

Marx and Religious Alienation: Remarks Further to *Religion, Hateful Expression and Violence*

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1. Introduction

In the opening chapter of the recent volume *Religion, Hateful Expression and Violence*, Bergsmo refers to the critique contained within Marx' claim in the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (the 'Critique') that religion "is the opium of the people"¹ – that it is a source of passivity in the proletarian struggle for justice: "reducing suffering and providing pleasant illusions that may give hope"². The passage in the *Critique* continues: "it is at once an expression of, and a protest against, real wretchedness"³. This gives an indication that the critique of religion for Marx is a dual one, that occurs on two fronts "at once". The two are intimately linked and, in a way, inextricable from one another. Nevertheless, for the purpose of analysing one in depth, we can attempt to separate them into two strands. The first, highlighted by Bergsmo, is that religion is a source of hope and, by extension, passivity; religion serves as a sedative. The second is that religion is a cause of human alienation. The indication towards this second strand is confirmed earlier in the *Critique* when Marx states that religion is "an inverted self-consciousness"⁴, as well as when he directly alludes to the work of Ludwig Feuerbach: "man makes religion, religion does not make man"⁵. The latter quote echoes the argument Feuerbach makes in his work *The Essence of Christianity*, also discussed by Bergsmo in the aforementioned chapter.

This dual critique, in particular, the strand that states that religion is pacifying, has validity discernible from the real-world examples of religion being used as a force to maintain oppressive structures and to quiet desire for change amongst oppressed classes. This strand of critique has also been widely discussed and often critiqued and countered⁶ from many angles including, notably, lib-

eration theology, a socialist Catholic theological movement directly influenced by Marx, which sought to express his vision for proletarian social and economic emancipation.

These two critiques stem from the broader Marxian conception of religion which, though never delineated explicitly or cohesively, can be extracted from Early Marx⁷ writing on religion, though limited in number,⁸ as well as his more fundamental work on historical materialism,⁹ on the superstructure¹⁰ and, within it, ideology.¹¹ As Bergsmo also notes, Marx conceives of religion as an entity used to maintain dynamics of power in society and preserve class structures, and believes it to be an expression of a more fundamental problem with the very existence of these dynamics and structures

cal, SCM-Canterbury Press, London, 1973; Roberto Goizueta, "Theologies of Liberation", in Lewis Ayres and Medi Ann Volpe (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, Oxford University Press, 2015; Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, translated by Christopher Rowland, SCM Press, London, 2001 (first published in 1973).

⁷ Generally speaking, before *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) by Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx. After 1848, Marx' work becomes less philosophical, and his focus shifts to being primarily concerned with political economy and the material class struggle.

⁸ The mid-1840s is generally understood as when Marx' view on religion crystallized and when he placed greatest emphasis on it in his work. This is notable through several texts including *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844), the *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), and *The Social Principles of Christianity* (1847).

⁹ The Marxist theory of history posits that a society's economic development (the modes of production and exchange, the division of classes and the relationship between these distinct classes) is the driving force that shapes its history. See Friedrich Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific", in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 24, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 2010 (first published in 1880), pp. 306–307.

¹⁰ Historical materialism considers the 'base' of society to be made up of its economic structure and its 'superstructure' to consist of legal, political, social and cultural (including religious) institutions. Under historical materialism, the superstructure is determined by the base. Thus, as the economic structure changes, the institutions of society change, and history is given its shape. See Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy", in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 29, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 2010 (first published in 1859), pp. 263–264.

¹¹ Referring to carefully crafted ideas imposed by the bourgeoisie onto society which are used to preserve class structures and social and economic power more generally. Ideologies are a part of the superstructure. So, under capitalism, as the economic base is corrupt, the ideology that it produces and serves to maintain it is corrupt as well.

¹ Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 2010 (first published in 1844), p. 175. The *Marx and Engels Collected Works* is the complete collection of the writings of Marx, Engels and their co-authored works translated into English. The most recent version was published in 2010 by Lawrence & Wishart (London).

² Morten Bergsmo, "On the Problem of Hateful Expression in the Name of Religion", in Morten Bergsmo and Kishan Manocha (eds.), *Religion, Hateful Expression and Violence*, Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher, Brussels, 2023, p. 1 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/x0h6cl/>).

³ Marx, 2010, p. 175, see *supra* note 1.

⁴ Sometimes alternatively translated as 'world-consciousness'.

⁵ Marx, 2010, p. 175, see *supra* note 1.

