

ฟอยเยอบัควิพากษ์คริสต์ศาสนา

Feuerbach's Critique of Christianity.

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คำสำคัญ: ผู้ต่อยอดแนวคิดเฮเกิล
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Abstract

This article is divided into; 1. Feuerbach: A biographical summary, 2. The early influence of Hegel, 3. Feuerbach as a “Left Hegelian”, 4. The purpose of Feuerbach’s work, 5. Feuerbach’s early works, 6. Feuerbach’s reflections on religion, 7. From theology to anthropology and 8. The influence of Feuerbach.

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1. Feuerbach: A Biographical Summary

Ludwig Feuerbach was born on July 28, 1804, in Landshut, Bavaria, a state in the southern part of what is now Germany. He was born into a well-educated family; his father was an important official of the state, one of his nephews became a famous painter. Feuerbach entered the University of Heidelberg with the intention of pursuing a career in the church. Because of the influence of Prof. Karl Daub, one of its distinguished professors he became interested in the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel. After two years, in spite of his father's opposition, he enrolled the University of Berlin, where the now-famous Hegel (1770-1831) was a professor. Feuerbach attended some of his courses twice. He completed his education at the University of Erlangen in the field of natural science and received a doctorate degree from Erlangen in 1828 with his thesis *De ratione una, universali, infinita* (The Infinity, Unity and Universality of Reason).¹

The foundation he received in both theology and philosophy prepared him well to take part in the debates that were taking place at that time in Prussia (Germany today). He taught for some time as what was called a *privatdozent* or private, unpaid teacher. He married a woman who was partly owner of a pottery factory and her income enabled him to dedicate himself to writing. Because of his books and lectures he was involved in many conflictive debates. When the factory had to close down because of economic problems he was forced to live the remaining years of his life in very modest circumstances.

¹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ludwig-feuerbach/#BiogIntr>.

Feuerbach retired to Nuremberg in 1860, where he lived until his death in 1872. The lifetime of Feuerbach (1804 – 1872) coincided closely with that of Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882). It is highly unlikely that they ever met but they have one thing in common, they thoughts of both on the nature of religion changed with the passing of time.

Feuerbach's works include: *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* (1830), *Toward the Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy* (1839), *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), *Principles and Philosophy of the Future* (1843), *The Essence of Faith According to Luther* (1844), and *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* (1851). In general, historians consider his two key works to be *The Essence of Christianity* and *the Essence of Religion*.

Feuerbach is not as well remembered in history as his fellow countrymen Kant or Hegel; his legacy was the effect he had on others. On the side of Atheism his criticism of traditional religion, theology and practices provided much raw material for the writings of Karl Marx. On the Christian side the writings forced theologians of his day, and later writers like Paul Tillich, Martin Buber and Karl Barth, to provide a suitable response.

2. The Early Influence of Hegel

Before we go to Feuerbach's thought we need to look at some of the basic ideas of Hegel, his first model. As a young student he was an enthusiastic listener to the lectures of Hegel. In later years he would become one of his severest critics.

Hegel was a complex thinker and here we will mention just some of the ideas for which he is most remembered today.

i) He is regarded as a man who attempts to write a philosophy of history. If we want to understand how the world is developing we must study history. Every country and every period of time, for example the medieval period, has its own particular history. Hegel tried to identify the elements of history that lie behind all the 'smaller histories' of each place and time.

ii) As time passes something is developing in history. This something is not just the small changes that we notice taking place around us but the evolution of Spirit or what in German is called Geist. The development is moving towards what he calls the Absolute; something close to our idea of God. The spirit of each human person participates in some way in the Absolute Spirit and is moving towards it.

iii) One of Hegel's best-remembered ideas is the threefold process of the unfolding of history. First there is a state of affairs or a situation which he calls the thesis. Secondly there are those who are not happy with the situation and begin to do something about it or to oppose it. He calls this the anti-thesis or simply the antithesis. Thirdly this tension will be resolved (for better or worse) by what he calls the synthesis – this is the changed situation that comes about as a result of the tension between the thesis and antithesis. This synthesis will later become the thesis of a new round of tensions. The politics of Thailand during the past 20 years provides plenty of examples of this Hegelian process.

