

Kierkegaard and Feuerbach

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A major figure in radical philosophy in Germany in the 1840's, Ludwig Feuerbach evoked generally respectful comment from Kierkegaard. Although the humanistic and naturalistic analysis of religion and Christianity on which his reputation is chiefly founded stands in stark contrast to the theism of Kierkegaard, there also exist striking parallels in their thought and existential concerns. Feuerbach is unfortunately often identified with a naive materialism and anti-religious position which he expressly repudiated. In actuality he is a naturalist in philosophy, an insightful interpreter of religion, and an unflagging proponent of religious humanism. No less important, in Kierkegaard's eyes, he is a sworn enemy of the religious hypocrisy of nominal Christians. [Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx* (London, 1936), Chaps. VII, VIII; Eugene Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach* (London, 1970); Karl Barth, *Die Theologie und die Kirche* (Munich, 1928), Chap. VII.]

The radical naturalistic critique of Christianity which aborted his hopes for university appointments also brought Feuerbach some enthusiastic recognition. Shortly after the publication in 1841 of his major work, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, his most famous disciple, Karl Marx, proclaimed him to be the only way to truth and light. Years later, Friedrich Nietzsche reflected on the fact that a great many – including his own one-time friend Wagner – had once welcomed Feuerbach's thought as a new gospel. [Karl Marx, "Luther als Schiedsrichter zwischen Strauss und Feuerbach" in Arnold Ruge, *Anecdota zur neuesten deutschen Philosophie und Publicistik* (Zürich und Winterthur, 1843), Part II, p. 208; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gesammelte Werke* (Musarionausgabe, Leipzig und München, 1920–29, XI, p. 374.) Although the wave of popularity which Feuerbach enjoyed relatively short lived, his *Das Wesen des Christentums* quickly went through two succeeding editions after its publication in 1841, and it was translated into English in 1854. Kierkegaard purchased several of Feuerbach's books, including, in 1844,

a copy of the second edition of *Das Wesen des Christentums* and of Arnold Ruge's *Anecdota* containing Feuerbach's important "Vorläufige Thesen zur Reformation der Philosophie" with responses to the latter's work by Ruge and Marx. [See H. P. Rohde, *The Auctioneer's Sales Record of the Library of Søren Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen, 1967)] Although disapproving of Feuerbach's antagonism to Christianity itself, Kierkegaard recognized similarities in their thought. In fact he expressed some concern lest he himself be identified with freethinkers like Feuerbach. In his fairly numerous if brief written references to Feuerbach, he portrays him as a clear expositor of Christian faith, a formidable critic of modern orthodoxy, and an unintentional but useful personal ally. [Kierkegaard sometimes refers to Feuerbach as "the freethinker", and occasionally he links his name with those of D. Strauss, B. Bauer and others. [SV VII, 605; XII, 154–55; XIII, 441; XIV, 42.]

Like Kierkegaard, Feuerbach finds Christianity related essentially to human emotional life and in fundamental tension with reason. Unlike him, he provides a naturalistic explanation of these facts and of religion in general, contending that gods are mythological products of man's need, beings whose contradictory nature and essential impossibility testify to their fully human origin and function. Thus, the human qualities of Christ – whose paradoxical nature Feuerbach and Kierkegaard equally strongly emphasize – are needed to make a supposedly transcendent god humanly relevant. By simultaneously infinitizing these, men find solace for their natural limitations and support for their quite human values. [*Wesen*, 2nd ed., Chaps. II, XVI, XXIII, Appendix, pp. 510–22.] In an account which bears marked resemblances to that of Kierkegaard, Feuerbach delineates the existential significance of Christianity – its requirement of suffering love and the manner in which the life of reason and morality may be compromised or otherwise altered through devotion to a deity transcending both. It is in their responses to this analysis that the two thinkers most clearly diverge. Kierkegaard's faith enables him to question the claims of reason and morality. For Feuerbach, such a paradoxical faith subverts reason and natural self-interest and self-respect and should be replaced by a commitment to mankind itself. [*Wesen*, Chaps. II, V, XXVII, XXVIII, Appendix, pp. 459–64, 488–510.]