⁶ See Alistair Kee, *Seeds of Liberation: Spiritual Dimensions to Politi-*

– a “spiritual manifestation”,¹² to borrow Marx’ own language. The Marxian conception of religion has been critiqued for its lack of universality, in particular, for pertaining to only certain forms of Christianity or for its Eurocentricity.¹³ Nevertheless, given the immense prominence of the critiques Marx put forward, as well as their influence on both thinkers who followed him and the broader discourse on the social functioning and nature of religion, there is merit to exploring them further.

In this policy brief, I will examine the second strand outlined above in more depth, in order to uncover a possible weakness in the Marxian position that religion is a source of ‘alienation’, that stems from our status as rational agents with a developed sense of intellectual agency. To put forward my analysis and ultimately expose a point of weakness in the Marxian position, I will first explain the Marxian notion of ‘alienation’ as a social and psychological ill and outline the critique that religion is a source thereof. Then, I will examine what I call the *doxastic*¹⁴ weakness of his critique, utilizing the notion of rational epistemic¹⁵ agency.

2. Religion and Human Alienation

We must first consider more carefully the notion of ‘alienation’: a Hegelian-turned-Marxian concept that describes the condition of separation of two entities that are meant to be together. In general, these entities are a ‘self’ and, from which it is separated, an ‘other’ that belongs with the original self.

Marx identifies four kinds of alienation that man experiences under capitalism: from the product of labour, the act of labour, from other workers (from one’s community), and from one’s species-essence.¹⁶ Man’s ‘species-essence’, or *Gattungswesen* in the original German, is his human nature. It consists of the uniquely human qualities and capacities he possesses that distinguish him from animals; it can best be understood as our *humanness*.¹⁷

For Marx, ‘alienation’ is an inherently problematic phenomenon that is necessary to overcome,¹⁸ and thus the alleviation of alienation serves as a central tenet to much of his work. It is at once a social ill and a psychological one, occurring both at the level of the individual and society. This idea will perhaps benefit from some illustration. Consider the relationship between an individual and his community: in an ideal society, the individual would be in harmony with his community, live in solidarity with others, cooperate with them, *et cetera* – in Marxian terms, ‘be together with his community’. However, under capitalism, man is forced to be in competition with others in order to succeed or, perhaps more realistically for Marx, survive. This competition leads to isolation and

hostility towards others. In other words, it leads to the individual being *alienated* from his community.

‘Alienation’ from one’s ‘species-essence’, as it concerns only oneself, is more abstract and, for this reason, somewhat convoluted. An example here may assist us. Under ideal conditions, an individual will have a unique set of qualities and values, what he may describe as ‘identity’. They make up his ‘species-essence’ and find unique expression in each person, directing our actions in different ways. Under capitalism, bourgeois ideology creates a set of universal ideals – for example, pertaining to social status and material wealth – which foster conformity among the masses. Every person strives to fulfil these ideals, which causes the individual to lose his own authentic values, aspirations and qualities – ultimately losing his identity. Thus, the individual has become alienated from his ‘species-essence’, as he has become moulded by external forces and his *self* is no longer discernible; he is no longer ‘together’ with this self.

In Marx’ view, ‘alienation’ can be remedied by the ‘bringing together’ of the two separated entities. Regarding alienation from one’s ‘species-essence’, which is our main concern when examining the critique of religion, this ‘bringing together’ requires recognition and exertion of ‘species-essence’. ‘Recognition’ entails seeing one’s unique qualities as one’s own, and ‘exertion’ is, for Marx, tied with labour: under capitalism, all workers experience some degree of ‘alienation’ from their labour. Therefore, pursuant to the Marxian analysis, without a fundamental shift in society’s base, they cannot exert their humanness through non-alienated labour. For this reason, and because labour does not directly pertain to the epistemic realm which my argument is centred on, I will focus on the condition of ‘recognition’.

Having gained a preliminary understanding of Marx’ notion of ‘alienation’, we can now consider the critique that religion causes ‘alienation’ from our ‘species-essence’. This is a critique that Marx took from Feuerbach, who outlined it in *The Essence of Christianity*.¹⁹ Marx considered this critique²⁰ as both the “prerequisite to every critique” and as “essentially done”.²¹ The Feuerbachian position can broadly be sketched as follows: man creates God in his image; in other words, as possessing qualities that are innately human. In this way, God becomes the personification of our ‘species-essence’, rather than its personification being ourselves.

