorn their truths in order to make them acceptable to all. This pathos is certainly recognizable in our present and practically an idiom in popular culture. At the time of its publication, however, the feeling was such that *The Essence* had cleared new grounds. It was frequently said that *The Essence* had a liberating effect. It expressed - double entendre implied - the spirit of the age. Or at least the very least the spirit of a particular segment within the 19th century German

speaking countries of Central Europe. A segment of society that was repressed and excluded and had now, finally, found a voice to call its own.

Feuerbach's aim was to clear away the alienating representations of Christianity in order to gain an empiricism that allowed to clearly state the nature of reality. Feuerbach:

“(...) weiter will meine Schrift nichts sein als eine sinngetreue Übersetzung – bildlos ausgedrückt: eine empirisch- oder historisch-philosophische Analyse, Auflösung des Rätsels der christliche Religion.”[3]

“(...) my book wants to nothing more than a translation that is true to the senses – expressed without images: an empirical- or historical-philosophical analysis, resolution of the mystery of the Christian religion.”[4]

In the above Feuerbach makes clear his intent. He wants to strip bare the Hegelian dialectic into its most elementary form and overcome an idealism that is identified as being synonymous with the teachings of Christianity. The truth attained after decomposing Christianity will be immediate, sensual, and therefore without images. These words resemble those of an iconoclast, of someone wanting to empty the faith of all idolatry that stands in the way of truth.

This is feeling is enhanced by Feuerbach's insistence that the Christianity which he shall tackle is not the same today as it was at the moment of its own genesis.[5]The original teachings of the Christian faith by Jesus have been steadily corrupted, according to Feuerbach, by subsequent interpretations and explanations of theologians. Theology has transformed

Christianity into dogma's that are contradictory and unintelligible. The Essence is an attempt to retrieve the religion of Christianity from its theology, and Feuerbach makes a clear distinction between the two. Only after going back to this moment of authenticity within the Christian faith, that is, of the original myths surrounding the teachings of Jesus, can we hope to gain a new insight as to what these myths really imply. This explicit disapproval of theology in Feuerbach's writing is, as we shall see, consistent with a particular strand of anti-intellectualism expressed in *The Essence*.

For Feuerbach believed that he had transcended not only the limitations of religion but those of philosophy as well. *The Essence* is itself therefore not a work of philosophy but of anthropology. In anthropology both religion and philosophy were superseded; it provided immediate, scientific, truths about human nature. By emphasizing that he was practicing another form of enquiry altogether Feuerbach tried to make more dramatic his break with both Christianity and the excesses of speculative philosophy as done by Hegel. Anthropology was believed to provide concrete results that could be empirically verified by basic human understanding, doing so in a commonsense language untainted by jargon.

Anthropology dealt with humanity in general and had as a field of study, according to Feuerbach, something concrete and real. For humanity was undeniable since we ourselves were human. Feuerbach abhorred the tendency of idealist thought to reduce everything to the consciousness of the single mind. This, he thought, was an absurdity since much of what one calls one's own can be seen to be embodied by other human beings as well.

[6]The human body was as a source of non-intellectual understanding, or 'feeling', shared by all members of the species.[7]

So too was (historic) human culture a field for the creation of collective meaning by which those unalienable qualities of the human race could be represented. Feuerbach remained a Hegelian in seeing historical development of human culture in connection with the development of human consciousness. He too believed that the ideas and truths developed and represented in culture would, given time, be embodied by human consciousness. Feuerbach diverted from Hegel in seeing this development in terms of man's understanding of himself as member of a species. This understanding was expressed in highly naturalistic and empirical terms.

With regard to Strauss, Feuerbach said not to be interested in the question of whether Jesus Christ had truly existed or not. Nor would Feuerbach critically interpret theology, a field in which he had no interest other than a feeling of disdain. What was of interest was the instantly recognizable myth told by the Biblical story of humanities redemption through Christ. This was the core around which the webs of mystification were spun. Just as the life and death of Christ was key in Hegel's understanding of the Christian faith in being his philosophy's other. So too was redemption, according to Feuerbach, the single most important event which had taken place in human history. Feuerbach's task was to take this myth and explain it in atheistic, anthropological, terms which directly reflected the hope and aspirations of humanity at large.

This was not, however, to reduce or criticize the essence of faith. Rather, this methodology exhibited in *The Essence* was to scientifically explain the myth central to Christianity. In the understanding of the dialectic this meant that the content of the Bible, which was still marred by an excessive dependence on representation, could be brought on a higher plain of immediate understanding. In other words, although Christianity contained a truth, this truth was itself marred by Christianity. Christianity was in contradiction with itself, a contradiction that had to be resolved by its being superseded by anthropology. Feuerbach says of this:

“ Ich (...) lasse die Religion sich selbst aussprechen; ich mache nur ihren Zuhörer und Dolmetscher, nicht ehren Souffleur.”[8]

“ I (...) let religion speak for it self; I am merely its audience and translator, not its critic.”[9]

Feuerbach, like Hegel, sees Christianity as a mirror of human consciousness. The qualities ascribed to Christianity are, in truth, the qualities of the human mind at a given time. Throughout *The Essence* the claim is repeated that faith is but an alienated manifestation of the self-as-species. The consciousness of God is the self-consciousness of mankind, the knowledge of God is the understanding of mankind. Religion is the first attempt towards self-consciousness. Yet it is in itself flawed; it remains an indirect self-consciousness through the manifestations of religion. Feuerbach writes in a sentence that could have been made by Hegel himself;

“ Der Mensch verlegt sein Wesen zuerst außer sich, ehe er es in sich findet.”[10]

