

# Opium as Dialectics of Religion: Metaphor, Expression and Protest

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This is the premise of a Marxian analysis of religion: “Religion...is the opium of the people”. But what does it mean to equate religion with opium? For most twenty-first century readers, opium means something quite simple and obvious, and the comparison between the two terms seems perfectly literal. Opium is a drug that kills pain, distorts reality, and an artificial source of solace to which some poor souls can become addicted; so also religion.

Friedrich Nietzsche argues that the ‘true’ or literal meaning of a word is one “to which one has become accustomed due to frequent use... a metaphor... whose metaphorical nature has been forgotten” (1995:72). Through the “interminable repetition” of the phrase in Marxian analyses of religion (O’Toole 1984:68), “opium of the people” has lost its metaphorical sense. Even when readers of “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction” encounter the text as a dialectical analysis of religion, their understanding is governed— and loses its dialectical force— by a literal and presentist reading of this central metaphor.

In what is quite possibly the greatest work of Marxist literary theory, Frederic Jameson argues that

...texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend [them] through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand-new—

through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions (Jameson 1981:9).

Few texts come before us more always-already-read than the beginning pages of “Towards a Critique”. In order to re-read Marx’s analysis of religion in this text, we need first of all to disrupt the truth of our received literal understandings of “opium of the people”, and dig through the sedimented layers that have accumulated since 1843. While this will not provide us with the “True” meaning of the text, if we fail to do so, our reading of the text will inevitably become yet another ritual repetition, reinforcing the received reading of the text, further repressing the metaphor and ironing out the dialectics of the text. This received reading turns Marx into a minor disciple of Feuerbach, and provides a gently politicized account of the latter’s view of religion.

I will begin rethinking this seminal text first by destabilizing our understanding of opium; looking briefly at Europe in the nineteenth century, I will propose several different –and contradictory– senses of “opium” in the middle of that century. This will give us the space to re-think the larger text in which the metaphor occurs, to encounter the text dialectically, including the dialectical metaphor that is the heart and spirit of Marx’s analysis of religion.

### Opium and the People of the nineteenth century

In Europe, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, opium was largely an unquestioned good. Such was its importance as a medicine that in the first years of the nineteenth century, people would have understood “opium of the people” as something we could translate into twentieth century idiom as “penicillin of the people”. By the end of the century, however, its medical uses had largely been supplanted by other medicines,

and medical and moral puritans effectively demonized opium. It is between these two periods that Marx penned opium as his metaphor for religion. In 1843, it is an ambiguous, multidimensional and contradictory metaphor, expressing both the earlier and later understandings of the fruit of the poppy.

‘Opium at present is in great esteem, and is one of the most valuable of all the simple medicines’: thus the Encyclopedia Britannica (1st ed. 1771) expresses the late 18th and early nineteenth century attitudes and beliefs about opium. Small doses are medically useful. Moderate doses can make a person somewhat intoxicated, “bold and above the fear of danger; for which reason the Turks always take it when going into battle” (1771). In 1820s England, there were somewhere between 16,000 and 26,000 completely unregulated opium sellers (Berridge and Edwards 1980:25). Because it was relatively inexpensive and used for such a wide range of ailments, every British home had laudanum in the cupboard (Butel 1995:37); its use was so common that, as one writer suggests, “[o]pium itself was ‘the opiate of the people’ ” (ibid). Opium “use in the early decades of the century was quite normal...it was not... a ‘problem’ ” (Berridge and Edwards 1980:37). The concept of addiction had not even been formulated.

Between the 1830s and 1850s, opposition to opium-use grew, particularly from the newly formed ‘temperance’ and ‘public health’ movements. The problem was expounded as concern over longevity and baby doping but also over ‘luxurious’, or as we would now say “recreational use”. Government inquiries followed, the most famous of which was Edwin Chadwick’s (1842) *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population* (Berridge and Edwards 1980:77). The physicians and their allies in the temperance movements conjured ‘opium poisoning’ (which had long been recognized as

*possible* with ‘very immoderate doses’) into an epidemic. Despite this nascent censure, opium continued to be widely accepted, and as late as the 1860s, up to 20% of *all* medicines sold in England were opium based (ibid).

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the movements against the opium trade, and intemperance, and for public health, joined forces with the medical inebriety experts. With the constitution of a new knowledge-régime (Foucault 1980:109-33) came the concept of ‘opium addiction’, a truth with both a medical and a moral component (Berridge and Edwards 1980). Not only did Parliament grant control over opium-use to the physicians and pharmacists, but in 1891 it also called a halt the ‘morally indefensible’ opium trade, even if the official opium trade would last another two decades, until the international treaties of 1907 (Butel 1995:376-403).

