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Atheism: Young Hegelian Style

Andrew Levine

For roughly a decade following the death in 1833 of Germany's and the world's leading philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a handful of students and young professors in Berlin set out to advance the cause of revolution in Germany by extending Hegel's ideas and by launching a "critique" of contemporaneous ("Right Hegelian") Protestant theology. These Young (or "Left") Hegelians included David Strauss, Bruno Bauer, Karl Neuwerc, Ludwig Feuerbach, Arnold Ruge, Max Stirner, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx; as remarkable a group of fledgling thinkers as ever joined together in a common project.

Their rationale, the methods they deployed, and the substantive views they advanced seem exotic today, a relic of a long gone moment in German thought.¹ Nevertheless, from roughly the 1950s through the 1980s, Marxists in Western countries took a keen interest in Young Hegelianism because they saw Marx's early, Young Hegelian writings as key to developing a "humanistic" version of Marxism. More recently, with interest in Marx and Marxism on the wane, interest in Young Hegelianism has subsided accordingly. This is unfortunate because what we can still learn from Feuerbach and the others is, if anything, even more timely and urgent than ever.

I will dwell no more on the movement's history or its internal divisions than I must in order to convey a sense of what it was about in its own time and place. Following ample precedent, I will assume that Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* was, at once, the movement's seminal work and crowning achievement. Because Feuerbach influenced Marx, and because Young Hegelianism is inevitably viewed through a Marxian prism, this is a standard, though contestable, position. But even if Feuerbach's place in the Young Hegelian movement was less central than it seems to those interested more in Marx than the others, the fact remains: for most purposes, it is Feuerbach's masterwork that merits the most attention.

For contemporary readers, *The Essence of Christianity* can seem a strange collation. This is hardly surprising: it is an intervention into philosophical and political debates that faded into obscurity long ago. Fortunately, however, this is an instance where, as it were, God is *not* in the details. This is why the details can, for the most part, be passed over or set aside. My aim today is just to sketch a different kind of atheism, atheism Young Hegelian style, from the kind with which most people are familiar.

In the Young Hegelian view, what might be called *standard atheism* was "completed" in the eighteenth century. The Young Hegelians were therefore not interested in rebutting arguments purporting to establish the rationality of belief in God; they regarded that work as already done. Neither were they interested

directly in other aspects of so-called “rational theology.” Rather, they took it for granted that none of it meets rational standards for belief acceptance. The Young Hegelians, along with many others, credited “materialist” philosophers with securing rational theology’s demise. It should be noted, however, that Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), an idealist philosopher and also a believer, played, if anything, a more decisive role. Nevertheless, for reasons having to do both with the appeal of theistic convictions and with the nature of philosophy itself, rational theology refuses to die. I would venture, though, that the Young Hegelians were right – that the end of “rational theology” is long past due. In reflecting on their version of atheism, I will therefore follow their lead by not dwelling on issues they regarded as established beyond any reasonable doubt.

* * *

Feuerbach had two related aims: to develop a “philosophical anthropology” or, what comes to the same thing in his thinking, an account of the human essence; and to explain theism in anthropological terms – revealing the human (anthropological) meaning that belief in God both expresses and conceals. Feuerbach also sought to uncover the human meanings of concepts that cluster around the God idea, for which the concept of God is foundational. *Criticism* is the methodology Feuerbach devised for these purposes. It is a “hermeneutical” or interpretive program. Specifically, it is a “translation” program that aims at what would nowadays be called a “theoretical reduction” – in which one theory is recast or translated into another more fundamental theory. In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach’s aim was to translate Right Hegelian Protestant theology, which he regarded as the most developed “theory” of religious experience, into Young (Left) Hegelian philosophical anthropology, a “theory” he considered fundamental for reasons I will discuss presently. However, unlike an ordinary translation, Feuerbach’s “critique” of Protestant theology does not just identify equivalences between terms; it “reduces” away and therefore eliminates one of the theories, the theological one, by translating it into the other, the philosophical anthropology. The Young Hegelians thought that reducing a theory away, eliminating it, is tantamount to reducing away what it represents, eliminating the theory’s “object” as well.

As remarked, Feuerbach had no reason to restate what he took to be timeworn rebuttals of Christianity’s claims. He assumed standard atheism. But there is a sense in which he supposed that rational theology’s (literally false) claims are true – inasmuch as they express something real. The problem, though, is that they misrepresent the truths they express. Translating them into a true philosophical anthropology sets these misrepresentations right. Thus Feuerbach took up the preceding century’s efforts to throw off Christianity’s yoke not by showing that

its main contentions are wrong but by uncovering the human meanings they conceal. His was therefore a more radical atheism than the one his predecessors had established; an atheism that, fully grasped, would set humanity on a course free from the thrall of beliefs that are not only false, but also, for reasons I will next discuss, retrograde and oppressive.