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“ At first man misplaces his essence outside himself, before finding it within himself.”[11]

Everything that is to be found in religion can be found in actual human consciousness itself. Religion is constituted by reverence for alienated qualities of the self. Despite all its grandeur, religion has no content that is particular to its self. Religion is alienation itself and therefore made up around nothingness. This also explain the vague, indistinct, character of the omnipotent Christian God. God is said to embody all virtues of man, yet none in particular. God is everywhere, yet nowhere in particular. God knows everything, because he knows nothing in particular. According to Feuerbach the very notion of God is itself void:

“(…) weil alle Dinge, die der Vernunft imponieren, vor der Religion verschwinden, ihre Individualität verlieren, im Auge der göttlichen Macht nichts sind. Die Nacht is die Mutter der Religion.”[12]

“(…) because all things, that are impressive to the mind, vanish before religion, lose their individuality, are nothing in the eyes of God. The night is the mother of religion.”[13]

Religion is itself the very movement by which man loses his own essence. That which enriches our conception of God makes our understanding of ourselves all the more poorer.[14]The two are directly related in that what benefits one deprecates the other. In the mirror house of representation that is religion, a strange shift has occurred the puts the world upside-down. God, the representation, has replace man as representans, that is, as the very source from which the representation was brought forth.

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“ Der Mensch – dies ist das Geheimnis der Religion – vergegenständlicht sein Wesen und macht dann wieder sich zum Gegenstand dieses vergegenständlichten, in ein Subjekt, eine Person verwandelten Wesens; er denkt sich, ist sich Gegenstand, aber als Gegenstand eines Gegenstands, eines andern Wesens. So hier. Der Mensch ist ein Gegenstand Gottes.”[15]

“ Man – this is the secret of religion – objectifies his being and then again transforms himself into an object in relation to his own objectification, into a subject, a essence changed into a person; he thinks himself, is object to himself, but as object to an object, another being. There you have it. Man is an object of God.”[16]

As was hinted at in the above, however, Christianity carries within itself a contradiction. According to Feuerbach this contradiction means the end of Christianity itself and has to do with the notion of love. Love was crucial in the story of redemption. In this Biblical narrative man is redeemed in the eyes of God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Jesus had died for our sins in the name of mankind – in an act of love – and so had brought us into union with God. A harmony had been restored. A new holy light shone upon mankind in which all men were henceforth assured of the love of God. Feuerbach that this was the message and myth central to Christianity; a myth that was still clearly visible after ages of theological corruption.

But Feuerbach believed that love did not unify mankind but, instead, divided it into those having God’s grace and those lacking it. The notion of love, central to Christianity, narrowed the conception of who was man and who was not. In practice love had gained a negative meaning; it served to denote

the faithful from the heathen.[17]Love, then, determined who was to be fought and annihilated. “ Im Glauben liegt ein böses Prinzip”, that is, in faith there rests an evil principle.[18]Love is, according to Feuerbach, an completely natural and distinctly human instinct. Love is one of the most compassionate, benign, qualities of man. Love serves to bridge the gap between subject and subject; it is by virtue of itself inter-personal. Yet Christianity had managed to pervert love and make it not into a unifying notion, but a dividing one. Christian love, then, furthered particularity and subjectiveness, preventing a higher dialectical union in universal objectivity.

Feuerbach had granted love a moral dimension. To love mankind is a moral type of love, to love a single individual is a personal, subjective love.[19]The former unifies, the latter divides. For to love a single person is to exclude others from your love. Only universal love of man-as-species is moral. Since love of God is love that is particular it shows itself to be immoral. The love of God deprives mankind from the love of both other human beings and himself as a member of mankind. Christian love is therefore intricately connected not only with the image of those who do not receive it and are the enemy but also with the notion of self-hate.

To love God is to alienate that which make you human and thus reduce oneself to something underserving of that very love. This is why the concept of sin in a post-Christian era would not make any sense. Sin exists by virtue of God, a God whom we have granted our most valuable and essential qualities. We are sinfull because we have alienated our essence unto God. To deny God is to reclaim those qualities. Since I cannot be in contradiction with myself, there is not higher authority, I cannot live in sin.[20]

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Christianity is essentially intolerant and adverse to any true understanding of love. It denies that which it claims is its essence. Christianity, then, in the end, denies itself. This is what Feuerbach meant with the idea that to let Christianity speak for itself is to end it. It is a negativity that negates itself. Love has to be made universal. We should not say, as Feuerbach would have it, " God is love", but " Love is god".[21]God is our own universal nature that we have alienated through religion. Love is synonymous with universality itself. Feuerbach:

" Die wahre Liebe ist sich selbst genug; sie bedarf keiner besondern Titel, keiner Autorität. Die Liebe ist das universale Gesetz der Intelligenz und Natur - sie ist nichts anderes als die Verwirklichung der Einheit der Gattung auf dem Wege der Gesinnung."[22]

" True love is enough by virtue of itself; it needs not special title, no authority. Love is the universal law of intelligence and nature - it is nothing else but the realization of the unity of the species on the road of natural inclination."[23]

Love is only free when it is universal, unrestrained by particularity. Only then can it serve as the means by which man recognizes himself-as-species. The notion of species is not a cold intellectual thought; the very energy of love, our most human of inclinations, is that which constitutes our species-being. [24]The historical figure Jesus Christ is therefore nothing else but our species-being represented in a singular image. Since we are all human, and therefore part of humanity, so too are all of us Christ.[25]

(‘ The emperors’s new clothes’ by Hans Christian Andersson as a metaphor for Stirner’s ‘ Ego and Its own’; “ The Emperor (Feuerbach) is not wearing any clothes!”)