The result of man recognizing his qualities through a projection onto a deity is that man turns to religion in order to learn about the qualities that he himself possesses. Turning to an external source, in this case, religion, means that an individual’s recognition of their ‘species-essence’ is mediated. We have noted the particular importance of this recognition – as it serves as the first condition of alleviating ‘alienation’ from one’s ‘species-essence’. So, for Marx, by mediating the fulfilment of this condition, religion blocks the alleviation of ‘alienation’. This, in effect, makes religion both a source of ‘alienation’ with regard to our ‘species-essence’, and a perpetuating force of this ‘alienation’, as religion both alienates man and blocks its alleviation. This, we have noted, is inherently troublesome for Marx, and is a reason for him to call on humanity

¹² Marx, 2010, p. 176, see *supra* note 1.

¹³ José Juan Osés Bermejo, “Durkheim, Religion, and the Postcolonial Critique of Sociology’s Eurocentrism”, in *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 2023, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 3–5.

¹⁴ Relating to belief – from the Greek *doxa*. The term ‘doxastic’ refers to the sub-field of epistemology which concerns belief, its formation and its justification.

¹⁵ Relating to knowledge and the faculties that allow us to obtain it. For further discussion on the term and how it is used, see Matthias Steup and Ram Neta, ‘Epistemology’, in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2020 (available on the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy’s web site).

¹⁶ See Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts”, in *id.*, 2010, pp. 270–281, see *supra* note 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 274–276.

¹⁸ It has been argued that ‘alienation’ for Marx is a charged term, a thick description, and that its very employment is a “call for a revolutionary transformation” (Gajo Petrović, “The Philosophical and Sociological Relevance of Marx’ Concept of Alienation”, in Nicholas Lobkowitz (ed.), *Marx and the Western World*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1967, p. 134).

¹⁹ The Feuerbachian critique is outlined and discussed by Bergsmo in his chapter in *Religion, Hateful Expression and Violence*, 2023, see *supra* note 2.

²⁰ Specifically, that concerning religion as an alienating force. He discusses elsewhere that it is not wholly complete as it did not address the social causes of religion. See Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 5, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 2010 (first published in 1845–1847), pp. 6–11; Jonathan Wolff, *Why Read Marx Today?*, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 19–20.

²¹ Marx, 2010, pp. 3–103, see *supra* note 1.

to do away with religion.²²

It is here that the other strand described above becomes notable. Religion is able to serve the purpose of providing solace to an alienated proletariat, and simultaneously is in itself a force that alienates the very people who seek in it a remedy. In this way, the two distinct strands cannot truly come apart. The self-reinforcing nature that the relationship between religion and ‘alienation’ has for Marx gives us reason to analyse further the idea that religion is alienating.

3. Examining the Doxastic Weakness of Marx’ Critique

While *prima facie* the Feuerbachian critique (adopted by Marx) has been of great consequence, and it is clear why the practice of projecting our qualities away from ourselves would be an alienating one, examining this line of argument more closely may allow us to glean a potential weakness stemming from epistemic²³ agency in general, and, in particular, our individual capacity as rational and autonomous epistemic agents. This is in part an attempt to show that in much Marxian²⁴ and Marxist²⁵ literature there may be an underestimation – or at least an underemphasis – on the epistemic capacity of individuals in general, and of religious communities in particular.

To put forward this account, we must first gain a general understanding of the notion of ‘epistemic agency’. Sometimes called *indirect* doxastic voluntarism,²⁶ epistemic agency “concerns the ways in which we may acquire or revise beliefs by doing research, evaluating the evidence, considering opposing opinions, and so on”.²⁷ It is generally agreed that these are capacities that we possess as rational, autonomous agents.²⁸

Epistemic agency, which includes doxastic agency,²⁹ entails these capacities.³⁰ Given that by virtue of being rational agents we possess epistemic agency, then our possession of these epistemic capacities is a natural consequence of our rational agency. So, we can see that our rational agency seems to entail a number of capacities relating to the formation and maintenance of our beliefs. Some have been previously mentioned, but two further capacities are

²² On other readings, the Marxian position is that religion will wither away naturally as history progresses. This is a debated topic in Marxist scholarship linked to the discussion regarding the deterministic nature of historical materialism. For further discussion, see Paul Froese, “Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why An Atheistic Monopoly Failed”, in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2004, vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 35–50.

²³ See *supra* note 15.

²⁴ Referring to the thought and work of Marx himself.

²⁵ Referring to the political and economic ideology that emerged from the work of Marx and Engels. The term generally also denotes other notable post-Marx Marxists and those that followed them.