It seems remarkable today that, by their own lights, Feuerbach and the others were embarked on an emancipatory project that brings philosophy's history, as they conceived it, to an end – melding it into revolutionary politics. But that was indeed the case. The Young Hegelians developed their account of their own role in German politics and philosophy by drawing on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* (*Geist*), published in 1807, and from the material published posthumously in Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* and in his *Lectures on The History of Philosophy*. A particular conception of philosophy emerges from their reflections on these texts. It is a conception that emphasizes, and arguably exaggerates, Hegel's importance, and therefore the importance of his followers, including themselves. Hardly anyone today would endorse the story the Young Hegelians assumed without qualifying it substantially. Nevertheless, the Young Hegelians' view of what philosophers do, or rather of what they ought to do, is widely shared. For them, as for most philosophers nowadays, philosophy is not so much about doctrines as about resolutions of puzzlements of a broadly conceptual nature. Among the things philosophers do to this end is construct theories, accounts guided by rational standards, of general and abstract things – for example, goodness and beauty and the nature of the real. Of course, these theories can be considered doctrines. But not all collections of doctrines are philosophies. Bodies of doctrine exist nearly everywhere and at all times. But philosophy's way of making sense of the world, its project as it were, has a determinate history – a beginning, a middle, and an end. It began in ancient Greece and then developed, over two thousand years, in fits and starts until it was begun again, definitively and for the final time, in seventeenth century Europe. Philosophy's last new beginning is epitomized in the work of magisterial philosophers of whom René Descartes (1596-1650) was, by far, the most influential.

This “moment” in philosophy's history culminated in the late eighteenth century, in Germany, in the work of Immanuel Kant. Needless to say, Hegel and his followers did not maintain that Kant “solved” all the problems that philosophers had posed since Socrates. Their idea, instead, was that, after Descartes and the others had reconceived philosophy, making the forms and limits of knowledge its principal concern, efforts to defend or combat skepticism became Topic A. In Hegel's view, Kant finally defeated skepticism by showing how knowledge of “the external world” is possible. In doing so, he also made clear what the entire philosophical project, from its beginnings to his own day, had been about. It was about Freedom, an idea that worked its way to full self-consciousness through

the unfolding of real history and its philosophical representations.

Kant distinguished the *actual* world human beings experience, a *phenomenal* order that exists in space and time and that is governed by the principle of causality, from the *real* or *noumenal* order of things-in-themselves. He argued that we can establish that things-in-themselves, noumenal things, exist, but that knowledge of them must remain forever beyond our grasp. This separation of the actual from the real, where the former is cognitively accessible and the latter is not, gave rise to a new set of problems, the resolution of which was the task of “classical German philosophy.” In order to join the actual and the real in the way he ultimately did, it fell to Hegel to represent the structure of what is, of reality itself. Ultimately, he did so by identifying the Real with the Rational; in other words, with Reason itself.

This line of reasoning led Hegel to maintain that reality is dialectical in the sense that its constituent subjects and objects interact with and thereby transform one another. For as long as the dialectic unfolds, the real is in a process of *becoming* – in which, on Hegel’s account, what is, an *affirmation* or *thesis*, develops its own *negation* or *antithesis* with which it is in internal opposition or *contradiction*, until its contradictory “moments” are incorporated into a higher unity, a *synthesis* or *supersession* (*Aufhebung*).

Equipped with this understanding, Hegel came to the view that the Kantian idea of freedom is an essentially historical notion. Following his lead, all of Hegel’s followers, Right and Left, agreed that, ultimately, freedom can and must be realized in actual history. Both sides also agreed that this “end” or culmination of classical German philosophy is attained when the Kantian idea of Freedom is embodied institutionally in a state organized around principles of universal Right (*Recht*), a *Rechtstaat*. Their quarrel was therefore not so much philosophical as political. For the Right Hegelians, Prussia was already a *Rechtstaat*. The Right Hegelians were therefore defenders of their own regime’s status quo and opponents of revolutionary efforts to overthrow it. However, for the Young (Left) Hegelians, the Prussian state was the penultimate, not the final, “moment” in Freedom’s career. This is why, as its dialectical trajectory unfolds, it “inverts” the real; intensifying unfreedom to its maximum point. Accordingly, the task is precisely to overthrow that state – putting Reason finally in control of the political realm.

The Young Hegelians thought that their Right Hegelian rivals misconceived the end point of the project Hegel theorized because, like Hegel, they were *idealists*, not *materialists*. Correcting that mistake was a task the Young Hegelians took upon themselves. They sought to provide the Hegelian dialectic with the *materialist* foundations it lacks.

As remarked, when Descartes and the others relaunched the philosophical project in the seventeenth century, they put the question “What can I know?” in

the foreground. Their guiding idea was that what is is what we can know to be the case; neither more nor less. With this conviction in place, Descartes went on to show, at least to his own satisfaction, that there are two kinds of things we can know to be, two *substances*: ideal substance, Mind; and material substance, Matter. The former is mental (thinking is its essence) and therefore non-spatial; the latter is spatial (extension is its essence) and therefore mind-independent. Thus, even if it is fair to say that Descartes started philosophy anew, it is plain that he drew on the thinking of his predecessors. It was from them that he got the category of substance. Substances, in the “scholastic” tradition Descartes’ thinking emerged out of, are, among other things, radically independent of one another. Because he adopted their conception, incorporating it into his own metaphysical reflections, Descartes’ account of what is raised a momentous question: how can the two substances he identified, Mind and Matter, interact? They plainly do in each and every one of us; our bodies and minds affect one another. But how is this possible?

Descartes proposed a patently unsatisfactory solution to the so-called mind-body problem. So did others who followed in his wake. But it soon became the consensus view that, to make sense of mind-body interactions and of other problems generated by the preeminence modern (post-Cartesian) philosophy accords to theories of knowledge, there must ultimately be only one substance. Mind and Matter, conceived Descartes’ way, were the contenders. Those who maintained that everything that is, including ostensibly material things like physical objects, are ultimately mental in nature were *idealists*; those who maintained that everything, including ostensibly mental things like pains or sensations, are ultimately comprised of matter were *materialists*.

