

Feuerbach: Love & Atheism

By Van Harvey in *Philosophy Now* (2011)

Van Harvey is George Edwin Burnell Professor of Religious Studies (Emeritus) at Stanford University, and author of *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* (1995). In this fascinating article he explores an unusual critique of Christian love.

There have been many atheist critics of Christianity who have argued that its doctrines are intellectually untenable or based on illusion, but few have argued that the Christian notion of love enshrines the highest human virtue, and that this requires those who embrace it to renounce Christianity. Few atheist critics could write or even find intelligible this sentence: “As God has renounced himself out of love, so we, out of love, should renounce God; for if we do not sacrifice God to love, we sacrifice love to God, and in spite of the predicate of love, we have the God – the evil being – of religious fanaticism.” What I shall attempt to do in what follows is make this imperative at least intelligible.

The sentence occurs in Ludwig Feuerbach’s best-known book, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), which created a sensation when published in Europe, and which was quickly translated into English by no less than the novelist George Eliot. Although the sensationalism was in large part due to Feuerbach’s clever inversion of the ruling philosophy of his time, Hegelian Idealism, Feuerbach’s basic thesis that gods are psychological projections of human nature still finds its contemporary intellectual admirers. For example, Sidney Hook argued that this theory “still remains the most comprehensive and persuasive hypothesis available for the study of comparative religion” (*From Hegel to Marx*, 1936, p. 221).

What cannot fail to strike a first reader of Feuerbach is how sympathetic this atheist was to Christian beliefs. He was sympathetic, he once wrote, because religion was for him an object of practice before becoming an object of theory. Unlike most atheistic critics he did not simply dismiss religion, or, like the speculative philosophy of his time, try to make religion say what philosophy expressed better. By calling his method ‘critical’ rather than negative, he meant that he tried to understand religion from the ‘inside’; that is, to understand it as the believer understands it. He wanted to let religion itself speak; to be a listener when the ordinary believer prayed, sung, and recited the creeds. And what he claimed he discovered by this critical method was that the Christian believer’s

most important conviction is that *God is love*. Guided by this understanding of Christian belief, Feuerbach then preoccupied himself with the analysis of the idea of love and its implications.

Divine Projection

Feuerbach's basic conclusion, that God is a psychological projection, is more or less easy to understand: the Christian God is an objectification of the basic human attributes of reason, will, and feeling. But his conclusion is based on a series of very abstruse, underdeveloped, some would say arcane arguments. Nevertheless, one must have some grasp of them to understand why the concept of love is so crucial for Feuerbach's analysis.

The first of these arguments has to do with the origins of self-consciousness, an argument that seems dependent in many respects on Hegel's philosophy of spirit. To oversimplify, both Hegel and Feuerbach argued that the distinctive feature of spirit is self-consciousness, and that the condition of the possibility of self-consciousness is the awareness of another subject – a 'you'. So the self-conscious 'I' comes into existence over against another embodied being, 'you', for which the 'I' then becomes an object. In short, recognition by another is constitutive of self-consciousness. But in a modification of Hegel's philosophy of spirit, Feuerbach then argues that in this process of encountering another subject one also becomes aware of sharing 'predicates' [ie characteristics] with that other: the I becomes aware that it is a member of a species. This move then leads Feuerbach to his second important argument concerning what is involved in being a member of a species. This argument says that the type of experience possible to any species is dependent upon its distinctive capabilities, or what Feuerbach calls 'powers'. Every species has its own perspective on the world, so to speak. For example, an ant orients itself to the world by means of different powers than does a dog. They're called 'powers' because they are the conditions of any possible experience. Moreover, the exercise of these distinctive powers is the condition of health and joy. Consequently, the human species, which is differentiated from the animals by virtue of self-consciousness, necessarily considers its attributes as perfections, as absolutes, because they are what makes human self-conscious experience possible.