What then, could “opium” have meant in 1843, for Marx and for his readers? Metaphors draw a comparison between two things, in order to provide a new way of looking at one or both of them. They are unstable, fluid, and polysemic— and an unavoidable dimension of Marx’s writing (Kemple 1995). More than one meaning can be compressed into a metaphor, and these meanings change over time. This prevents us, at the very outset from describing the singular meaning of any metaphor. I suggest here several connotations of “opium” that would have been relevant in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century<sup>1</sup>: opium was a medicine (albeit one with significant, newly discovered ‘problems’); it was a source of enormous profit (which also provoked protest and rebellion); finally, it was a source of ‘utopian’ visions. Here I will sketch out these meanings of opium in the mid-nineteenth century, and forgo elaborating their theoretical import until later.

Medicine, not recreational use, was the most common use for opium in the first half of the nineteenth century, and opium was a medicine of utmost significance. Physicians and surgeons prescribed opium to their patients, while working-class people (who rarely encountered a doctor) administered the drug to themselves (Berridge and Edwards 1980:28). Opium was an important pain reliever, but was also used for *curing* diseases. We routinely distinguish between these two aspects of a medicine; nobody in the middle part of the century would have made such a firm distinction. It was prescribed for ‘fatigue and depression’, sleeplessness, rheumatism, ‘women’s ailments’, fevers, diabetes (ibid: 31), and was regarded as an extremely useful styptic. Opium was used as a treatment for all matter of bronchial infections, including pneumonia, bronchitis and tuberculosis (67). The most important use for opium was as a treatment for diarrhea, dysentery, and cholera; during the European cholera epidemics of 1831-32 and again in 1849-53 its use was ‘virtually unchallenged’ as *the only effective* treatment for this deadly disease (Berridge and Edwards 1980:67).

That opium was an important medicine was a given for Marx. As a means of coping with *his* various illnesses, Marx himself used opium. Along with other “medicines” such as creosote and arsenic, regular opium use became more important as a means for ridding himself of the carbuncles which caused him so much suffering in later life (McLellan 1973:337; Regnault 1933).

While Opium was an important medicine in mid nineteenth century Europe, it was not a medicine without its ‘social problems’. Two of these stand out in particular. The first is a concern with the purity of the opium in the marketplaces in the pharmacies and in household cupboards. The second was the concern over ‘baby doping’.

Adulterated opium was a common concern throughout much of the nineteenth century, since it led to very irregular doses, and highly adulterated opium would not be effective (Berridge and Edwards 1980:87-93). In a footnote of *Capital: Volume 1*, Marx writes:

From the reports of last Parliamentary Commission on adulteration of means of subsistence, it will be seen that the adulteration even of medicines is the rule, not the exception in England. Eg., the examination of 34 specimens of opium purchased at many different chemists in London showed that 31 were adulterated with poppy heads, wheat flour, gum, clay, sand, &c. Several did not contain an atom of morphia (1967:601).

The location of the text, in the midst of a section on the poor dietary condition of the working class, is important. Given the tendency in capitalist society to cut every possible corner in pursuit of profit, petit bourgeois merchants were cheating sick people out of medicine that they badly needed.

In the nineteenth century, opium-based medicines were commonly used for children, and there were many brands marketed specifically for children's use. A very partial list of those sold in England includes Godfrey's Cordial, Dalby's Carminative, Daffy's Elixir, Atkinsons's Infants Preservative, Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrop, Slowe's Infants Preservative and Street's Infant Quietness (Berridge and Edwards 1980:98-99). The name of the last of these, Street's Infant Quietness suggests one of the common uses for opium-based elixirs. In Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx writes that

...the high death rates are, apart from local causes, principally due to the employment of mothers away from their homes, and to the neglect and maltreatment, consequent on their absence, such as, among others, insufficient nourishment, unsuitable food, and dosing with opiates (Marx 1967:398).

While this passage draws primarily on a government report from 1861, Engels wrote about infant-doping in *The Condition of the Working Classes in England* (1845) and it

had begun to be seen as a social problem beginning in the 1830s (Berridge and Edwards 1980:97-105). Unlike many of the liberal reformers, Marx and Engels don't blame 'bad mothers' or the ignorance of the working class for infant doping. First, the declining standard of living among the working classes made it necessary for women to work in the factories, leaving their infants at home, or in the care of a babysitter. These working class babysitters were reputed to use opium-based cordials to keep the many children in their care quiet (Marx and Engels 1975, vol.4: 399, 402-3,437). Secondly, while Marx was concerned about the adulteration of opium for the sake of profit, he and Engels also argued that profit-driven pharmacists promoted the inappropriate use of opiates for children—once again for the sake of profit.

In addition to the important uses and abuses of opium as medicine in the nineteenth century, opium had wider economic, political and cultural significance. Opium was an extremely important commodity, particularly for the British Empire, as well as a cause for the two Opium Wars. Finally, it had an important relation to cultural and intellectual life—especially as exemplified through the lives and work of the Romantic poets.