Kant and Hegel were idealists, as were many of their celebrated predecessors, but there were materialist philosophers too, especially in eighteenth century France. These were the philosophers who took it upon themselves to refute belief in God. Partly for this reason, materialism came to be identified with atheism. Because so much revolutionary activity in those days was directed against ecclesiastical authorities, and because atheists were anti-clerical, materialism also became associated with revolutionary politics. Correspondingly, idealism was associated with theism and conservative or even reactionary politics. There were exceptions, of course, but the idea that these metaphysical, theological and political positions were connected – not just for contingent historical reasons, but for conceptual reasons as well – was a tenet of the intellectual culture the Young Hegelians inhabited. It had been so for decades before Young Hegelianism erupted on the scene, and it would remain so throughout the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth century, thanks to orthodox Marxism and later Communism. Thus it was not only philosophical considerations that led the Young Hegelians to seek to recast the Hegelian dialectic on materialist foundations. Their motivations

were political as well.

By his own account, Feuerbach was a proponent of Hegel's dialectical method but also, as a materialist, an opponent of Hegel's idealist ontology. In all likelihood, Hegel would have deemed this configuration of positions incoherent; Feuerbach's Right Hegelian opponents certainly did. But the Young Hegelians were adamant. How successful they were, however, in forging a genuinely dialectical materialism is another matter. The feasibility of that project remains controversial to this day.

Feuerbach also differed from Hegel on other key issues. Hegel's philosophy was about abstract, historical processes; not about Man (sic) or any other historical "subject." In marked contrast, Feuerbach's philosophy was precisely about human subjectivity; it was a "philosophical anthropology," a theory of what human beings are. However Feuerbach was no naturalist; his philosophical anthropology took no account of universal psychological properties, or anything else susceptible to empirical investigation. It was metaphysical and *essentialist*. Feuerbach thought that the way to account for what human beings are is to identify essential metaphysical (non-natural) properties pertinent to the human subject. He deemed this project fundamental. If he was right, philosophy ultimately just is philosophical anthropology in the sense that the questions posed within classical German philosophy, philosophy's final stage, are, in the final analysis, *about* what Man essentially is.

The idea that there is a human essence — that there are *essential*, as opposed to merely *accidental* properties of human beings — is itself a metaphysical contention. It is therefore not equivalent to the claim that, as a matter of fact, there are traits or properties all human beings share. Aristotle, for example, held that Man is essentially a rational animal; in other words, that rationality is an essential human trait and that no physical property, other than being an animal, is. Being shorter than ten feet tall would therefore not be essential for being human even if, as a matter of fact, no human being has ever exceeded ten feet in height, and none ever will. Being shorter than ten feet is only an accidental property in the sense that a rational animal taller than ten feet, if one existed, would still count as a human being. On the other hand, an animal without rationality could never count as human. An *essence*, then, is a set of conditions necessary and sufficient for being what one is. Aristotle's claim that Man is a rational animal is a claim about the human essence or, what comes to the same thing, about necessary and sufficient for being human.

The Young Hegelians' metaphysical essentialism is of a piece with this contention. There is therefore nothing original or even unusual in their claim. What is original and unusual was their account of what the human essence is. Also unusual, and thoroughly non-Aristotelian, was their insistence that this essence is somehow the answer to all philosophical questions. There is, however, a

precedent even for this rather implausible view within classical (Kantian and post-Kantian) German philosophy; indeed, within Kant's own work. In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously proclaimed that "What can I know?" "What ought I to do?" and "What can I hope?" are the fundamental philosophical questions.² In a later work, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), he went on to suggest that, in the final analysis, these three questions reduce to one: "What is Man?" However, Kant never expressly defended this assertion nor did he work out its implications. These too were tasks Feuerbach and the other Young Hegelians took upon themselves.

Notwithstanding their self-identified Hegelianism, the Young Hegelian reduction program was fundamentally Kantian. Young Hegelian "criticism" was methodologically innovative, but it was still criticism in the sense of Kant's three *Critiques*.³ Kantian criticism aimed to establish "the conditions for the possibility" of one or another form of experience. As philosophical anthropologists, the Young Hegelians maintained that it is ultimately essential humanity that makes the heterogeneous ways that experience presents itself possible. Their aim in doing philosophy, or rather criticism, was to establish this fundamental truth, drawing out its consequences, by laying bare the human meanings experience expresses "through a glass darkly," as their Right Hegelian antagonists might put it.

In effect, then, their philosophical anthropology was a general theory of everything; an account of what everything ultimately *means*. That meaning is always and everywhere the same. This is so because, in the end, everything means the same thing – everything has a *human* meaning. Thus there is ultimately only one real thing. This was Hegel's view too. But, for Hegel, the one real thing was Spirit (*Geist*) becoming conscious of itself; for the Young Hegelians, it was Man becoming what He essentially is. In both cases, essential unity is recovered through a process of *becoming*. Philosophy's goal is to comprehend this process and to carry it forward.

To execute the critical program—specifically, to reduce Right Hegelian theology to philosophical anthropology – it is necessary, of course, that the philosophical anthropology be available. *The Essence of Christianity* was Young Hegelianism's seminal work because it constructed that anthropology, at the same time that it reduced Christianity to it.

