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KARL MARX (1818–1883)

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“Religion is the opium of the people”—this would have been the most well-known statement by Karl Marx concerning religion. It seems to mean that religion is no better than a drug that dulls the senses; it makes one forget one’s sorrows, and causes bodily and psychological harm. Not only is this assumption incorrect, but it is also a caricature of Marx’s complex position on religion. To provide a more comprehensive and nuanced picture, I will outline the main points of Marx’s thoughts on religion in relation to philosophy. It involves relating his work to the Young Hegelians, Bruno Bauer, Max Stirner and Ludwig Feuerbach. I then deal with the ambivalence of the opium metaphor in the context of the passage in which it appears. I close with the most interesting and significant of Marx’s arguments concerning religion, namely, the fetish. As these features of Marx’s reflections on religion unfold, it will become clear how they are crucial to the nature of his work as a whole.

Biography, context and writings on religion

Before proceeding, some biographical and contextual material is needed. Marx was born in 1818 (two years before his closest friend and lifelong comrade, Friedrich Engels) in Trier, Prussia. He was a brilliant student at the gymnasium, before obtaining a doctorate from the Friedrich Wilhelm IV (now Humboldt) University in Berlin. Through an eventful 65 years, Marx had to flee Prussia, then France, then Belgium, since the police were on his tail for revolutionary activity. He and his family settled in London, living in poverty until Engels was able to supply them with resources from his family firm. In London, Marx and Engels organized the International Working Men’s Association, or First International, and fostered communist movements around the world. Marx died from overwork in 1883.

The context into which Marx was born was the backward economic and political status of the German states. Economically, they lagged well behind the Netherlands, England and France in the development of capitalism; politically, the Prussian kings, Friedrich Wilhelm III and IV, sought to ensure the continuance of the monarchy, stifle any reform movements and foster the “Christian state.” When the new Prussian king, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, took power in 1840 he succeeded a father who had begun a process of ensuring the Restoration of authority in the monarchy. Frightened by the revolutionary Frenchmen across the border, one Friedrich after another set about shoring up their domain. In 1822, the devoutly Calvinist Friedrich Wilhelm III had brought together the Calvinist and Lutheran churches to form the Prussian Union (*Preussische Landeskirche*). He enforced a single liturgy for the church, ensured a strict hierarchy and placed himself at the head of the church. Theology and politics, it seemed, were united in a broad reactionary front, concentrated in one person who was both political leader and Christ’s representative on earth. Despite a few vague hints at reform to keep the liberals hopeful, Friedrich Wilhelm IV sought to wind back the clock even further. The “Christian state” would be maintained no matter what stood in its way: one by one, the reforms of 1805–15 (reluctantly granted by his father during republican ferment in the wake of the French Revolution) were rolled back. In effect, they were trying to hold back the push for political power from a newly wealthy bourgeoisie, a push they saw as anti-church, anti-aristocratic and democratic.

Unlike France, with its revolutionary experiences and the radical atheism of Voltaire and company, and unlike England, with its burst of industrialisation and the growth of deism, in the German states debate over modern issues was mediated through theology and the Bible (see Breckman 1999). As Engels put it, “the battle for dominion over German public opinion in politics and religion” is in fact a battle “over Germany itself” (Engels 1841, 181). They waged furious controversies over the Bible, especially the New Testament and its Gospels. In short, the stories about Jesus in the Gospels were the gunpowder in the political powder-keg, precisely because political and ecclesiastical power hinged on this figure. If theology was nothing less than the *lingua franca* of public debate in Germany for most of the first half of the nineteenth century, then the Bible was the terrain of battle for the knot of political struggles—over republicanism, politics, parliamentary representation, freedom of the press, bourgeois democracy, individual rights, secularism, reason and religion. Thus, to criticize the Bible or Christianity was to criticize the reactionary political situation. It is no surprise, then, that the most controversial work of mid-nineteenth century Germany was the work of David Strauss, Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Feuerbach. The furor over Strauss’s *The Life of Jesus* (1835) arose over its argument that the narratives of Jesus in the Gospels are purely mythological and that each person is able to become a democratic Christ. Similarly, Bauer’s radical atheism (1838, 1840, 1841, 1842, 1843a) argued through biblical interpretation, challenged the oppressive particularism of religion and urged a democratic self-consciousness. And Feuerbach’s proposal ([1841] 1989) that religion is the projection of what is best in human beings was seen as deeply revolutionary, since it