For the British Empire, for example, trading opium was a very lucrative venture, generating a seventh of the British-Indian government's total revenue. So crucial were these trading arrangements that the British army fought two Opium Wars against the Chinese government in order to defend them. The first war broke out in 1839 and ended with the treaty of Nanking in 1842, the year before Marx penned his 'opium of the people' epithet. A second war was fought between 1856 and 1860; however many people (including Marx) had anticipated it several years earlier. Marx' (and Engels')

writings on the opium trade and opium wars during the 1850s, all of which appeared in the *New York Daily Tribune*, were concerned primarily with ‘opium’ as an instance of economic imperialism.

The British-Chinese conflict was regularly called the ‘Opium War’ throughout Europe, as well as in Marx and Engels’ writings (Marx and Engels 1975, vol.12:93, vol.15:282,354, vol.16:14); even to say “opium” in the year after the end of the first Opium War is to conjure-up images of massive social conflict. In 1853, Marx went so far as to argue that the increasing use of opium in China was the primary cause of an emerging anti-imperialist war. The irony was not lost on Marx when he wrote that ‘the occasion of this outbreak is unquestionably been afforded by the English canon forcing upon China that soporific drug called opium.’ (1975 vol.12:93). Opium is not only a trope for conflict, but it implied certain oppositional groups, and a certain oppositional rhetoric about the trade. In China, Marx notes that opium use and trade were legally a ‘heresy’ (Marx and Engels 1975 vol.16:19), the implication being that opium use was opposed on religious grounds, as was the trade itself in England.

Opium also had its recreational users. Like ether for William James, hashish for Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch, and LSD in the Sixties, opium provided a glimpse of “another reality” for mid-nineteenth century intellectuals, artists and poets. The meanings associated with these visions circulated so commonly in the nineteenth century that they would have been difficult to ignore. Especially prominent were the visions of the English Romantics who were also heavy opium users: De Quincey, Coleridge, Shelley, and Byron. The ‘opium-eating’ habits of the first two were particularly well known, and while Marx discusses in many places De Quincey’s economic writing, he was best known

throughout Europe as the author of an autobiographical book, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821).

Particularly striking about this opium-inspired poetry is its visions of ‘no-places’ that are at the same time ‘good-places’, reflecting St. Thomas More’s constructed etymology of ‘Utopia’ (Goux 1990). M.H. Abrams, in his important study of the opium poets, writes: “This fantastic land is not the fleeting shadow of an ordinary dream, but is a reality nearly as vivid as actual experience” (1971:5). Admittedly, the visions of the “opium romantics” are often enigmatic, and are only in part visions of a ‘good place’. Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’ contains images of destruction, chaos, and war, and some of De Quincey’s visions, especially in part II of *The Confessions* (1956:291-332) are positively haunting. They remain undeveloped, or *as yet* incomplete utopian visions (Bloch 1964).

Opium had a complex history in the nineteenth century, and yet when we, early twenty-first century readers encounter “opium of the people”, we read it in a straightforward, literal, (and uniformly negative) manner that is alien to Marx’s time. In other words, we read opium as people who have learned to think about opium in a world after the puritanical prohibitions against opium use have become naturalized. By drawing a parallel between religion and opium, Marx alludes to all of the mid-nineteenth century connotations that opium would have had for his readers. Any reading of “Towards a Critique” must deal with the complexity and ambivalence of this metaphor.

## Towards a Reading of Marx's Critique of Right: Introduction

Having destabilized the “truth” of our established understanding of religion as opium, or at least having put it into question, we can now turn to take a closer look at “Towards a Critique”. In order to grasp Marx’s text dialectically, it is easier to work backwards, that is, to start with the reflections on the dialectics of the proletariat; only then can we really deal with the beginning of the text, where we encounter the dialectics of religion.

The primary theoretical contribution of “Towards a Critique” concerns not religion, but the role of the proletariat in the dialectical overcoming of the current state of society. After surveying the “present” state of Prussia (1843), Marx asks: “So where is the real possibility of German emancipation?” His answer?

We answer: in the formation of a class with radical chains, a class in civil society that is not a class of civil society, of a social group that is the dissolution [*Auflösung*] of all social groups, of a sphere that has a universal character because of its universal sufferings and lays claim to no particular right, because it is the object of no particular injustice but of injustice in general...It is... a sphere that cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating these other spheres themselves. In a word, it is the complete loss of humanity and thus can only recover itself by a complete redemption of humanity. This dissolution of society, as a particular class, is the proletariat.

... When the proletariat declares the dissolution of the hitherto existing world order, it merely declares the secret of its own existence, since it is in fact the dissolution of this order. When it demands the negation of private property, it is only laying down as a principle for society what society has laid down as a principle for the proletariat, what has already been incorporated in itself without its consent as the negative result of society (Marx 1977:72-73).