Because everything means the same thing, criticism of any aspect of human experience leads in principle to the same result. The essence of Christianity is the human essence, but the human essence is the essence of everything else as well. However, the Young Hegelians insisted that the critical program could not have begun anywhere other than where it did, with a critique of Right Hegelian theology. This is because the God idea, which finds its most developed expression in the theology Feuerbach "interpreted," designates an "object" that is entirely

immaterial and therefore utterly unreal. It is *nothing but* a chimera, a representation, in inverted (or “alienated”) form, of essential humanity. The truth about Man is embodied in it as it is in everything else; but everywhere else human meanings are less transparent – and therefore, in the absence of a developed philosophical anthropology, less accessible – because they are embodied in real things. Were the philosophical anthropology at hand, material admixtures would be less likely to throw “critical critics” off track. But, insofar as the task is to still to get the anthropology right by discovering what the human essence is – to construct the theory to which everything else can be reduced – empirical admixtures are likely to mislead. Human beings “objectify” their essence in all and sundry, but only when they do so in God is their objectification perspicuous enough to serve Feuerbach’s purpose. This is why criticism of Christianity is the Royal Road to the philosophical anthropology the Young Hegelians aimed to discover.

It is therefore also the key to philosophy’s next and final stage. After the criticism of religion (Christianity) is complete, the critical program can then be applied to other aspects of human experience – including matters of expressly political and economic concern. Then, as Marx proclaimed, “the arm of criticism” will pass into “the criticism of arms” – in other words, the “revolution” in philosophy registered in Hegel’s solution to the problems Kant raised will culminate in a social revolution, propelling humankind, the real subject of all philosophy, into the realm of Freedom.

* * *

Thus the Young Hegelians were motivated not only by theoretical exigencies immanent in classical German philosophy, but also by political concerns that they cared about even more. These motivations flowed together to produce an atheism of an unprecedented kind.

In the Young Hegelians’ time, a confluence of circumstances made Christianity an especially potent obstacle to progressive social and political change in Prussia and other German lands. Feuerbach and the others were revolutionaries, living amidst a people whose aspirations for freedom were suppressed by their own theistic beliefs, and by the ecclesiastical institutions that sustained them. Like their counterparts in pre-Revolutionary France, the Young Hegelians were therefore anti-clerical; like most materialists, they were atheists. But their attitude towards the theism of their compatriots was not dismissive in the manner of their eighteenth century predecessors or the “village atheist” of American lore. Unlike them, the Young Hegelians were sensitive to the ways religiosity addresses the deepest concerns of persons in its thrall. They saw no need to demonstrate the falsity of Christian or other religious beliefs; that work had already been done. They were more interested in addressing the puzzle of theism’s persistence. To

this end, they set out to show how theistic beliefs, though manifestly false, express fundamental *human* truths.

Like the Right Hegelians, Feuerbach made much of Christianity's affective side. He was, after all, a product of a Romantic age and a Protestant culture and therefore no foe of inwardness, enchantment, reverence and awe. He and the other Young Hegelians rejected the heartless, mechanistic world-view of eighteenth century materialism. But Feuerbach never doubted that faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – or in the God that Jewish, Christian and Muslim philosophers defend in the name of that God – is bad faith. However, as a Hegelian, he also believed that a good faith, one that overcomes the bad not by rejecting it but by incorporating it into a “higher unity,” is possible too. In a good faith, God or gods would have no role, but what these ideas simultaneously express and obscure about essential humanity would. This is because, in the end, theism is not about God or gods; it is about Man (sic). Its claims therefore express human truths; truths that, to their detriment, both theists and their opponents, village atheists, miss.

Feuerbach thought that taking consciousness of these truths, not just cognitively but affectively as well, is emancipatory and, for that reason, politically portentous. To make it known that God is Man – that Man makes God, not vice versa – can help turn masses of former believers into agents of revolutionary change. This, in turn, advances the “end” (*telos*) of history in the Hegelian scheme, the earthly realization of the Idea of Freedom.

As remarked, “irreligious criticism” is indispensable for the critical program to be applied in non-religious domains. Whatever their interests or concerns, the Young Hegelians were therefore obliged to focus on religion, at least in the beginning. But, unlike Feuerbach, most of them were not much interested in religion for its own sake. Marx was hardly typical in this respect or any other, but his example is illustrative; he always had more important things to think about than God. In his mid-twenties, Marx broke with Young Hegelianism altogether; as he wrote in the long section on Feuerbach in *The German Ideology*, written in 1845 but published posthumously, he “settled accounts with his erstwhile philosophical conscience.” But even when he was still effectively Feuerbach's disciple, he had little to say about religion per se. When Marx was no longer a Young Hegelian, he said even less.

However, what he did say in his Feuerbachian period is widely known and nearly as widely misunderstood: religion, Marx proclaimed, is “the opium of the people.” Marx wrote these words at the beginning of a reflection on Young Hegelianism's role in the years immediately ahead, years preceding the revolutionary upheavals that finally erupted – and failed – in 1848. His remark was made in the context of contemplating criticism's next phase. Marx had no interest in correcting or revising Feuerbach's reconstruction of Christian beliefs,

or in dwelling on his account of Christianity's essence. In his view, Feuerbach had gotten Christianity right. What Marx wanted to do instead was to apply Feuerbach's methods and results to other forms of experience — specifically, to the developments in ethics and politics registered in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, and to the world described in the emerging “science” of political economy.