Once a person becomes aware of being a member of a species whose attributes are perfections, one also becomes aware that one is not a perfect exemplification of the species. The species is perfect, but the individual is imperfect. The species will endure, but the individual is limited and will die. It is in this discrepancy

between the individual and the species that religion takes root. Driven by the will to live and longing for perfection, the imagination, which is a servant of the feelings (emotions), seizes upon the essential human attributes and objectifies them in the notion of a perfect superhuman subject, over against which the individual sees itself as an imperfect being. The person then longs for recognition and aid from this superhuman subject and attempts to gain that recognition by sacrifice, prayer and ritual. Thus, feeling, which Feuerbach believes drives human beings and is indifferent to reality, latches onto our perfections, and with the aid of the imagination converts them into an independent transcendent being – a deity who exemplifies them: God. “The divine being,” Feuerbach wrote, “is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective – i.e., contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature.” (p.14).

The religious person is not aware that she is projecting her own predicates: indeed, ignorance of doing so “is fundamental to the peculiar nature of religion.” (p.13). Nevertheless, it is by means of this projection that human beings first come to a self-knowledge of their ideal traits. Religion is, in Feuerbach’s opinion, man’s earliest but indirect form of self-knowledge, and every advance in religion may be said to be an advance in self-knowledge. At this point, Feuerbach’s thinking bears an affinity to Hegel’s philosophy of spirit, but with an inversion that a Hegelian could only regard as perverse. Hegel had argued that the Absolute Spirit objectifies itself in the creation of the human world, and he regarded the various stages of human culture as moments in the unfolding of this Spirit. Consequently, Hegel saw the various religions – animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Greek and Roman religion, and Judaism – as culminating in Christianity. Hegel believed that Christianity was the absolute religion, because the doctrine of the Incarnation symbolizes the metaphysical truth realized by philosophy, that in fully objectifying itself in the external world, the Absolute reconciles itself to its alienated creation. In other words, to Hegel the history of religion culminating in Christianity was a progressive revelation of the truth that the Absolute is not impersonal, but Subject. Feuerbach accepted Hegel’s notion of the development of spirit, but stood Hegel’s argument on its head. Hegel argued that Absolute Spirit comes to self-consciousness through the development of human culture, while Feuerbach argued that humanity comes to its self-consciousness through the projection of an Absolute. Like Hegel, he is prepared to say that Christianity is the absolute religion, but it is absolute only in that the deity that has been projected by it bears the most perfect aspects of human nature: its powers of sympathy and of love for other human beings.

Love Renounces God

As the argument of *The Essence of Christianity* progresses, it becomes clear that Feuerbach does not believe that a (merely) morally perfect being can ultimately appeal to human beings who long for compassion and love. He argues that moral law only creates consciousness of being a sinner, but *love* gives one consciousness of being a person. The powerful appeal of the Christian God lies in the fact that the individual is an object of recognition and love by the creator of the universe: one has value in the sight of the most perfect and powerful being. Feuerbach believed that almost every religion believed that the deities are not indifferent to human beings, but it is only in Christianity that the predicate of love determines the deity itself.

It is important that one frame the issue in this way – that it is the predicate ‘love’ which determines the Christian God – because Feuerbach’s argument is that in the religious case the predicates are more important than the subject, since it is the predicates which are projected. It is this idea about the Christian ultimate projection of the predicate ‘love’ which expresses indirectly and in a mystified form that love is the essential human relationship between an I and a you. Christianity presents us with two things: God and love; but it would be disastrous for Christianity if God were conceived only as a subject behind or independent of the predicate love – “a severe power not bound by love.” (p.52) So long as the subject lurks behind and independent of the predicate love, there also lurks a being who delights in the blood of unbelievers – the God of religious fanaticism. But Christian doctrine declares that God sacrifices his only Son because of his concern for human well-being. In other words, love mandates God to renounce his divinity; and this renunciation, Feuerbach argues, is out of love for humanity, since everything in religion is directed towards the welfare of the species.

But it is not only in the sacrifice of deity that one sees this love for the species, but in the picture of Jesus Christ himself. This is particularly evident in the suffering of Christ – a suffering that springs out of his being a member of the species. For Feuerbach, love is “nothing else than the realization of the unity of the species” (p.269) because in love, one is related to other human beings as one is to oneself. In love we share the suffering of others as our own. Anyone, therefore, who rises to the love of humanity, to the species, does what Christ did, and so does not need Christ, or Christianity. For someone who loves the species, who allows its heart to beat in him or herself, Christ disappears.