Kierkegaard is clearly cognizant of the general character of Feuerbach's position. He remarks that the freethinkers are less muddled in interpreting Christianity, than its orthodox defenders, and that they are at least honest in

calling it myth and poetry, while the latter betray their own scepticism in their lives. [*Pap.* XI¹ A 70; X⁵ A 62; *SV* VII, 571–72, 585–86; XIV 117.] He acknowledges that Feuerbach is enlightening in his criticism, that he is a clever and consistent thinker, and that he can serve for Christians as a purifying fire. [*Pap.* V B 1, 10. As noted above, Kierkegaard purchased Ruge's *Anecdota* in 1844, and his reference to Feuerbach as an "*Ild Bæk*" probably reflects his having read Marx's tribute to the "Feuerbach". (Part II, p. 208.)] Nevertheless, despite such positive recognition and some occasionally remarkable parallels in their thought, Kierkegaard has remarkably little to say about the central themes of *Das Wesen des Christentums*. He never engages in a critique of Feuerbach's naturalistic hypothesis regarding Christianity or religion, and the claim that one may find in Kierkegaard (as in Marx, Nietzsche and Freud) "evidence of the fertility and importance of Feuerbach's ideas" seems dubious. [Kamenka, p. viii.]

It is to an issue somewhat peripheral to Feuerbach's analysis that Kierkegaard chiefly devotes his attention – the contrast between the rationalized, self-indulgent and falsified religion of contemporary Christendom and the faith and suffering devotion of previous generations. Although the original faith is itself largely an unfortunate delusion for Feuerbach, he finds its contemporary corruption uniquely distasteful, and he speaks of it in words reminiscent of those of Kierkegaard. Whereas a dying to the world is essential for genuine Christianity, "solche Freiheit, solche Wahrheit widerspricht nun freilich dem heutigen Christentum ...," a religion "höchst praktisch und weltklug Doch wende mich mit Ekel und Verachtung weg von dem modernen Christentum, wo die Braut Christi bereitwillig selbst der Polygamie huldigt ... aber doch zugleich – O schändliche Heuchlerei! auf die ewige ... heilige Wahrheit des Wortes Gottes schwört Wie anders die alten Christen! ... Und jetzt leben wir im Zeitalter der Versöhnung! Ja wohl!" [*Wesen*, 243–44.]

For Kierkegaard, for whom mere playing at Christianity is more spiritually dangerous than heresy or schism, and for whom hypocrisy is anathema, this exposé by Feuerbach came as welcome support from an unexpected quarter. [*SV* VI, 483; *Pap.* V B 148, 37; X² 163 (p. 129); XI¹ A 70; XI² A 267–68; *Wesen*, Chap. VI, Appendix 424 fn., 437–39.] Kierkegaard is not completely satisfied with Feuerbach's portrayal of the harshness of Christian faith; in fact he senses in it a deliberate distortion. Nevertheless – as with his own

account – he sees this portrayal functioning as a useful corrective to an even greater distortion. Whatever its faults, he sees it as more accurate than that of the “so-called Christian Church.” It has come to the place, he suggests, that one must learn from freethinkers about faith. [*SV* VIII, 605; *Pap.* XI¹ A 559.]

Considering the fact that Feuerbach attacks not only a degenerate and corrupt Christendom but the essence of Christian faith itself, the tone of Kierkegaard’s comments is remarkably positive. Only rarely does he point to what he perceives as errors in the thought of Feuerbach or of other freethinkers, and then to matters essentially unrelated to the central naturalistic critique of Christianity or religion. [*SV* II, 286–87; *Pap.* V A 14; XI¹ A 333.] Occasionally he criticizes Feuerbach for a certain malignancy of motive, and in one case he attributes his rejection of Christianity to personal weakness, an inability to meet the very requirements of faith which Kierkegaard credited him with so well understanding. [*Pap.* X² A 163 (p. 128); XI¹ A 559.] In another instance he groups Feuerbach with Adler as differing manifestations of a common malaise – obstinate repudiation of authority. In the case of Adler this showed itself in a claim to spiritual authority for himself, in that of Feuerbach in an attempt to overthrow legitimate authority. In general, however, Kierkegaard reacts in a remarkably mild manner to Feuerbach’s work and person. He identifies the latter’s rejection of faith as both less confused and less dangerous than the claims of Adler, and he clearly and consistently finds hypocrisy a greater spiritual threat than honest doubt. [*Pap.* VIII 2 B 19 (p. 72), B 27 (pp. 77–78); *SV* IV, 452.]

Most evident in Kierkegaard’s generally respectful treatment of Feuerbach is his recognition of the latter’s usefulness to the cause of faith. [*SV* VI, 475.] While acknowledging that Feuerbach is a skilled enemy and even a “malicious demon”, Kierkegaard repeatedly observes that he may nevertheless serve as a useful ally. He is what the hypocritical and demoralized age requires, one who can play a role in the cause of truth – perhaps even suffering persecution for it – in a manner not unlike that of Kierkegaard himself. [*Pap.* V B 9, B 74, 5; X² A 163; XI² A 119, A 267.]