After breaking with Feuerbach, Marx turned his attentions elsewhere — to the this-worldly investigation of “the laws of motion” of capitalist societies and to aspects of world history generally. This was a momentous change of focus, undertaken, in part, because he had come to the conclusion that irreligious criticism was no longer as politically consequential as it had been, or had seemed to be, a few years earlier. Other Young Hegelians went their own ways too. Thus the “moment” of Feuerbachian criticism passed. Even before 1848, the movement had effectively ceased to exist.

What ended was a stage in the history of atheism that atheists subsequently, nowadays especially, foolishly ignore. That it came into being at all is quite remarkable. In their time and place, it must have required considerable discipline on the Young Hegelians' part to resist lapsing into a dismissive atheism. Right Hegelianism was the bulwark upon which defenders of the status quo staked their case. It was a “discourse” of oppression. How tempting it must therefore have been to disparage theism, and to leave the matter at that! How difficult to empathize with those who took theistic beliefs and practices to heart! But empathize is what the Young Hegelians did. For them, the “opium of the people” was not just a narcotizing drug administered by cynical ruling classes to lull the masses into submission. It was that too, of course. The Young Hegelians knew as well as anyone that, throughout history, elites have used religion for their own ends. But, as Marx insisted, religion is also an “expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering...the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world...the spirit of spiritless conditions.” How difficult it must have been for precocious and enthusiastic heirs of enlightened thought to assume an attitude consistent with these words when they knew beyond doubt that there is no *defensible* reason to believe in an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God!

By their time, this eighteenth century discovery — or rediscovery of what was already well understood in antiquity — may already have seemed stale in advanced intellectual circles in France. However, even in France, outside the most enlightened quarters, theism still flourished, just as it did everywhere else. The Young Hegelians were very cognizant of the fact that Germany was “backwards” in relation to France. But its backwardness was actually an asset in their view because it raised the prospect of leaping over what enlightened French thinkers had accomplished decades earlier. In most German lands, atheism was officially repressed, and freedom of religion, like other liberal rights, was more an aspiration than a reality. A political revolution like the one in France would

change that. But the Young Hegelians envisioned a German revolution more far-reaching than the French Revolution had been – one that would transform not only the state but civil society as well. They were confident that their work would insure that revolution’s coming; that full human emancipation, not just equal citizenship and liberal rights, would become inevitable once irreligious criticism took hold of the consciousness of German believers.

Theirs was an extreme version of a common conceit. It seemed plain to the Young Hegelians, as it then still did to enlightened thinkers everywhere, that it is only necessary to spread the word – as it were, to make the *death* of God known – for bad faith to disappear. Well into the twentieth century, this remained a widespread view. The political left was especially wedded to it. Many liberals believed it. For most nineteenth century socialists and anarchists, it was, as it were, an “article of faith.” Of course, they all knew that the way forward would be neither easy nor direct. Elites would continue to use religion to control their subordinates, and clerisies would never relinquish their wealth and power without a struggle. But, in the end, light would triumph over darkness. Within a few generations at most, religion would become a relic of a benighted past.

This was and still is a reasonable expectation for those who believe in the power of reason to sway the human mind. However, during the past century and a half, confidence in theism’s imminent demise has become increasingly difficult to sustain. The religions enlightened thinkers inveighed against should no longer matter politically; by now, they should no longer even exist. But they do exist and they do matter. This is not only true in the Islamic world where a variety of circumstances, including the machinations of imperialist powers in search of allies in battles with secular nationalists, nurtured a “political Islam” of explosive force. It is the case nearly everywhere. We are today, again, in a Young Hegelian moment – a time when religion is, more than usually, an obstacle in the way of human progress. Yet again, the time is ripe for a Young Hegelian response.

* * *

The Young Hegelians’ ways of arguing and their mix of Hegelian and materialist metaphysics have not aged well. This is why their writings today seem both exotic and obscurantist. But this was already the case decades ago when the authority of the young Marx, still Feuerbach’s disciple, was invoked by those who would “humanize” Marxism. When “Marxist humanism” waned, neither its methods nor its metaphysics were to blame. It was the ambient political culture that caused interest in Young Hegelianism to subside. This is not to say that we can or should take up where the Young Hegelians left off; only that the animating spirit of Young Hegelian criticism survived in a political and intellectual

environment more similar to ours than to the one in which the movement arose and briefly flourished. Much has changed in recent decades, especially on the political front, but I would venture that it can do so again.

As interest in Marxism and therefore Young Hegelianism diminished, the idea took hold that, as Margaret Thatcher put it, “there is no alternative” (TINA). Thatcher intended her remark to apply to the neo-liberal, anti-union and anti-welfare state policies she advocated. However, proponents of TINAist thinking succeeded, unwittingly perhaps but effectively, in establishing the idea that the form of civilization that contemporary capitalism sustains, its religious component included, is unavoidable and permanent. This sensibility is still widespread. The conventional wisdom is that what did in revolutionary programs like the Young Hegelians’ was utopianism or, more precisely, unwarranted optimism about the prospects for changing life fundamentally for the better. Divergences from contemporary intellectual styles do account, in part, for the lack of interest today in early and mid- nineteenth century revolutionary thought. But they are of much less consequence in the larger political culture than the attitudes TINAist thinking encourages.