meant that human beings en masse were the sovereign creators of the gods and their own future. In this context, Marx began his work in response to theology, seeking to differentiate himself from the dominant theological frame in which German thought functioned in the 1830s and 1840s.

Although Marx never held a teaching position due to his radical political work, he was a prolific writer, producing journalism for newspapers and magazines in Europe and North America as well as significant contributions to economics, philosophy, history and politics. No complete collection of Marx's works yet exists, although the most comprehensive is contained in the 50 volumes of *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (MECW), an English translation published between 1975 and 2005. The original language edition, the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA), is only halfway through a projected 112 volumes. Most of Marx's explicit reflections on religion appear in his earlier works, written in the 1840s. They include an important but neglected article on religion and philosophy (Marx [1842] 1975a), as well as writings on the Rhine Assembly (Marx [1842] 1975b), on Hegel (Marx [1843] 1975, [1844] 1975a), and the well-known *Theses on Feuerbach* (Marx [1845] 1976). However, in his later work we find crucial developments of the theme of fetishism, so much so that it becomes central to his analysis of capitalism (Marx [1867] 1996, 81–94; [1861–63] 1994, 455–61; [1894] 1998, 388–97, 801–18). Two joint works with Engels are also saturated in religious themes: *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels [1845] 1975, [1845–46] 1976).

The early works, from the 1830s and 1840s, show how much theology saturated public debate, but also how hard Marx laboured to free himself from his context. This effort shows up particularly in an important but neglected article of 1842 called “The Leading Article in No. 179 of the *Kölnische Zeitung*.” The article is a sustained response to a certain Karl Hermes, editor of the journal mentioned in the title, conservative Roman-Catholic and government agent. Hermes had fired a broadside against the young Hegelians and the relatively new critical approach to the Bible and theology. So, we find Marx in a curious position: he wants to defend these new approaches to the Bible and theology, while at the same time seeking to extricate himself from the theological tenor of public debate. How does he do so? Theology is presented as an other-worldly, reactionary and traditional venture; against it are ranged scientific research, history and philosophical reason. The catch is that Marx ends up defending a form of theology and biblical research that is scientific, historical and rigorously philosophical. In this article, we also find Marx mercilessly tackling the contradictions of the “Christian state” and introducing one of his first explorations of the fetish (to which we return below).

The young and theological Hegelians

Although he studied theology at the gymnasium, Marx never felt any religious commitment. Indeed, he found the connection between the churches and the ruling classes obnoxious. However, given the way philosophical and political thought was mediated through theology, and given that the most radical thinkers in the

German states were the Young Hegelians (a radical group of philosophers seeking to develop Hegel's thought), both Marx and Engels had to negotiate that thought to develop their own positions. The following focuses on three important philosophers and theologians. Against Bruno Bauer and Max Stirner, Marx began to define his own position, especially since their positions too were radical. By contrast, Ludwig Feuerbach influenced Marx deeply, and he used Feuerbach as a springboard for his own approach to religion.