Marx’s dialectical method is enormously complex, and cannot simply be reduced to the schema developed by British Hegelians at the turn of the century, and sometimes

incorporated into Marxist writings: it is not simply “thesis, antithesis and synthesis”. This schema, especially when applied to Marx, usually simply covers more than it reveals. The passage just quoted helps us come to grips with two of the senses active in Marx’s writings, and these will be helpful for us in understanding the religion passages.

While Marx never explicitly refers to *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1994), here we find an account of the dialectics of Proletarian and Bourgeois that is strikingly reminiscent of Hegel’s story of the Master and Slave (1994: §189-196)<sup>2</sup>. Marx argues that it is only because of its universal exploitation, the universal suffering of the proletariat, that this is the group that embodies the potential to transform itself, and with it, the whole set of social relations that make up “this society”. By transforming society, it transforms itself, and while it transforms society, it transforms itself. For Marx, these are not separable from one another. In short, dialectical logic points, not to the stasis of being, but rather to *becoming*, through overcoming contradictions: it is only because of the universal chains that universal emancipation becomes possible.

When the proletariat demands “the negation of private property” (Marx 1977: 73), it declares the secret of its own existence, both as the essence of this society, and of the new communist society. The proletariat dialectically overcomes its status as propertyless through the abolition of private property, thereby abolishing the proletariat itself, and making propertylessness into something very different. A class without private property is in seed form the same as, and yet totally different from, a society without property. *Aufheben* is the key dialectical term for both Hegel and Marx. For Marx it indicates the way “in which negation and preservation (affirmation) are brought together” ([1844] 2002:87). While Engels cannot usually be trusted for his interpretation of Marx’s

dialectic, he nonetheless provides a useful gloss on *Aufhebung* as a philosophical term. He suggests that it means “‘Overcome and Preserved’; overcome as regards form, and preserved as real content” (Engels [1877] 1969:166). Denys Turner (1991) suggests that the contradiction between form and content are crucial to the problem of religion in Marx. For this reason, Engels’ formulation is helpful for making sense of one way that *Aufhebung* operates in this text, even if it cannot be taken as the *only* means by which overcome and preserved can be related, even in this text<sup>3</sup>.

In the conclusion to “Towards a Critique” (Marx 1977:73), Marx points to a similar dialectical relationship between philosophy and the proletariat. Philosophy finds in the proletariat its material weapons, and the proletariat finds its intellectual weapons in philosophy. He continues: “Philosophy cannot realize itself without transcending [*Aufhebung*] the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot transcend [*aufheben*] itself without realizing philosophy.”

The dialectical relations of the proletariat to society and to philosophy helps us to begin unraveling the logic of Marx’s thinking on religion, and to see how he dialectically overcomes the work of Feuerbach. Marx begins “Towards a Critique” with an introductory sentence, “the criticism of religion is essentially complete, and the criticism of religion is the presupposition of all criticism”, followed by a two-paragraph summary of Feuerbach’s analysis of religion. While this is usually read as part of Marx’s analysis, Feuerbach could have written most of the material here himself (*The Essence of Christianity* (1957), *Philosophy of the Future* (1972)). Marx’s only addition comes where he begins to critique Feuerbach for his abstract conception of religion: “[Religion in the Young Hegelians’ thinking] is the imaginary realization of the human essence, because

the human essence possesses no true reality. Thus, the struggle against religion is indirectly the struggle against the world whose spiritual aroma is religion". The struggle demands that we be concrete; our struggle is with "this state, this society" not with the Essence of Man.

Most readers of Marx, sensitive to his indebtedness to Feuerbach, and his early participation in the *Doctorklub*, unwittingly end up treating "Towards a Critique" as a minor contribution to the Left-Hegelian critiques of religion (Rojo 1988), a mere supplement to Feuerbach's work. While Marx certainly is indebted to Feuerbach's writing, this text is an *Aufhebung* of the latter's writings. Feuerbach developed a "theological" critique of religion, but Marx is here moving beyond Feuerbach's "abstract" conception of religion, to one that focuses on "this state, this society" which produces religion—rather than seeing the "superman" in the sky as a reflection of Man's essence, since "the human essence has no reality". In other words, Marx takes issue with Feuerbach's abstract essence of man as much as with his abstract "essence of religion", which in Feuerbach are conceptually inseparable. As Marx writes in his "Theses on Feuerbach": "Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations" (Marx 1977b: 157). I will return to this point later, arguing that to treat religion as an essential or reified category is to violate the terms and the spirit of Marx's concrete analysis. "Marxian" analyses of religion that analyze the "essence" of religion (rather than concrete social relations) have far more in common with Feuerbach than with Marx.