There is a strong spiritual element in Hegel's philosophy and he saw himself as one who was helping Christian thought to evolve. After the death of Hegel two different groups of followers appear:

a) The 'young Hegelians' who later came to be called the 'Left' Hegelians. They followed the philosophy of the younger, more revolutionary Hegel. He had proclaimed that the Spirit was constantly in the process of evolution. This evolution did not stop, the Young Hegelians insisted, with the death of Hegel. The Young or Left Hegelians believed in further developing his philosophy. In fact they soon abandoned the spiritual element of his philosophy and prepared the way for a materialistic philosophy without any reference to Spirit.

b) The 'Right' Hegelians follow the later philosophy of Hegel. In later life Hegel became less revolutionary and began to believe that the Prussian state was a near perfect incarnation of the Spirit and there was no need for revolution.

3. Feuerbach as a Left Hegelian.

After two years in the University of Berlin Feuerbach became less enthusiastic about the content of the lectures of Hegel. He began to associate with the Young Hegelians, or Left Hegelians. Gradually this group came to give a very different interpretation to the philosophy of Hegel. A new chapter of history had begun. The spirit that was now evolving in the world would lead to the abolition of the present European institutions, including the Christian Churches. Around this time Feuerbach wrote to a friend saying: "Theology, I can bring myself to study no more. I long to take nature to my heart, that nature before whose depth the faint-hearted theologian shrinks back; and with nature man, man in his entire quality." These words are a key to Feuerbach's development.

Another factor that caused his departure from the Christian way of looking at the world was the work of D. F. Strauss. The event that precipitated the gradual dissolution of the Hegelian synthesis of faith and knowledge that Marx and Engels later referred to sardonically as the “putrefaction of absolute spirit” was the publication in two volumes in 1835–36 of D.F. Strauss’s *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*. Here Strauss used the tools of the “Higher Criticism” he had acquired from his Tübingen teacher, F.C. Baur, to reveal the historical unreliability of the accounts of the life of Jesus preserved in the canonical Gospels, and interpreted the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ as a mythological expression of the philosophical truth of the identity of the divine spirit and the human species “conceived as the community of finite spirits existing throughout history, and not as the historical individual, Jesus of Nazareth”.²

This is how another author describes the changes in his thinking: Having set his focus on man’s relationship to his fellow human beings and to the world, Feuerbach criticized the idealism of Hegel in addition to recasting religion in general and Christianity in particular from a humanistic perspective. His anthropological interest in human transcendence toward the absolute and the Divine compelled Feuerbach to bring these heady subjects down to a human level at which they had a greater chance of influencing the lives of real people. Reason, cooperation, and mutual understanding would demonstrate that the relationship between self and other, “I-and-thou” is fundamental and more compelling than the faith-bound desire for supernatural communion.³

² Article on Feuerbach in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*.

³ Ludwig Feuerbach, *the Essence of Christianity* translation by George Eliot; Introduction by Karl Barth, Foreword by H. Richard Niebuhr, First Harper Torchbook, USA, 1957, p.xiii.

4. The purpose of Feuerbach's work

Karl Barth in his introduction to *The Essence of Christianity* says that "Feuerbach wants, in the end, to help man secure his due. Therefore, his philosophy begins with the sentence: 'I am a real, a sensuous, a material being; yes, the body in its totality is my Ego, my being itself. His teaching aims to be a 'frankly sensuous philosophy'"⁴

At the end of what are called his Heidelberg Lectures in 1848 Feuerbach gave another statement of his aims. He wanted:

"to change
the friends of God into the friends of man
believers into thinkers,
worshippers into workers,
candidates for the other world into students of this world,
Christians, who on their own confession are half-animal and half-angel, into men, whole men,

He wishes to send forth a call,
to turn away from a lie to the truth,
from God to the world and man,
from faith to love,
from Heaven to earth and from Christ to ourselves,
from the vaporous and shadowy phantoms of supernaturalism to real life"⁵

⁴ The introduction of Barth to the *Essence of Christianity* of Feuerbach p.xii

⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach, *the Essence of Christianity* translation by George Eliot; Introduction by Karl Barth, Foreword by H. Richard Niebuhr, First Harper Torch books, USA, 1957, p.xi –xii.

Elsewhere Feuerbach reveals that he had sought in this book to achieve two things:

First, to attack the Hegelian claim for the identity of religious and philosophical truth by showing that Hegel succeeds in reconciling religion with philosophy only by robbing religion of its most distinctive content.

Second, to place the so-called positive philosophy in a most fatal light by showing that the original of its idolatrous image of God is man, that flesh and blood belongs to personality essentially.

Any reader will see that Feuerbach's approach is extremely negative. He explains why: "I deny only in order to affirm. I deny the fantastic projection of theology and religion in order to affirm the real essence of man"⁶ Certainly my work is negative but, be it observed, only in relation to the unhuman not to the human elements in religion.