Bruno Bauer

The first to influence Marx deeply was Bruno Bauer (1809–82), the radical biblical critic. Bauer taught and deeply influenced Marx, especially during the latter's studies at university. Not only did Marx study the biblical book of Isaiah under Bauer's direction (1839), but Marx's doctoral thesis on Epicurus reveals Bauer's influence (1841). In the early 1840s, they planned numerous works together, including a journal and a jointly authored book. Marx, however, was unable to complete his part, which became the now lost work, *A Treatise on Christian Art*.¹ Marx's close connection with Bauer was also pragmatic, for he hoped for a university position under Bauer's patronage. This was not to be, for Bauer's radical theological work and political republicanism saw him removed, first from his post at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin in 1839, and then from Bonn in 1842. With no options left within a university as his license to teach was revoked, he purchased a small farm, ran a tobacco shop and wrote—as prolifically as ever—in the evenings until his death in 1882.

As for Bauer, he argued that the church was ossified and dogmatic, since it claimed universal status for a particular person (Christ) and group (the church). In the name of free self-consciousness, he argued that the church's religious dogmatism should be overthrown and replaced with atheism, democracy and republicanism. Marx was initially enthused, but he later came to criticize Bauer sharply, especially in his reply to Bauer's *On the Jewish Question* (Bauer 1843b, Marx [1844] 1975c). Why did Marx change his tune? Bauer had reached a radical republican and democratic position through his theology, but for Marx this was the wrong approach. The Marx of this time held that theology deals with heaven and not earth—that is the task of the new historical materialism. In the end, for Marx, Bauer was too much under the influence of Hegel's idealist method. So, we find the repeated criticism that “saint Bruno” left matters in the realm of theology and thereby stunted his critical work.

Max Stirner

Max Stirner was the nom-de-plume of Johann Kaspar Schmidt (1806–56). His book, *The Ego and Its Own* ([1845] 2005), caused quite a stir when it was first published, but it was forgotten until its much later recovery as a core text of anarchism, nihilism and even post-modernism. Stirner's central category was the individual, in the most

radical sense: this individual was shorn of any social, state, family, church or collective connections so as to stand solitarily before history. Indeed, Stirner set out in a somewhat rambling fashion to reshape the understanding of history itself in light of what he felt was a new approach. For Marx and Engels, Stirner's book was crucial, so they devoted over 300 pages to refuting it in *The German Ideology*. It prompted them to develop the first coherent statement of historical materialism in response to Stirner's account of world history. That is, Marx and Engels offered an alternative theory of world history as they developed their critique of Stirner. The way they wrote the manuscript (which was never published in their lifetimes) is important: as they wrote on Stirner they found that increasingly coherent statements of an alternative position began to emerge. Some of these statements remain in the Stirner section, while others were moved to the beginning of the manuscript and placed in the Feuerbach chapter (especially sections II and III). In contrast to Stirner's radical focus on the individual, Marx and Engels developed a collective focus. Instead of Stirner's use of Jesus as the first great individual human ego, they sought an approach that was very much of this world. Above all, Stirner wanted to provide a schema of world history that was pitched against Hegel. The reason why Marx and Engels devoted so much attention to him is that they too wanted a schema of world history that overturned Hegel. The difference was that while Stirner made that lever of history the radical individual ego modelled on a very human Jesus, Marx and Engels located the lever in the internal contradictions of class, economics and modes of production. The long struggle with Stirner was an effort to overcome this residual religious influence. One need only look at the structure of their criticism—moving through the major books of the Bible and quoting the Bible *ad nauseam*, criticizing Stirner's prophetic role and theological dabbling—to see that religion is at stake. Out of that intense struggle the first clear statement of historical materialism arose.

Ludwig Feuerbach

Thus, Marx developed his position by criticising the work of Bauer and Stirner. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) was a different proposition, for Marx drew deeply on his work. In Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* ([1841] 1989), Marx found the proposal that religion and the gods were projections of human beings immensely helpful. At its core is what may be called the "Feuerbachian inversion": previous thought about religion began at the wrong point, namely in the middle, working from God to human beings. Instead, argued Feuerbach, God is not a pre-existing being who determines human existence; rather, human beings determine God, who then comes to be seen as the cause of human existence.