For Marx, the criticism of religion, although essentially finished (175), is not an end in itself, but rather a means (177). Marx's concern is to take the latest developments of Hegelian philosophy, and turn them into praxis-oriented critique of the social world, one rooted in the "*categorical imperative* to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being". Thus, *Towards a Critique* is not primarily a "philosophical" text. The point of the text is not that "Man makes religion, religion does not make man"—this was Feuerbach's thesis and his claim to fame—but rather to overcome the situation in which human beings are enchained (Thesis 11, *etceteras*). The philosophical point is here but a premise or an "assumption" (*Voraussetzung*) from which Marx proceeds.

Marx's own analysis begins in the fourth paragraph:

Religious suffering is at the same time an expression [*Ausdruck*] of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.

The [*Aufhebung*] of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions of their condition is a demand to give up a condition that requires illusion. The criticism of religion is therefore the germ of the criticism of the valley of tears whose halo is religion.

Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chains not so that man may throw away the chains without any imagination or comfort, but so that he may throw away the chains and pluck living flowers. The criticism of religion disillusioned man so that he may think, act, and fashion his own reality as a disillusioned man come to his sense; so that he may revolve around himself as his real sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself (Marx 1977:64; translation emended as noted, emphasis original).

These passages begin with an essentially dialectical logic. Religious suffering, is both "expression of" and "protest against", both of which Marx highlights by underlining. He

further underlines their “simultaneity, when he writes that they are expressed *in einem* and repeats another time *und in einem*”; together they comprise a single moment, and an indivisible whole (Rojo 1988:214). Sergio Rojo writes,

The characteristic of the definition which Marx gives to the two terms "expression of real suffering and protest and against real suffering" constitutes a dialectical relation, an unstable equilibrium, which mutually influence each other, even if, historically, one aspect has prevailed over the other (1988:210; my translation).

Unlike in Feuerbach’s analysis, religion is not an “abstract” expression of the human essence. Rather, expanding on the “expression”, he highlights the social dimension by writing that religion is the spirit and heart of a spiritless, heartless social situation, where religion is a sigh that bears witness to oppression.

Marx’s underlining (expression, protest, opium), suggests that “opium” is the dialectical culmination of the movement from expression-and-protest to opium. Opium, then is the moment of *aufheben* “in which negation and preservation (affirmation) are brought together” ([1844] 2002:87). The “traditional” readings of religion as “opium of the people” neglect the context and dialectical movement, in which opium, as a condensed signifier, brings together both expression and protest in one moment. Opium is already a metaphor; Marx’s use of it in this context highlights these multiple significations of the term, and forces us to look at them dialectically: opium/religion as expression *and* protest.

In the nineteenth century opium expressed the immiserization of the people. Opium use increased with declining conditions for the working class: more health problems, and the outbreaks of epidemics such as cholera. As Engels, for example, pointed out in *The Condition of the English Working Class* (1845), declining health was directly related to the ravages of capitalist relations. Opium thus ‘expressed’ in an

indirect way the ravages of capitalism on the health and well being of the population, but most particularly the workers. Similarly, the “dosing” of children with opium, expressed the miserable lot working class children, due to their parents prolonged and ever increasing hours of labor outside the home (Marx and Engels 1975, vol.4: 399, 402-3,437).

*Ausdruck* means “expression”, something ex-pressed, squeezed-out. As an important commodity, opium was pressed out of poppies, but it was also the product of labor squeezed out of peasant workers, and sold at great profit by European capitalists. Marx recognized that religion was increasingly becoming a commodity, rupturing its traditional imbeddedness in Feudal relations, and becoming thoroughly imbedded, not just as an element of the cultural “superstructure”, but also as a commodity, sold on an open market (see, most (in)famously, *On the Jewish Question*). Religion today, even more than in Marx’s day is both expressed as a commodity, and expresses the topsy-turvy relations of capitalist society. As Theodor Adorno puts it:

Religion is on sale, as it were. It is cheaply marketed in order to provide one more so-called irrational stimulus among many others by which the members of a calculating society are calculatingly made to forget the calculation under which they suffer” (1992: 294).

Religion in this aspect is not “superstructure” (insofar as this is a useful term), but part and parcel of economic production and exchange. It is this distinctive character of religion in capitalist social formations that makes the tools of neo-classical economics some utility in comprehending the social logic of religion. By neglecting, however to situate their analysis in a broader conception of capitalism per se—that is, by failing to understand religious or economic markets as socio-historical phenomena, the rational choice theorists miss the big picture entirely.