²⁶ Doxastic voluntarism refers to the idea that we have voluntary control over our beliefs. ‘Indirect doxastic voluntarism’, in this case, denotes that this control is not one of the direct acquisition of beliefs, but rather a control over *how* we form these beliefs.

²⁷ Markus Schlosser, “Agency”, in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2019 (available on the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy’s web site).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Doxastic agency is encompassed by epistemic agency, but relates entirely to beliefs and their formation, rather than other forms of knowledge.

³⁰ See *supra* note 14. We can consider epistemic capacity as entailing doxastic capacity as we can broadly sketch the concept of ‘knowledge’ as a form of justified true belief (Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa and Matthias Steup, “The Analysis of Knowledge”, in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2018 (available on the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy’s web site)).

noteworthy for the discussion at hand: our capacity to separate the origin and justification of our beliefs and our capacity to justify (at least some of) our beliefs internally. The origin of a belief is simply the source from which we encounter and develop the belief, and its justification is the reason we maintain and continue to hold it. Thus, the capacity to separate the origin of a belief from its justification is a consequence of the capacity to justify beliefs internally.

These are capacities that we can reasonably assume to hold as rational agents.³¹ A *lack* of these capacities would entail that the agent adopts beliefs for non-epistemic reasons, for example, because of the position of the source of the belief. To adopt a belief for solely non-epistemic reasons is contradictory to epistemic agency, which, as we have seen, it is widely agreed that we possess as rational agents. An example may be helpful to illustrate these capacities: for a young child (who we would not consider a fully rational agent),³² it is not uncommon to hold beliefs simply because of their origin – typically because of their parents. However, as we grow into adulthood, in other words, as we become rational agents, we tend to cease to doxastically function like this, and when we justify our beliefs, we do so not purely based on their origin: we consider things internally before we come to hold a belief. By its nature as an internal process, we can consider internal justification to be a task of reflection.

So, the process of a rational agent coming to form a belief requires a level of reflection – that occurs in order to justify these beliefs. This crucially points to a weakness in the Marxian critique: the belief in God that is outlined as alienating, first by Feuerbach and later by Marx, concerns a belief connected to the set of qualities that constitute our ‘species-essence’ – in particular, the fact that our recognition of these qualities is mediated, or interrupted. By their reasoning, ridding ourselves of this mediation – religion – is the only way to overcome this ‘alienation’.³³ However, we have noted that the condition for overcoming ‘alienation’ from our ‘species-essence’ involves recognizing it as our own. As autonomous rational agents with epistemic agency, when we engage in the process of coming to hold beliefs regarding the qualities that make up our ‘species-essence’, this process requires the act of reflection on our behalf. This action of reflection clearly entails recognition: we cannot reflect on an idea that we do not first recognize. Because we must first reflect on our ‘species-essence’, we must also recognize it – recognition being, as we have noted, one of the conditions of being ‘together’ with – in other words, not alienated from – our ‘species-essence’. So, relying on our epistemic agency, we can alleviate the concern of religion mediating the recognition of our ‘species-essence’, thereby causing our ‘alienation’ therefrom.

Now, to rely so greatly on the notion of epistemic agency may raise concern, as it may seem that emphasizing on fostering agency over our beliefs in order to alleviate alienation from ‘species-essence’ forces us to defend a form of *direct* doxastic voluntarism. Direct doxastic voluntarism, in short, maintains that we can fully choose our beliefs.³⁴ This is a radical view that should be, and wide-

³¹ Sometimes referred to in epistemological literature as ‘intellectual virtues’. See, for example, Jason Bealer, “Character Virtues, Knowledge, and Epistemic Agency: A Debate with Ernest Sosa”, in Mark Alfano (ed.), *Current Controversies in Virtue Theory*, Routledge, London, 2015, pp. 74–87.

³² There is an abundance of literature concerning the non-status of children as rational agents. See, for example, Aaron Ben-Zeev, “Who Is a Rational Agent?”, in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 1982, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 647–661.

³³ Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto”, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 6, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 2010 (first published in 1848), pp. 503–504.

³⁴ Murray Clarke, “Doxastic Voluntarism and Forced Belief”, in *Philo-*

ly is,³⁵ rejected, for it is highly implausible to claim that we can simply decide whether or not to, say, believe in God – this counters the rationality we possess as *rational* agents. To rationally form beliefs, we must utilize the capacities that make us rational agents – we consider evidence or expertise, evaluate opposing beliefs, and so on. To simply decide on one’s beliefs goes against the stages necessary for rational doxastic formulation. It is for this reason that within post-Cartesian³⁶ epistemological discourse, direct doxastic voluntarism is considered somewhat inconceivable. However, emphasizing the importance of agency over beliefs, we may seem to fall into this highly implausible position – for choosing to believe something is the highest form of epistemic agency.