This is not the place to inveigh against TINAism in general. My contention, again, is that, with respect to religion, Young Hegelian optimism is not utopian at all – that theism can and should be superseded, not just refuted. However, TINAism is not without merit because it forces attention upon a potentially disabling problem that the Young Hegelians radically underestimated. Feuerbach and the others were wrong in their view of the difficulties in the way of putting Reason in control.

Like other enlightened thinkers of their time, the Young Hegelians failed to recognize the extent to which human beings resist rational persuasion, especially in matters of faith. It is as if religious convictions enjoy special immunities that shield them from rational confutation. This is potentially an embarrassment to enlightened thought. But insofar as human recalcitrance can be accounted for in ways that accord with enlightened norms, embarrassment can be avoided. Feuerbach was only one of many thinkers who have much to tell us about the obstacles in Reason’s way where God is concerned. Many of those thinkers come from intellectual traditions opposed to Hegelian thought. Indeed, it would be fair to say that a common thread running throughout enlightened thinking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was precisely to account for theism’s persistence in the face of its manifest untenability. In this endeavor, the Young Hegelians were on target. But, unlike many who would come after them, they radically underestimated the difficulties in the way of hitting the mark. Theistic convictions are harder to exorcise than they imagined. The humanistic “faith” they promoted – consistent with Reason and centered on human beings rather than on God or gods – is, if anything, even more difficult to realize and sustain.

environment more similar to ours than to the one in which the movement arose and briefly flourished. Much has changed in recent decades, especially on the political front, but I would venture that it can do so again.

As interest in Marxism and therefore Young Hegelianism diminished, the idea took hold that, as Margaret Thatcher put it, “there is no alternative” (TINA). Thatcher intended her remark to apply to the neo-liberal, anti-union and anti-welfare state policies she advocated. However, proponents of TINAist thinking succeeded, unwittingly perhaps but effectively, in establishing the idea that the form of civilization that contemporary capitalism sustains, its religious component included, is unavoidable and permanent. This sensibility is still widespread. The conventional wisdom is that what did in revolutionary programs, like the Young Hegelians’, was utopianism or, more precisely, unwarranted optimism about the prospects for changing life fundamentally for the better. Divergences from contemporary intellectual styles do account, in part, for the lack of interest today in early and mid-nineteenth century revolutionary thought. But they are of much less consequence in the larger political culture than the attitudes TINAist thinking encourages.

This is not the place to inveigh against TINAism in general. My contention, again, is that, with respect to religion, Young Hegelian optimism is not utopian at all – that theism can and should be superseded, not just refuted. However, TINAism is not without merit because it forces attention upon a potentially disabling problem that the Young Hegelians radically underestimated. Feuerbach and the others were wrong in their view of the difficulties in the way of putting Reason in control.

Like other enlightened thinkers of their time, the Young Hegelians failed to recognize the extent to which human beings resist rational persuasion, especially in matters of faith. It is as if religious convictions enjoy special immunities that shield them from rational confutation. This is potentially an embarrassment to enlightened thought. But insofar as human recalcitrance can be accounted for in ways that accord with enlightened norms, embarrassment can be avoided. Feuerbach was only one of many thinkers who have much to tell us about the obstacles in Reason’s way where God is concerned. Many of those thinkers come from intellectual traditions opposed to Hegelian thought. Indeed, it would be fair to say that a common thread running throughout enlightened thinking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was precisely to account for theism’s persistence in the face of its manifest untenability. In this endeavor, the Young Hegelians were on target. But, unlike many who would come after them, they radically underestimated the difficulties in the way of hitting the mark. Theistic convictions are harder to exorcise than they imagined. The humanistic “faith” they promoted – consistent with Reason and centered on human beings rather than on God or gods – is, if anything, even more difficult to realize and sustain.

Because they believed that a social and political revolution was imminent, the Young Hegelians had no time for that “pessimism of the intellect” that Antonio Gramsci recommended along with “optimism of the will.”⁴ They all but claimed that seeing the world aright, seeing the human reality that religion inverts, will lead, in short order, to the revolutionary overthrow of the world that makes religion, the “opium of the people,” both possible and necessary. They soon discovered that they were wrong. However they were not wrong in thinking that “taking consciousness” – facing reality – is a condition for changing life for the better. Their error was to conflate this single facet of a larger emancipatory project into a full-fledged, stand alone strategic program. To reconstruct and restore the Young Hegelians’ still timely idea, it is not enough to focus only on what Reason requires. The factors that make it difficult for Reason to prevail must also be taken into account.

* * *

“Militant” atheism was often the norm in Communist countries, where the coercive power of the state was deployed to discourage and sometimes repress religious practices and beliefs. Realizing that theirs was a lost cause, at least in the short run, the Communists were seldom rigorous or thoroughgoing in their efforts to excise faith; but they did try. Marxists out of power could only endeavor to persuade believers to come to their senses; they could hardly force them. In time, though, Marxists, including Communists, sought to make common cause with believers – especially in countries where there were strong Catholic political parties that advocated social and economic reforms. Thus, by the middle of the twentieth century, Marxist positions on religion verged on liberalism – in practice and, increasingly too, in theory. The histories of liberalism and of religious toleration are intertwined. Nevertheless, many liberals, especially in the nineteenth century, agreed with the goals militant atheists advanced; they were atheists themselves, and they wanted theism to disappear. Their quarrel was with the militants’ means, which they considered inadmissible or ineffective or both.