This expression, also leads to protest and conflict, something sorely neglected in most Marxian understandings of religion. The Opium trade with China (enforced by canons) occasioned protest, first among the Evangelicals and Quakers in Britain, and also became the source of two major wars between China and Great Britain, the first of which had only recently ended in 1843. It bears repeating that Marx himself articulated this as a dialectical relation when he wrote, “the occasion of this outbreak has unquestionably been afforded by the English cannon forcing upon China that soporific drug called opium” (Marx and Engels 1975 vol.12: 93). If we attend only to the “soporific” effects of religion, we miss an important part of the picture, the allusion to the potential for religion to induce conflict, robbing the text of its dialectical thrust.

If opium was an important medicine, the social forms into which it was inserted—capitalism in the broadest sense—characterized by baby doping, shameless profiteering and warmongering, were and continue to be oppressive, situations with neither heart nor spirit. I quoted Engels earlier, when he defines *Aufheben* as “ ‘Overcome and Preserved’; overcome as regards form, and preserved as real content” (Engels [1877] 1969:166). It is the form of relations in which opium is embedded, the contradiction between form and content, which must be overcome.

“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the spirit of a spiritless situation” (Marx 1977:64). The object of Marx’s critique is not the sigh (though this is a product of the situation), heart, or spirit. The Left-Hegelians’s theological critiques attempt to deal with this “content”, with religion *an sich* in abstraction from its social forms; Marx’s critique, by contrast, is thoroughly *in situ*; it is

“this state, this society” which are the object of his critique. The content in this dialectical phrase is in fact preserved, at least in seed form.

For Marx, religion is to be *aufheben*, not simply “abolished”. Most of the English language versions of “Towards a Critique” translate *aufheben* in a theoretically preconceived fashion. When Marx calls for the *aufheben* of philosophy, or the proletariat, the translators use words that indicate a positive overcoming, for example, “transcend”, or “supercede”. When Marx calls for the *aufheben* of religion, there is a marked tendency for translators to choose “abolish” (Marx 1963,1975, 1977, 1983). This is a legitimate choice of words for a translator, but as readers unless we see *aufheben*, and recognize the dialectical thought beneath the translation, we are quite likely to miss Marx’s dialectical argument.

The [*Aufhebung*] of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions of their condition is a demand to give up a condition that requires illusion. The criticism of religion is therefore the germ of the criticism of the valley of tears whose halo is religion (Marx 1977: 64).

It may be, as the argument usually goes, that this illusory happiness forestalls the motivation for emancipation. But following in the wake of the opium metaphor, we need to think of these illusions as “utopian” openings, visions of another world, “an ordinary dream, but [nonetheless] a reality nearly as vivid as actual experience” (Abrams 1971:5). Engels gave the idea of “Utopia” a bad name, most famously in his *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* ([1880] 1954), but he had long held such a view, and it was a position to which Marx moved in the late 1840s. Nonetheless in *Towards a Critique*, Marx still uses “utopian dream” in a positive sense, as parallel to the “radical revolution” and in contrast to the “merely political revolution” of the bourgeoisie (Marx 1977:71) <sup>4</sup>.

If, as Marx suggests, religion offers a picture of an imaginary world, its dialectical overcoming is by no means simply the world in its actuality, an actuality of suffering, domination, oppression and brutality. It is imagination, in fact that cracks open the merely existent world, and offers other possibilities. In the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” (1844) Marx suggests, in fact, that it is this capacity for imagination and creative production that gives human beings their unique species being. Even in his later thinking (*Capital* vol. 1), Marx suggests “...what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality” (1967:178).

Max Horkheimer once wrote about precisely this dimension of religion-as-utopia: The concept of God was for a long time the place where the idea was kept alive that there are other norms besides those to which nature and society give expression in their operation...Religion is the record of the wishes, desires and accusations of countless generations (1995:129).

While it is true that in Marx’s text, religion is an “illusory happiness”, there is still a kernel of happiness there, happiness in promised form. The history of religion records the “wishes, desires and accusations” of oppressed human beings. When they are not *sui generis* dreams, these visions of another reality are designed as the promise of a blissful hereafter for obedient slaves. Do they not nonetheless, in their vision of another reality, also open up new possibilities for imagining ‘real happiness’? To create this ‘real happiness’ is to “break the chains and pluck the living flower”, which, given the context is clearly an opium poppy!

In *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Frederic Jameson argues that if Marxist analysis is to escape a narrow and unconvincing instrumentalism (or functionalism) in its study of culture, it must not only continue to exercise a negative (unmasking)

hermeneutic, but also recover a positive (or utopian) hermeneutic. It must come to recognize the interplay between the ideological and the utopian in all cultural forms, including religion. Writing of the media in mass culture, he argues that

...a process of compensatory exchange must be involved...in which the henceforth manipulated viewer is offered specific gratifications in return for his or her consent to passivity. In other words, if the ideological function of mass culture is understood as a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are ‘managed’ and defused, rechanneled and offered spurious objects, then some preliminary step must also be theorized in which these same impulses—the raw material upon which the process works—are initially awakened within the very text that seeks to still them (Jameson 1981:287).