Feuerbach clearly believes that there is a lot of work to be done. He wants to clear away what he considers to be all the confusing and mistaken religious ideas that are preventing the people of his time from becoming the free and noble human beings that nature means them to be.

5. Feuerbach's Early Works

While he was still a young man Feuerbach reduced his chances of getting a job as a professor by publishing works which cause a great amount of conflict. At about the age of 26 he published *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*. His way of understanding both of these concepts was very

⁶ Ibid., p.xii.

different, to say the least, from the ideas of most of the people in the Prussia of his time. For him human death is something very natural: humans die just like all the other living things in the world around them. There is no personal life after death. Christian preachers who tell people that there is a life for the individual soul after death are in fact an obstacle to real human life here on Earth now. In this book Feuerbach makes a clear break with Hegel who saw religion with its doctrine of life after death as an important part of the dialectical development of history. Even in his 20s Feuerbach believed that the death of religion, as practised in Prussia, would be a good thing.⁷

For Hegel, the unfolding of history was part of the process of the development of mind or Spirit. The changes and developments taking place in the actual world around us is a participation in the evolution of the Absolute Spirit. At this stage of his life Feuerbach still appears to accept Hegel's idea of an Absolute Spirit into which the spirit of the individual is absorbed after death. What is this Spirit? Its essence seems to be made up of thinking, knowledge and will. In the human individual these activities can only happen when he or she has a body. They are participating in the activity or life of the Spirit while they are alive. But once the body dies these activities cease for this particular individual; but they do not cease in the world because the individual is just one of a human species which continues to live.

⁷ Feuerbach, Ludwig. *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*. Translated by James A. Massey. Berkeley: University of California Press, p.133.

6. Feuerbach's Reflections on Religion

In his *History of Philosophy* Copleston remarks that, on reading Feuerbach one gets the impression that he is more interested in theology than philosophy. The following quote from Copleston gives an overall picture of Feuerbach's thinking on the past and the future of religious practice: In *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach concentrates on the idea of God as a projection of human self-consciousness, whereas in *The Essence of Religion*, in which religion is considered historically, he lays emphasis on the feeling of dependence on nature as the ground of religion.⁸

Feuerbach himself asserted that the main theme of his writings was religion and theology. But he did not mean by this statement that he believed in the objective existence of a God outside human thought. He meant that he was principally concerned with clarifying the real significance and function of religion in the light of human life and thought as a whole. Religion was not for him an unimportant phenomenon, an unfortunate piece of superstition of which we can say that it would have been better if it never existed, and that its effect has simply been that of retarding man's development. On the contrary, the religious consciousness was for Feuerbach, an integral stage in the development of human consciousness. He can be said therefore, to have substituted anthropology for theology.⁹

⁸ Fredrick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* Vol. VIII. Burns & Oates 1963. p.296.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.294.

Many peoples around the world have a religion. Why is this so? Feuerbach says that if one studies the earliest history available there is evidence of religious practice. In the beginning the objects that receive special veneration were things from the world of nature such as the sun and moon or things closer to earth like mountains or rivers. Usually they were things that people could not understand nor control. Gradually some of these gods were 'personalized' the ancient Greeks for example had many gods such as Zeus, Apollo, Demeter, etc. they were polytheistic. The different Asian religions also had many gods. These gods were thought to have the power to act on people and change the course of events. When Christianity becomes the dominant religion, the powers once thought to belong to the gods are now centralized on one God or on the Trinity. This, for Feuerbach was a chapter of history but one that now needs to be replaced because to continue with this way of thinking in the present is an obstacle to further development. Why is a religious approach to life harmful? The following quote summarizes Feuerbach's objections:

"It is pleasanter to be passive than to act, to be redeemed and made free by another than to free oneself; pleasanter to make one's salvation dependent on a person than on the force of one's own spontaneity; pleasanter to set before oneself an object of love than an object of effort; pleasanter to know oneself beloved by God than merely to have that simple, natural self-love which is innate in all beings; pleasanter to see oneself imaged in the love-beaming eyes of another personal being, than to look into the concave mirror of self or into the cold depths of the ocean of Nature; pleasanter, in short, to allow oneself to be acted on by one's own feeling, as by another, but yet fundamentally identical being, than to regulate oneself by reason".¹⁰

¹⁰ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* translation by George Eliot; Introduction by Karl Barth, Foreword by H. Richard Niebuhr, First Harper Torch books, USA, 1957, p.140.

It is clear that for Feuerbach the one who believes in and practices a religion becomes a very passive individual who is very unlikely to develop into a mature autonomous person. Marx would later incorporate some of these ideas into his writings on alienation.