The Young Hegelians only discussed religious toleration in the course of faulting revolutionary endeavors that were insufficiently radical because they envisioned nothing beyond the liberal and democratic horizons of revolutionaries fifty years earlier. They saw no need. They thought that making the human meaning of theistic concepts known would vanquish religion altogether. They therefore had nothing to say about how to deal with people who resist their explanations. But had the movement survived long enough for the Young Hegelians to have had to confront the issue, they would probably have opposed militant atheism – not exactly on liberal grounds but because politically organized

efforts to suppress faith are at odds with the spirit of Young Hegelian criticism. What Feuerbach contrived was an explanatory program intended to help people free themselves from ways of thinking that oppress them. It envisioned mass self-emancipation; not repression. An atheism that retrieves what is still living in the Young Hegelians' purchase on faith would follow suit.

Many Young Hegelians had been liberals before they moved on to more radical positions, many of them continued to evince respect for liberal values. In the liberal view, it is morally indefensible to repress beliefs, and it is wrong to repress practices that do no harm to others. There are many ways to defend this position. Perhaps the most convincing, and also the one most connected historically and conceptually with the Young Hegelian movement, draws on Kant's moral philosophy. On this view, it is wrong to interfere with expressions of private conscience, and also with harmless behaviors directed at others, because doing so violates the principle of morality, epitomized in a formulation of Kant's, according to which persons ought never to be treated merely as means but should instead be accorded the respect due to "ends-in-themselves." Repressing religion falls afoul of this requirement insofar as religious practices harm no one directly, and insofar as religious commitments are among the core values that constitute individuals' conceptions of themselves.⁵ To proscribe *or* enforce beliefs that play this role is therefore to fail to respect human "dignity" in the way morality requires.

Contemporary liberals characteristically join this defense of tolerance with an implicitly TINAist disposition to think that religion will always be with us. They believe, in other words, that, under free (non-coercive) conditions, theism will survive for an indefinite period, and therefore that religious convictions will merit unqualified respect for just as long. The Young Hegelians had a different view. They thought that because theism's appeal is meretricious, it merits no respect. Even unqualified acceptance of the case for treating moral personality in oneself and others as an end-in-itself does not mitigate this fact. Respect for persons can never underwrite acquiescence in their irrationality, especially when their beliefs and practices have debilitating – counter-emancipatory – consequences. What the respect Kant enjoined necessitates is encouragement of enlightenment in oneself and others. It commands "taking consciousness" of the real, not acquiescing in erroneous representations of it.

* * *

If the Communist experience shows anything, it is that the battle against theism cannot be waged successfully at the level of institutions, policies and laws alone. This conclusion is consistent with Young Hegelian thinking; so is the idea that, for mitigating and eventually eliminating the harms the Abrahamic religions

do, cultural and psychological factors matter more than rationally compelling arguments. Ironically, in these matters, there really are no alternatives. Coercion cannot suppress theism indefinitely, and liberal “respect” does not even aim at freeing humanity from religion’s thrall. Only a protracted struggle in and over the ambient intellectual culture can, in time, render the Abrahamic religions as politically inert as, say, the wiser, but similarly meretricious polytheisms they replaced.⁶

Theism cannot be repressed into oblivion. However, under ideal conditions, it can and probably will wither away on its own. Because they believed this fervently, the Young Hegelians were not exactly liberals with respect to religious liberty, though there is little doubt that, had they been forced to take a position, they would have defended freedom of religion as ardently as any liberal. They would have been right to do so – not only because it is wrong to coerce right thinking, as liberals also believe (for other reasons), but also because it will not work. For those who would have societies overcome their pasts by turning to enlightened irreligion, liberalism is more efficacious than militant atheism. It is also more congenial to the Young Hegelian conviction that enlightenment is an individual achievement, not a policy authorities can legislate. Liberals agree. But there is a difference: for liberal atheists, atheism is a cause to plead within a framework of political institutions that takes no side; indeed, that encourages a plurality of sides. As liberals, liberal atheists value religious pluralism. The Young Hegelians had no time for it. Their aim was to hasten the day when an enlightened citizenry, comprised of persons free from the “self-imposed nonage” that has held humanity back for so long, forsake religion definitively and irreversibly.

With their pretensions to exclusivity and universality, monotheistic religions promote discord and strife. Polytheistic religions are more tolerant. In a famous passage from *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edmund Gibbon, speaking of the time when imperial Roman institutions flourished, observed that “the various modes of worship that prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful.”⁷ Thus there was a kind of “religious concord,” as Gibbon put it. On Gibbon’s account, monotheistic Judaism in distant Palestine was the exception; it was intolerant of paganism and its rituals. Even before it became an official religion of the Roman Empire, Christianity universalized the intolerance of its ancestor faith. It maintained that its God was the only God, and that outside its Church, there was no salvation. In this way, what began as an exceptional phenomenon in a remote Roman province spread throughout the Roman Empire, upsetting the benign and tolerant world of classical antiquity. Abetted by Islam, a later Abrahamic religion that took much from the other two, intolerance persists to this day.