According to Jameson the Marxist critic must look for both the ideological and utopian dimension of any cultural form, since in an alienated situation, they cannot be separated. Marx’s demand, then, becomes to actualize the utopian kernel that is the spirit of a spiritless situation, to achieve a dialectical overcoming, whereby the promised happiness becomes an actualized or, as Marx puts it, a “real happiness”.

If we take the Marx’s call for the *aufheben* of religion seriously, this means reading the metaphor, and hence religion, with all of its contradictions, the conflict between form and content, and the possibility of dialectical inversions. Opium, as a medicine was not a “bad” thing (Marx never thought to criticize the fruit of the poppy itself, and used it himself when the need arose); but it was often used (form) for the dubious purposes of baby doping and was a “good” sold to considerable profit by shameless profiteers. It was a “soporific” which awakened considerable serious conflict, both within Britain and abroad. It has the capacity to “distort reality” (the ubiquitous “pie in the sky”), but also to offer other a imaginary counterpoint to the actuality of domination and oppression (Brittain 2005, Siebert 2005). The driving force of Marx’s

critique of religion is his insistence on the “categorical imperative” –a very Lutheran notion, deriving from Kant– to “overthrow all circumstances in which man is humiliated, enslaved, abandoned, and despised...” (1977:69). This imperative itself may be rooted in the very religious traditions that Marx critiques, providing an ongoing impetus to negative critique (Siebert 2005), but there is nothing unusual about this in Marx’s thinking. On the contrary, all dialectical thinking insists on, and consists of, the reflexivity of critique critiquing itself (Karakayali 2004).

### Beyond Religion as an Abstract Category <sup>5</sup>

As I have argued, Marx’s critique of Hegel’s *Rechtsphilosophie* is an *aufhebung* of Feuerbach, rather than a mere repetition of the latter’s a/theology. First, Marx moves the question of religion away from a/theology and decisively makes it a political and economic problem. Second, Feuerbach’s critique of religion is abstract, whereas Marx insists on the necessity of being concrete—an adequate analysis of religion can only address “this state, this society”, which is why his analysis in that text is concerned almost exclusively with the situation in Prussia in the 1840s.

If there is one lesson to be learned from the endless debates about an adequate definition of religion, it is that religion is not a singular thing with a singular set of dimensions or effects, and is hence extraordinarily resistant conceptual definition (cf. Spiro 1966; J. Smith 1998; Lambert 1991; McKinnon 2002). In effect, contrary to Feuerbach, there is no *Essence of Religion* (1967). It has become a reified category (an essence) through historical, political, and cultural processes, and scholars who continue to treat it as such fail to live up to the Marxian imperative: “Always Historicize!” (cf.

Jameson 1981). In *The Meaning and End of Religion* Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1978 [1962]) historicizes religion and demonstrates precisely why religion has proven impossible to define adequately. Smith's history of the concept demonstrates that "religion" (not only as phenomena, but also as a concept) is a social construction.

Most languages historically had no word that corresponds with our concept "religion", and the equivalent terms in contemporary non-European languages have been imported from the West. Even in Europe, for most of its history the word "religion" (*religio*) meant something very different than it does today. Smith argues that in early Latin texts, *religio* had to do with specific cultic rites and piety, rather than with a "name for a system of ideas and beliefs" (1978: 40). This is for the most part the sense in which it is used even in the history of the West up to the seventeenth century. Smith argues that even at the time of the Reformation, *religio* and its derivatives in the European *vulgata* still meant "piety" or "worship". The idea that religion "names a system of ideas and beliefs" emerges for the first time in the Enlightenment (1978: 40). In pamphlet after pamphlet, tract after tract, this new idea was driven home, either by polemicists or by apologists of particular traditions. Initially, "religion" was something that someone else had, whereas the critic had "faith", "piety", or, in the case of the *Lumières*, "rational thought". Slowly, however, people began to refer to their own faith as "religion" as they began to defend "true religion" (as a coherent system of beliefs and practices) against the critics of "religion".

After the seventeenth century, there were several new developments in the understanding of "religion" in the West. First was the use of the word "religions" (plural) to denote phenomena that were different, but somehow equivalent. Missions, particularly

Catholic missions, and the encounter with and construction of “other religions” in trade and proselytizing, led for the first time to the concept of the “world religions” (cf. Jonathan Z. Smith 1998). The second was the use of “religion” as a generic “essence”. Feuerbach himself is particularly important in this story, since he was the first to argue that “religion” in the generic sense was a single thing with a single essence (1957 [1854], 1969 [1846]).

In modernity, religion has become a reified category (now exported from the West around the globe) through political, economic, and juridical means (cf. Haan 2005). Marx presumes this reified concept and treats religion as a singular phenomenon (Feuerbach, after all, provides his “premise”). However, in thinking religion dialectically, and by demanding that critical analysis be concrete, he points beyond Feuerbach’s rigidly reified (and thoroughly a/theological) understanding of religion.