What is the basic problem with having a religion? Feuerbach explains:

“Religion is the disuniting of man from himself; he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself. God is not what man is – man is not what God is. God is the infinite, man the finite being; God is perfect; man imperfect; God eternal, man temporal; God almighty, man weak; God holy, man sinful; God and man are extremes: God is the absolutely positive, the sum of all realities; man the absolutely negative, comprehending all negations ... But the consciousness of the absolutely perfect moral nature, especially as an abstract being separate from man, leaves us cold and empty, because we feel the distance, the chasm between ourselves and this being; – it is a dispiriting consciousness for it is the consciousness of our personal nothingness and of the kind that is most acutely felt – moral nothingness ... And religion renders this disunion all the more painful, all the more terrible, that it sets man’s own nature before him as a separate nature, and moreover as a personal being, who hates and curses sinners, and excludes them from his grace, the source of all salvation and happiness”.¹¹

¹¹ Lecture XXX, (Lectures on the Essence of Religion) and Essence of Religion pp.45-47

From the above we can see where he thinks the problem lies. Humans have many desires; the imagination has no limits but the real world places many obstacles to the fulfilment of their desires. A healthy life would be one where people identify what are attainable desires and then try to fulfil these. The problem with religions and especially Christianity is that it focuses on the imaginary and unattainable desires. These cannot be fulfilled on Earth but the promise is made that these will all be available in another life – in Heaven. This, for Feuerbach is something very destructive. Ordinary people lose faith in the present life and the possibilities for fulfilment and happiness that it offers; they focus on a life after death and have less concern for improving this life.

He writes: “Man, this is the mystery of religion, projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject” (Feuerbach 1957, 29-30). Religious persons, according to Feuerbach, see the positive elements of their nature and through wish and imagination extend them to perfections; nature becomes supernatural, power becomes omnipotence, and knowledge becomes omniscience. Feuerbach sees himself as a philosopher continuing the challenge we find in Plato's Allegory of the Cave. He is shining a light into the dark corners of ignorance.

Human beings are dependent creatures but not totally so. They are intelligent and they can learn. The basic characteristic features of the human being are reason, will and affection. A human being who does not have these, is nothing. Through their relationships human beings discover themselves; they recognize that they are members of a species.¹²

¹² Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* translation by George Eliot; Introduction by Karl Barth, Foreword by H. Richard Niebuhr, First Harper Torch books, USA, 1957, p.6.

They come to be aware their own inner (subjective) nature but then make a fatal mistake. Instead of recognizing this as their own, they project it on to an outside being onto what they call God. This is where God 'is born.' The essence of God is nothing more than the accumulation of human wish projection.

More and more Feuerbach moves away from a God-directed dimension in the human and focuses on what is material. For him, the only thing that is real is nature, the things of the natural world. He was using the ideas of a famous physiologist of his time when he wrote: "Foodstuffs become blood; blood becomes heart and brain, the stuff of thought and attitudes. Human fare is the basis of human education and attitudes. If you want to improve the people give it, instead of homilies against sin, better food. Man is what he eats."¹³

Although he did move far away from traditional Christianity and its theology and said he was an atheist, he writes in his Lectures on Religion that he still does have a religion:

"Though I myself am an atheist, I openly profess religion in the sense just mentioned, that is, a nature religion. I hate the idealism that wrenches man out of nature; I am not ashamed of my dependency on nature; I openly confess that the workings of nature affect not only my surface, my skin, my body, but also my core, my innermost being, that the air I breathe in bright weather has a salutary effect not only on my lungs but also on my mind, that the light of the sun illumines not only my

¹³ Kamenka, Eugene, 1970. *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*. New York: Praeger Publishers Inc.; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, p.30

eyes but also my spirit and my heart. And I do not, like a Christian, believe that such dependency is contrary to my true being or hope to be delivered from it. I know further that I am a finite moral being, that I shall one day cease to be. But I find this very natural and am therefore perfectly reconciled to the thought.”¹⁴

To sum up we see that Feuerbach thought religion had a negative effect on people because it caused them to lose sight of their true nature and their possibilities in this life. They projected the best qualities of their own nature, things like compassion, love generosity, on to a Being that is separate from them and looked to this Being to fulfil their desires in the future. This caused them to be alienated from life at the present time.

7. From Theology to Anthropology

If we read the Catechism of the Catholic Church today we will find a statement of the relationship between God and human beings. Man is created by God, in his image. CCC¹⁵ says in No. 41 that “All creatures bear a certain resemblance to God, most especially man, created in the image and likeness of God”. In the view of the believers man is the image of God, but man is not God. The reason why God created man was because of his love. God is the creator and man the creature; this is a fundamental belief of all Christians. Man searches for God but cannot in any way ‘replace’ God.