We may see Feuerbach's influence in the midst of Marx's most famous statement on religion, in the introduction to his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*:

Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral

sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realization* of the human essence since the *human essence* has not acquired any true reality.

(Marx [1844] 1975a, 175)

At the same time, Marx went beyond Feuerbach on two counts. First, since human beings project religion from within themselves, one begins analysis not in the heavens, but here on earth. Marx still tended to see theology as an other-worldly concern, while the business of philosophy and political criticism is this-worldly (see also Marx [1842] 1975a). In doing so, Marx missed the dialectical nature of Feuerbach's argument, for he was both radically theological and radically materialist. Feuerbach sought both to ground theology in human reality and thereby purify theology in the process. Second, the fact that people make such projections is a signal that something is wrong here on earth, for if they place their hopes elsewhere, then they cannot realize them here and now. Religion becomes a sign of social and economic alienation and *that* needs to be fixed. We find this theme very strongly in the fourth and eleventh *Theses on Feuerbach*, the most developed of Marx's engagement with Feuerbach:

Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-estrangement, of the duplication of the world into a religious world and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. But that the secular basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must, therefore, itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionised in practice. Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be destroyed in theory and in practice. The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.

(Marx [1845] 1976, 4–5)

Soon, Marx deployed his appropriation of the “Feuerbachian inversion” in a number of ways, especially in his criticism of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (Hegel [1820] 1991). Marx argued that Hegel's position on the state was analogous to theology: instead of beginning with a materialist basis, it began with abstracted ideas such as state, sovereignty and constitution and tried to make human beings fit into them. Marx's answer was to focus precisely on flesh-and-blood human beings and see how and why they produced such abstractions (Marx [1843] 1975).

On the nature of historical materialism

Thus far, we have found that Marx developed his own philosophical position in response to the work of Bauer and Stirner, and used Feuerbach as a springboard to reach much deeper conclusions. That position came to be known as “historical” or

“dialectical” materialism. Rather than the monism of naïve materialism, in which all aspects of reality are produced out of matter, Marx’s materialism is dialectical. The key is not so much a dualistic opposition with idealism, in which one argues over causation in terms of ideas or matter—are ideas the primary cause of reality, or is all our reality caused by matter? Rather, the materialism in question is able to account for the nature and reality of idealism. As the quotations concerning Feuerbach show, Marx did not seek to reject idealism, instead, he sought to understand it in a different, materialist fashion. At times, this position leads Marx to espouse a vulgar form of materialism, in which religion—among other idealist forms—are mere excrescences of the brain. Although this vulgar form remains a part of Marxism, it is always tied in with sophisticated dialectical formulations, in which ideas are both produced by material conditions and contribute to the production of those conditions. The complex dialectic is found at the heart of his arguments concerning fetishism and capitalism.

This materialism is also historical, in the sense that economic and social factors play a crucial role in producing the world and who we are as human beings. This approach has become so commonplace today (feeding into the understanding that we are socially constructed beings) that its origins with Marx and Engels is often forgotten. If we return to the quotation concerning Feuerbach, the historical conditions are the “inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness” of our everyday world. Of course, the point of historical materialism is not merely to understand this strife-ridden world, but to change it.

Opium and the ambivalence of religion

One text from Marx’s engagement with Feuerbach has caught the popular imagination in relation to Marx’s theory of religion. It comes yet again from the introduction to his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*:

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

(Marx [1844] 1975a, 175)