To overcome this challenge, we must emphasize the capacity noted above that is a consequence of being a rational agent: the ability to separate the origin of our beliefs from their justification. To defend direct doxastic voluntarism would be to claim that all beliefs must both originate and be entirely justified through an internal process. This is not the claim I am making, nor is it a plausible one. Rather, I wish to point out the inextricable link between religious beliefs and a recognition of our ‘species-essence’ that comes about because of the necessity of internal justification. We can see this using the following reasoning: religious beliefs are generally a type of belief that find their origin externally — we tend to adopt religious beliefs after discovering them from an external source. This ‘adoption’ will require a degree of internal justification because the epistemic capacity of rational agents – which we can broadly consider all adult individuals to be – does not allow for the blind adoption of external beliefs, or, in other words, the adoption of beliefs for non-epistemic reasons. This internal justification, that we can assume occurs, necessitates a level of reflection on these beliefs and thus a reflection on our ‘species-essence’ and, by extension, a recognition of our ‘species-essence’.

Thus, we can consider this recognition a true one and see the condition of recognition – the first to overcoming ‘alienation’ for our ‘species-essence’ – fulfilled.

It is possible that certain characteristics of particular religious structures do not encourage or facilitate the use and development of our rational doxastic capacities, and, in fact, that there may be some that actively discourage it; one that relies on substantial religious hierarchy may be an example. However, the capacities of internal justification and, as part of it, reflection are nevertheless abilities innate to rational agents that adult human beings are. The link we have made above between reflection and recognition, and the emphasis Marx placed on recognition with regard to being ‘together’ with one’s ‘species-essence’ helps us to see the link between internal justification and coming together with our ‘species-essence’. Where the capacities associated with epistemic agency are exer-

cised, we can conclude, then, the above point of weakness in the critique that religion serves as a source of ‘alienation’.

4. Conclusion

To briefly sum up the discussion, we have noted the centrality of ‘alienation’ to the Marxian social critique at large and the critique of religion in particular. Having understood the somewhat abstract notion of a ‘species-essence’ and the social and psychological challenge that ‘alienation’ therefrom poses, we considered the Feuerbachian argument adopted by Marx that religion is a force that alienates man from his ‘species-essence’ by making individuals recognize their human qualities as foreign, deified characteristics. Following our consideration of this line of thought, we examined more closely the epistemic and doxastic underpinning of the Feuerbachian argument, which allowed us to glean that it underestimates the now-widely agreed upon set of capacities entailed by our status as rational agents. Finally, we noted that when placing appropriate emphasis on our rational capacities and epistemic agency, there is a necessary link between religious belief and the recognition of our ‘species-essence’.

The purpose of this policy brief has not been to claim that there is no merit or validity to the Marxian analysis and critique of religion. As stated in my introduction, there are many recognizable practical instances of religion maintaining oppressive structures or being used for personal gain. However, what we have been able to glean is that due to an underestimation of our epistemic agency, the argument of religion as a source of ‘alienation’ may fail to take into account the reflection necessary for rational epistemic agents to form beliefs.

As Bergsmo points out, in a certain sense, Marx with his critique of religion is an intellectual forerunner of the current discussion regarding the link between freedom of expression and freedom of belief. The area of religious ‘alienation’ and its connection with our ‘species-essence’ feels especially pertinent in the present discussion on hate speech, both when religious communities are the targets of hate speech and when they are its source. In the former context, examining this area allows us to glean insight into how such speech may assail the set of beliefs inextricable from a community’s understanding of their selves and their selfhood. In the latter, this examination causes us to become aware of the agency that is at play and call into question whether it is fostered; that is, whether it lies in the hands of the individual or the religious structure he finds himself in – usually a hierarchical one. The relationship between the current discussion on hate speech and the critique of religious ‘alienation’ being so, a greater understanding of the Marxian convictions can only extend our appreciation of the dynamics involved.

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sophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition, 1986, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 39–40.

³⁵ Schlosser, 2019, see *supra* note 27.

³⁶ Descartes is often considered the most notable proponent of direct doxastic voluntarism, and those that have followed or accepted his position in the centuries since his fourth Meditation are few and far between. See Clarke, 1986, p. 39, *supra* note 35.



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