¹⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*.

¹⁵ CCC is Catechism of the Catholic Church, the official teaching of the Catholic Church edited by Joseph Ratzinger. He now died in 2022.

The ancient Greek philosopher Empedocles had a very different view. He said that the Egyptians thought their god had dark skin and brown eyes and the people of the race thought god was fair skinned with blue eyes. He added that if horses or cattle could make images of their gods they would look like horses and cattle. Feuerbach wasn't so extreme but he agreed with Empedocles on one basic point – God was a human creation. Writing in *The Essence of Religion* he says "God did not, as the Bible says, make man in His image; on the contrary man, as I have shown in *The Essence of Christianity*, made God in his image." How did this human invention of 'god' come about the central concept here is projection.

If we have to condense the whole book of the *Essence of Christianity* into a single sentence, it would be "Look, theology is anthropology!" Feuerbach claims that it is not him, an insignificant individual, but religion itself that says "God is man, man is God." (Feuerbach *Essence*, xxxvi) He, as a listener and interpreter of religion, not its prompter, discovers that the Christian God is nothing else but an abstraction made up of all the characteristics we would wish for ourselves. God is the projection of the human mind; therefore what religion really worships is not God but humankind itself. Feuerbach later finds further proofs concerning this human nature of God in Martin Luther's statements (see Feuerbach, 1967). Religion, thus understood, is an expression of human being's alienation: "Religion is the disuniting of man from himself; he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself. God is not what man is - man is not what God is."¹⁶

¹⁶ Ludwig Feuerbach, *the Essence of Christianity* translation by George Eliot; Introduction by Karl Barth, Foreword by H. Richard Niebuhr,, First Harper Torchbooks, USA, 1957, p.33.

The function of religion, according to Feuerbach, is that it is a wish-fulfillment, a way to deal with frustrations one encounters in his or her life. Religion reflects the (weak) nature of human feelings: Feuerbach would agree with the First Noble Truth of Buddhism that the world is full of suffering. There is all kind of things from personal suffering and loneliness to extreme social inequality and injustice that can leave human beings very frustrated. They have a deep wish for a better world; for a world where there is personal fulfillment and happiness, justice and peace. They cannot find it in this world so they project their wishes into a next world and on to a supremely good, compassionate and just Being who will fulfill all these wishes. Religion is nothing more than anthropology.

Feuerbach's answer to this dilemma would be something like this: 'God is only a projection of positive attributes of human nature because that is what humans want'. This comes back to Feuerbach's foundation of projection theory: deep seated wishes. As was noted earlier, Feuerbach says "God springs out of a feeling of want", that is, God is nothing but the fulfilment of our inner and most central desires. Sigmund Freud, one of Feuerbach's great disciples, summed up this position succinctly: "religious ideas, which are given out as teachings...are illusions, fulfilments of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind"¹⁷

¹⁷ Freud, Sigmund. 1927, 1961. *The future of an Illusion*, translated by James Strachey, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, p.30

8. The Influence of Feuerbach

For a relatively short time in the mid1800s Feuerbach was a widely-read philosopher. He challenged the idealistic philosophy of Kant, Hegel and others that had been the dominant philosophers before that and moved philosophy in the direction of naturalism and, eventually, materialism. He was largely forgotten after that time but came to light again because of Marx's Theses on Feuerbach. Although Marx wrote this in 1845 it didn't become well-known until Fredrich Engels published it again in 1888 as an appendix to his book Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy. The following quote sums up Feuerbach's influence on those who came after him.

The significance of Feuerbach's life and thought seems to be increasingly re-recognized in contemporary world. Many readers still find the Essence of Christianity fascinating and/or disturbing. One reason for this phenomenon is that, according to Harvey, Feuerbach anticipated so many themes of the twentieth century: "a Marxist theory of alienation, the Freudian emphasis on the role of wishing and desire, the empiricist's stress on sense experience, the phenomenologist's concern with the body, and the existentialist concern with the confrontation of the consciousness with death and anxiety" We can certainly interpret this anticipation as Feuerbach's lasting influence on human-kind.

I began criticizing Feuerbach in 2011, when I defended my thesis "Fabro interprete di Feuerbach" in Rome, and then I completed my dissertation "Feuerbach's Theory of Religious Projection: An Examination of Religion Practice among the Karen Ethnic Group of Southeast Asia". I have discovered that some philosophers who have conducted thorough research will find concepts that are beneficial to their own beliefs.

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