Too often the phrase “opium of the people” is understood in a negative fashion. Opium is understood by the vast majority of readers to designate a drug that dulls the senses and makes us forget for a little while our misery. This is far from Marx’s understanding of the phrase. To understand “opium of the people” we need, first, to consider the sentences that precede it. Religious suffering may be an expression of real suffering and religion may be the sigh, heart and soul of a heartless and soulless world. But it is also a *protest* against that suffering. The key is the ambivalence of the opium metaphor. Second, the context of nineteenth-century Europe enhances that ambivalence (McKinnon 2006). Against our own associations of opium with

drugs, altered states, addicts, organised crime, wily Taliban insurgents and desperate farmers making a living the only way they can, the situation in the nineteenth century was quite different. Opium was regarded as a beneficial, useful and cheap medicine, especially for the poor who could hardly afford a doctor.² However, opium was at the same time (and more so later in the nineteenth century) seen as a curse, doing more harm than good. Opium was the centre of debates and parliamentary enquiries; it was praised and condemned. Opium was a source of utopian visions for artists and poets, but it was increasingly stigmatised as a source of addiction and illness. Perceptions of opium ran all the way from blessed medicine to recreational curse.

Third, Marx himself was a regular user of opium. Along with “medicines” such as arsenic and creosote, Marx imbibed opium to deal with his carbuncles, liver problems, toothaches, eye pain, ear aches, bronchial coughs and so on—the multitude of ailments that came with chronic overwork, lack of sleep, chain smoking and endless pots of coffee. As Jenny Marx wrote to Engels:

Chaley’s [Karl’s] head hurts him almost everywhere, terrible tooth-ache, pains in the ears, head, eyes, throat and God knows what else. Neither opium pills nor creosote do any good. The tooth has got to come out and he jibs at the idea
(Marx (senior) [1857] 1983, 563)

To sum up, for Marx, opium was a very multidimensional metaphor. This is precisely why he chose it as a metaphor for religion. Like opium, religion may be source of hope, a way of curing an illness, a sigh for a better world; but it is also a result of a world out of kilter, and may even be a source of harm in its own right.

Idols and fetishes

I have left the most significant aspect of Marx’s approach to religion until last. It concerns the fetish. Perhaps the most read section of Marx’s *Capital* is “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” (Marx [1867] 1996, 81–94). Marx traces the way commodities gain a life of their own and begin to interact with one another as though they were social beings. At the same time, human social relations suffer since they have become like the relations between things. Commodities and human beings have swapped roles. Yet, this was not the first time Marx made such an argument, for it derives ultimately from the study of religion. Marx offers the following hint at the opening of this section in *Capital*: “A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx [1867] 1996, 81).

Let us follow his hint. Twenty-five years earlier Marx had become enthralled by the emerging study of world religions, where data and studies were becoming available. In the early 1840s, Marx read Charles de Brosses’s *Du Culte des Dieux Fétiches ou Parallèle de l’Ancienne Religion de l’Egypte avec la Religion Actuelle de Nigritie*

(1760). A pioneering work in ethno-anthropology and the history of religion, it made the term “fetish” a central category for the analysis of religion, arguing that it applies just as much to ancient Egypt and the Bible as to contemporary practices in Africa. By “fetish,” de Brosses meant an object attributed with superhuman and magical powers, a practice characteristic of “primitive” peoples. These included amulets worn on the body and even edible objects that would be eaten at crucial moments of social exchange. Indeed, for the West Africans, the objects were crucial to social and cultural interaction, so much so that the Portuguese themselves had to use them when engaging with the Africans. Marx took up the idea with gusto, turning it over and adapting it for many uses, not least of which was the lost study on Christian art. That fetishism was a life-long interest is revealed by the reading notes from forty years later, now published as *The Ethnological Notebooks* (1972). It is a collection of notes and comments on the anthropologists L. H. Morgan (the basis for Engels’s *Origin of the Family*), John B. Phear, Henry Maine and John Lubbock. Particularly in the section on Lubbock, Marx once again deals with the religious dimensions of fetishism, quoting the Bible as a source of data on fetishism. The examples come from many parts of the world, from Siberia through Greece to Australia. But when Marx cites Lubbock on sacrifice, the Bible appears. Marx begins by noting that sacrifice may be either a sacrifice *to* the idol or a sacrifice *of* the idol. The latter he calls, quoting Lubbock, “eating the fetish.” Now four biblical texts appear: a reference to the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter in Judges 11, the prescriptions for Israelite sacrifice of animals in Leviticus 7 (actually the whole of chapters 1 to 7 deal with sacrifice), Paul’s comments on the origin of idolatry in Romans 1:23, and, last but by no means least, Christ’s sacrifice, which is as good an example as any of “eating the fetish” (Marx 1972, 339–51).