There is no turning back to pagan ways, nor should there be. But neither

should we deny the fact that, in many respects, the transition from polytheism to monotheism was a step backwards. Because the winners write the history, it is almost universally assumed that civilization advanced when monotheism replaced polytheism. The Young Hegelians believed this; indeed, their version of the consensus view was extreme. Following Hegel, they held that the religious convictions of contemporaneous German Protestants, represented in the doctrines of their Right Hegelian rivals, were the most advanced – and therefore the most revealing – in all of human history. In this case, as in others, they were misled by their underlying philosophical assumptions, just as less philosophically self-conscious proponents of the conventional wisdom are misled by theirs. For the fact remains: Gibbon was right – Graeco-Roman polytheism was less pernicious than the Abrahamic faiths that succeeded it. Of course, the founders of these faiths and their successors were also right in holding that polytheistic beliefs are not worthy of serious consideration. Unfortunately, it took just a few centuries shy of two millennia for a comparable judgment to be leveled against their own monotheism. More unfortunately, that incontrovertible judgment remains a minority view to this day.

In the modern period, liberalism provides a functional equivalent for Graeco-Roman tolerance – by turning religious convictions into matters of private conscience and insisting that they be of no political consequence. I would suggest, though, that liberal religion is not a viable option in the long run and not a desirable or even cogent option now. Liberal religion is not so much a new, distinctively modern form of faith, as a diminution of the old form. As such, it is a (painfully slow) vehicle of exit for a civilization that has outgrown theism but that, for trenchant human reasons, finds itself unable unequivocally to shake off its yoke.

Gibbon was a creature of the Scottish Enlightenment. He had co-thinkers throughout Europe, especially in France and among European colonials in the Americas. Many of his co-thinkers were liberals. Others looked forward to the passing away of theistic beliefs altogether, not just their relegation to a politically inconsequential private sphere. Their solution to the problem liberalism addressed by privatizing faith was to remove the very possibility of religious discord at its source. They envisioned a world in which the Abrahamic religions and therefore the politics they helped shape was only an historical memory, in much the way that paganism now is. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, socialists and anarchists were the main proponents of this enlightened eighteenth century objective. But then the militant atheism of official Communism brought discredit on their project. This is one reason why, in recent decades, “faith” in a secular future has lapsed even in what remains of the socialist and anarchist traditions; and why, in many circumstances, the religious Left is at the core of resistance to the status quo. Generations ago, this would not have seemed possible. For the

Young Hegelians, it would have been inconceivable.

But humankind will not succeed in building a future worthy of human beings, a future of the sort the Young Hegelians envisioned, until the forces of progress become resolutely irreligious again, and until good faith, faith in humanity and its future, supersedes the bad faith that theistic religions promote. To this end, it is vital to expose not just the untenability of theistic convictions but also the harm they do. This is a Sisyphean task in which it is not enough to win every (intellectual) battle. Still, these battles must be fought and (re)won, however many times it takes, until humanity is able again to move on – this time without any semblance of turning back.

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The Young Hegelians saw “irreligious criticism” as a decisive step in the struggle to realize liberty, equality and fraternity in the conditions of their time and place. We now know that the larger struggle is more difficult than they and their contemporaries in the revolutionary camp of early and mid nineteenth century Germany imagined, and that it too has a Sisyphean aspect. The Young Hegelians overestimated the importance of the “irreligious criticism” they developed, just as they underestimated the difficulties in the way of winning that larger struggle. They succumbed to what might be called the *rationalistic fallacy* – the assumption that rationally compelling arguments automatically win the day. As we again rise to the challenge of confronting the evils of religiosity in *our* time, we must guard against this mistake. It is disconcerting to think that debates that were concluded long ago must be resumed, and that it is as urgent as ever to battle against a social, political and psychological phenomenon, or family of phenomena, that ought to have faded from the scene long ago. But, for reasons we must endeavor to understand, this is the situation we confront.

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Notes

¹ For a collection of Young Hegelian writings, see Lawrence S. Stepelevich (ed.), *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology* (Prometheus Books, 1997). For general accounts of the movement, see William J. Brazill, *The Young Hegelians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970); Warren Breckman, *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory: Dethroning the Self* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); “Feuerbach, Marx and the Left Hegelians,” special issue of *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. 8, nos. 2- 4 (1978); Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (Ann Arbor: the University of Michigan Press, originally published 1936); Stathis Kouvelakis (G.M. Goshgarian, trans.), *Philosophy and Revolution: From Kant to Marx* (London: Verso, 2003); Harold Mah, *The End of Philosophy, the Origin of “Ideology”: Karl Marx and the Crisis of the Young Hegelians* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987); Karl Löwith (David E. Green, trans.), *From Hegel to Nietzsche: the Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967; original German edition 1941); and David McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* (New York: F.A. Praeger, 1969).

² *The Critique of Pure Reason*, B, II “Of the Ideal of the Summum Bonum as a Determining Ground of the Ultimate End of Pure Reason.”

³ *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *The Critique of Judgment* (1790).

⁴ The slogan “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” appeared regularly on the masthead of the journal Gramsci established, *Ordine Nuovo*.

⁵ One of Kant’s several formulations of the categorical imperative, the core principle of morality, holds that one should always act in such a way as to treat humanity, in oneself and others, as an end-in-itself and never merely as a means. See *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, part 2.

⁶ I say “wiser” because the strongest case for theism, the so-called “argument from design,” according to which the evidence of nature supports the hypothesis that God exists in the way that evidence supports hypotheses generally in modern science, provides better support for the existence of the spiteful and mean-spirited “powers” of ancient mythologies than for a perfect Being.

⁷ *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1, chapter 2, pp. 35-6.