Unfortunately, most Marxian understandings of religion are content with a reified—and thoroughly Feuerbachian— understanding of religion. Where religion is not treated as merely epiphenomenal, it is has still become a reified category, with a singular (or at least primary) function. In this respect, traditional Marxian analyses of religion shares much more with Parsonian functionalism (with a touch of Voltaire) than it does with Marx, even if it expresses its rubric differently: religion functions to maintain the pattern of (an unjust) social order (by making the working class quiescent with pie-in-the-sky promises). This kind of analysis becomes a slightly more political version of Feuerbach’s analysis, rather than a distinctly Marxian one. In treating religion as a reified category, it turns a blind eye to the multiplicity of phenomena that we call religion: no matter what instance we’re talking about, they are all non-contradictory moments, and all

have basically the same effect. Thus, the Melanesian cargo-cults, Ultra-Montanist Catholicism, Reconstructionist Judaism, Fundamentalist Islam, the Levelers and Diggers, Liberation Theology, the Puritans, and Theravada Buddhism are all seen—‘in the last instance’—as the same thing (religion) having the same effects (social control with a view to quiescence). Such an account is not only abstract, but it lacks sensitivity to contradictions—attentiveness to which is the hallmark of any authentically Marxian thinking.

Given Marx’s emphasis on concrete and dialectical thinking, we can not legitimately make his concrete analyses of religion in a particular time and place (particular forms of Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism in nineteenth century Germany and England) and make abstract universal theories that would apply to every “religious” phenomena. As a “type” of social object, there is nothing in the genus “religion” that requires special treatment; as particular phenomena, in particular times and places, however, each needs to be accounted for in all of its particularities, contradictions, and social effects.

Given that the category “religion” is a modern social-construction, we cannot hope to produce a— let alone *the*— Marxian theory of religion that will apply trans-historically and cross-culturally. Marx’s analysis in “Towards a Critique” does offer us useful tools with which to begin analysis of, not just “religion”, but also culture as a whole. It calls for attentiveness to the oppressive and the emancipatory, the ideological and the utopian, within the each social moment. It requires attentiveness not only to heart and spirit, but also to the concrete heartless and spiritless situation in which heart and spirit are expressed. Religion as culture “reflects” those situations, but it also plays a role

in constituting those heartless, spiritless situations; at the same time it points beyond them to other possibilities. Such is the dialectics of religion for those who want to follow in the spirit of Marx.

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#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> My focus in the following historical passages will be on Britain. Britain is important for a number of reasons. First, our understanding of opium comes from later moments in the history of opium there (the movement to ban opium emerged here). Secondly, throughout the nineteenth century, Britain played a central role in the production and distribution of opium on a global scale, it was also an important producer of Opium meanings, consumed throughout the rest of the continent (Butel 1995). Perhaps as a result, there is more solid historical research on opium use and meanings in the British context. Finally, when Marx and Engels discuss opium, most of their discussions deal with the English context.

<sup>2</sup> Why Marx would not engage with *The Phenomenology* is quite strange, given that it is clearly the most 'materialist' of all of the great philosopher's writings. In terms of allusion, however, the figures of Master and Slave seem to keep recurring throughout "Towards a Critique". It could be argued that "Towards a Critique" rallies the young Hegel (of the *Phenomenology*) against the old Hegel (of the *Philosophy of Right*). Such an argument, however, is well beyond the scope or concerns of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Engels tended towards understanding the dialectic in a distinctly scientific manner, formulating the logic of dialectics in terms of rigid principles not unlike that of the British Hegelians and their schema of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Despite my reservations about Engels' use of dialectics in general, I am nonetheless convinced that *this* formulation is helpful for helping us grasp the logic of *this* text.

<sup>4</sup> This may not be immediately apparent, since we are so habituated to reading Marx's later diatribes against the utopian socialists, especially those he encountered in France (St. Simon, etc). The structure of Marx's sentence assumes this equivalence: radical revolution=universal emancipation=utopian dream; partial [revolution]=political revolution=pillars still standing. Universal emancipation, the utopian dream requires that the pillars of society be torn down and rebuilt from the ground up. The anti-utopian

orthodoxy in Orthodox Marxism ultimately, I would argue, ultimately stems from Engels proclivity for scientism. Those who want to distance themselves from this positivistic stream of Marxism need to re-examine the negative disposition towards utopias that springs from such scientism. Ernst Bloch (1964) clearly promises to be a good guide and starting point for this re-examination.

<sup>5</sup> This section draws on my essay on the definition debates in sociology of religion and in religious studies, proposing a social constructionist account of the category “religion” (McKinnon 2002).

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