In the four decades between his reading of de Brosses and Lubbock, Marx deployed fetishism for political polemic, but above all for his economic arguments, including the categories of money, labour, commodities and capitalism itself. As an example of political polemic, there is an early piece criticizing the various decisions by the Rhine Province Assembly ([1842] 1975b). Marx accuses the Rhineland nobles of having a fetish for wood and hares, since they wished to punish the peasants who helped themselves to fallen wood and hares. A couple of years later, he would suggest that money as a mediator of exchange is analogous to Christ, who is projected by human beings as the ideal mediator. Similarly, money becomes a quasi-divine mediator: before it too we must kneel, since we gain our worth from money, its pursuit becomes our goal in life, and it mediates between objects and us (Marx [1844] 1975b, 212).

Marx also extends the fetish to deal with labour and commodities. Now fetishism is the transference of human social characteristics to objects and vice versa. With labour, the more the worker puts into the product he or she is making, the less the worker becomes. The value of the worker’s labour-power is transferred to the object produced, the commodity, which becomes alien and independent at the expense of the worker ([1844] 1975b, 272). By the time of *Capital*, this fetish transfer is applied to the commodity-form:

the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.

([1867] 1996, 82–83)

At the beginning of this section, I mentioned that Marx's well-known idea of the fetishism of commodities appears in an early section of *Capital*. Many interpreters assume that this is the final word on the fetish, as Marx attempts to uncover the secret of capital, to represent what can almost not be represented. However, a careful reading of all three (or four if one includes *Theories of Surplus Value* (Marx [1861–63] 1968)) volumes of *Capital* reveals that this section in volume one is merely the introduction to a significant development of the idea. After this introduction, Marx expands the fetish well beyond the commodity. Now we find a whole range of items that form the many workings of capitalism: interest, rent, wages, profit, land, landlord, capitalist, labour, machinery, circulation, world market and so on. All of them face the labourer as pre-existing, objective, alien realities that rule his life; they “stand on their hind legs vis-à-vis the worker and confront him as ‘capital’ (Marx [1861–63] 1994, 457–58).

This expansion of what counts as a fetish is really the preliminary to a distillation of the fetish. In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx initially identifies three core features of the fetish: capital, land and labour. These form what Marx calls “The Trinity Formula” (Marx [1894] 1998, 801–18), with capital producing interest, land producing ground rent and labour producing wages. The key is that the processes by which interest, ground rent and wages are produced are pushed into the background and forgotten, so that it seems as though interest, ground rent and wages are produced in and of themselves. Marx sums up:

In capital-profit, or still better capital-interest, land-rent, labour-wages, in this economic trinity represented as the connection between the component parts of value and wealth in general and its sources, we have the complete mystification of the capitalist mode of production, the conversion of social relations into things, the direct coalescence of material production relations with their historical and social determination. It is an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world, in which Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as mere things.

([1894] 1998, 817)

At last we come to the heart of capitalism itself, and Marx seeks a single formula, the essence of capitalism (Marx [1894] 1998, 388–97). His argument is that interest-bearing capital, or the financialization of the market, is the ultimate expression of fetishism.³ That is, capital creates its own surplus value, money creates money,

expanding of its own accord without the mediation of the commodity. He invokes the beautifully simple formula of “M-C-M,” in which money is mediated by the commodity to produce yet more money. However, in the case of interest-bearing capital the crucial item of the commodity (C), with its dependence on production and circulation, disappears. Instead, the essence of capitalism is simply “M-M.” Money produces yet more money of its own accord. Interest, financial speculation, the very mechanisms of the modern stock market—these are expressions of the pure fetish.