The Contradiction Between Faith and Love

Although this may be difficult to fully understand, it seems clear that one cannot overstress Feuerbach's emphasis on love. Unlike that other, devastating, critic of Christianity, Friedrich Nietzsche, Feuerbach attempted to conserve the ethic of love, as the basis of his naturalistic humanism. "A loving heart is the heart of the species throbbing in the individual" (p.268). This is clear also in his *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (1843), where he writes that "The essence of man is contained only in the community and unity of person with person" (§59).

His claim about the importance of love for the Christian is demonstrated in a series of chapters on Christian belief and practice, on the concept of prayer, the idea of miracles, and on the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, providence, and resurrection. Perhaps no chapter among these better represents Feuerbach's 'hermeneutics of charity' – his method of listening sympathetically to what the believer really feels and does – than his chapter on prayer. Prayer, he argues, reveals the ultimate essence of religion, because it is in prayer that the believer addresses the deity with the most intimate affection as a you (thou). It is in prayer which is sometimes disconsolate and pregnant with sorrow but which also expresses the confidence that human wishes will be fulfilled, that the believer brings the innermost feelings of the heart. Here "God is an unutterable sigh, lying in the depths of the heart" (*EC*, p.122). Feuerbach argued that it is superficial to see prayer as simply manifesting a sense of dependence. Rather prayer is rooted "in the unconditional trust of the heart, untroubled by all thought of compulsive need, that its concerns are objects of the Absolute Being, that the almighty, infinite nature of the Father of men is a sympathetic, tender, loving nature, and that thus the dearest, most sacred emotions of man are divine realities." (p.124.)

But despite this emphasis on love, Feuerbach believed that Christianity is an alienating (in the Hegelian sense) and a contradictory religion. It is *alienating* because the human spirit has not yet reappropriated the predicates it has projected or objectified – in other words, it has transferred its own species attributes to an external supernatural being rather than embracing these attributes as its own. Christianity is *contradictory* because its two fundamental virtues, faith and love, are incompatible.

The analysis of faith and love occurs in the latter part of *The Essence of Christianity*, entitled 'The False or Theological Essence of Religion'. He deals first with the contradictions he finds in the concept of God, and then he turns to the

contradictions between faith and love. For instance, the Christian thinks he has true beliefs, and that unbelievers and the adherents of other religions are wrong. But since these right beliefs have to do with salvation, the unbelievers are more than intellectually wrong, they are lost. Faith thinks of itself as privileged, as having been given the gift of grace not given to the unbeliever. So rather than this faith being a form of love, Feuerbach regards this as a type of arrogance under the form of humility. Although it is true that faith gives individuals a sense of dignity and importance, this dignity is a borrowed dignity – much like the dignity of a waiter in an expensive restaurant trades on the class of the restaurant, even though he is still only a waiter.

But Feuerbach's harshest polemic against faith is that as 'right belief' it is specific, and expresses itself in dogma. Consequently, faith is exclusive, and leads to the anathematization of those who do not accept the dogma. The church, Feuerbach concludes, justifies itself in adjudging damnation to heretics and unbelievers, "for this condemnation is involved in the nature of faith." (*EC*, p. 252) But this condemnation necessarily generates hostility and intolerance – both of which are the opposite of love. Love, by contrast, sees the unity of person with person – I with you – even if the you is of a completely different intellectual persuasion.

Many interpreters of Feuerbach stress that his criticism of Christianity depends largely on his inverted Hegelianism and the Hegelian concept of alienation, but it could be argued that his major emphasis falls on his analysis of the contradictions between faith and love. It is with a paean of praise to love that Feuerbach concludes his critique of Christianity – a paean that combines not only his arcane claim that "Love is the subjective reality of the species" (p.268) – but the more straightforward argument that it is the predicate 'love' and not the subject 'behind love' that is crucial for Christians: "In the proposition 'God is love' the subject is the darkness in which faith shrouds itself, the predicate is the light, which first illuminates the intrinsically dark subject" (p.264). It is this that constitutes the most intelligible, if not necessarily convincing, argument, that just as God has in the Incarnation renounced himself out of love, so we out of love should renounce God.