What has happened to the fetishism of commodities, let alone all the other instances of fetishism? In light of this argument, each of them has become a localized instance of fetishism, an example of a much more basic operation. Distilled to its pure essence, the fetish is none other than capital itself, and the fetish relation operates in terms of “M-M”—“the original starting-point of capital” ([1894] 1998, 389). That is, capital apparently produces surplus value in and of itself, unassisted by the processes of production and circulation. The argument concerning fetishism has expanded far beyond that initial foray in the first volume concerning commodities, let alone the first experiments concerning Prussian laws concerning hares and fallen wood. Now all that has gone before, the full range of items from commodities through to the personification of the landlord, have become incarnations of capital’s “pure fetish form” [*seine reine Fetishform*] ([1894] 1998, 801–2). To express this argument that the fetish functions at the core of capitalism, providing the secret of its workings, Marx coins a new term, eliding capital and fetish as “*kapitalfetisch*” (Marx [1894] 1973, 412).

Summary and conclusion

We have travelled far from the caricatures of Marx’s understanding of religion. It should be clear by now that his thoughts on religion are far more complex and dialectical. The public and political context in which Marx began his work was saturated with theology, so much so that he had to begin by responding to theological positions—via Bauer, Stirner and Feuerbach. His own initial development beyond Feuerbach, with the opium metaphor, revealed a significant ambivalence concerning religion. Yet, Marx’s most sustained engagement was with the idea of the fetish. Over four decades he transformed the idea for political criticism, the analysis of labour, money and commodities, to identify the core of the capitalism. I would suggest that this redeployment of the fetish constitutes Marx’s sublation, or *aufhebung*,⁴ of religion in his work. Religion is thus negated, preserved and transformed in Marx’s work. Marx has not simply kicked away the ladder of religion, but pulled it up and then used the materials to construct something quite new.

Are Marx’s insights into religion still valid today? I suggest that the core insight into the function of capitalism, especially the financialisation of the market, was already seen by Marx with his treatment of the fetish. The idea that money simply produces money, effacing the role of labour and material, remains central to the way capitalism works. Much of the discussion today concerning the “theology”

of the market misses this insight (see Meeks 1989; Loy 1996; Goodchild 2002, 2009). Further, the ambivalence over religion that Marx reveals through his image of opium is a real insight. I refer to the political ambivalence of religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which may be both politically reactionary—supporting tyrannical regimes—and revolutionary, seeking to overthrow those regimes. It is not the case that one sense is the true one and the other an aberration or betrayal, but that both senses are part of the very nature of these religious traditions.

Notes

- 1 Bauer published his part as *Die Posaune* or *The Last Trumpet* (Bauer 1983 [1841]).
- 2 Even in the early twentieth century, opium was used by doctors to treat melancholy and other ailments. As the left-leaning theologian, Metropolitan Vvedensky of Moscow, said in 1925, opium is not merely a drug that dulls the senses, but also a medicine that “reduces pain in life and, from this point of view, opium is for us a treasure that keeps on giving, drop by drop” (Vvedensky [1925] 1985, 223). This comes from a very popular debate between Vvedensky and Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Commissar for Enlightenment in Soviet Russia, on September 20–21 in 1925. This observation is the first observation concerning the ambivalence of the opium image.
- 3 “The relations of capital assume their most external and most fetish-like form [*fetischartigste form*] in interest-bearing capital” (Marx [1894] 1998, 388).
- 4 *Aufhebung* is almost untranslatable, for it is drawn from Hegel and means both cancellation and transformation to another level, where it takes on a whole new life. See the detailed discussion of Marx’s *Aufhebung* of religion and economics in my book, *In The Vale of Tears* (Boer 2014, 47–57).

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