



Feuerbach's Concept of Religious Alienation and its Influence

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Abstract

According to Feuerbach, religion and God do not exist beyond human reach; rather, they are the creation of human beings. True religion is the relation of man with himself or with his own true nature. God, according to Feuerbach, is the manifested inward nature of man. But when man cannot understand that religion and God are nothing but the creation of human beings, he becomes alienated from his actual nature. Worshiping the external God is nothing but an expression of human emotion. If God is regarded as something different from man, man becomes separated from his own true nature and ultimately becomes alienated. In other words, if human essence is considered to truly belong to God who exists beyond human reach, man becomes alienated from himself. Later on, Marx regards this religious alienation as the means of capitalists' process of exploitation. Thus, the present work will mainly focus on Feuerbach's concept of religious alienation and how Marx subsequently adopted and critically analyzed this concept of religious alienation in his philosophy.

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1.Introduction

The problem of alienation is one of the major concerns in the present society when the whole of mankind is engulfed in a crisis. Though we are globalized in the economic domain, in the psychic

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plain the humanity stands divided in the name of religious, political, racial, communal divides. As a result, the developments of science and technology have turned out to be threats to human existence. 'Alienation' literally, connotes the sense of 'divide; or dichotomy between I and the 'other' manifesting in forms of contradictions in the social, economic, political and religious domains. Space and time have been conquered and the breakthroughs in communication have turned planet Earth into a virtual global village where the wellbeing of people living in one part, are bound to the people living in other parts. The fact remains that in the psychic domain, human beings are still alienated. The sense of alienation is still dominating the human psyche. On one side, the entire globe is coming under a very good communication system and on the other, human beings are getting alienated from other aspects of life. In our present situation, we feel more and more concerned about this issue. Some of the perennial factors like - the fast lifestyle, complex and competitive socio-economic structure, political atmosphere of confrontation and disobedience, automatization and increasing dehumanization of the uses of science and technology, besides many others, have immensely contributed to the growing sense of alienation in the world today.

This concept of alienation has a long history of its own. The term alienation has been discussed differently in different fields of discussion. This term has been discussed differently in day to day life, in religion, in sociology, in science, in psychology and in philosophy. From the Judio-Christian tradition to the modern age, many philosophers have commented on it. Among them, Feuerbach (1804-1872) has discussed the concept of alienation from religious standpoint. Feuerbach realizes that the acceptance of a historical form of religion and God have together estranged men from their actual nature. Submission of the consequence of any action to an external being that exists beyond human reach is not true thinking. It is wrong to submit oneself to the external God. For him, God is the manifested or expressed inherent nature of men. God is not something that is external to us rather, it is associated with the human essence. God is not something different from man. Therefore, according to Feuerbach it is the acceptance of external God which is responsible for men's alienation. For him, the core of all religion is man. True religion is the relation or unity of man with

his own true nature. We should not differentiate God from man. He believes that human beings wrongly project their personality to an external God. God is in the actual creation of man. Therefore, this wrong projection of human personality to God is man's alienation from his own true nature. Subsequently, Karl Marx has been influenced by Feuerbach's concept of religious alienation and, by a critical analysis, develops it further.

The term 'alienation' does not possess a clear-cut definition, and is also treated differently in the various schools of philosophical, political, sociological, religious thoughts. But all these different usages of such an inter-disciplinary concept, in common refers to the act or process of separation or estrangement of somebody or something from something else. The dictionary meaning of the term 'alienation' is 'estrangement'. Besides, it also carries a host of other meanings, such as powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, cultural estrangement etc.

The main objective here is to examine how the problem of alienation has been discussed in the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach. In Hegel's (1770-1831) philosophy, alienation is part of the process of self-creativity and self-discovery. While Hegel explains the existence of the human subject by focusing on its ontological and moral dimensions, Feuerbach tries to give a human-based discussion on it. The proper understanding of the Feuerbach's thoughts on alienation is significant for this study. I shall also discuss how Feuerbach's concept of religious alienation has influenced the post-Feuerbach philosophy. In this context, I shall mainly discuss how Karl Marx (1818-1883) is influenced by Feuerbach's notion of religious alienation.

Feuerbach is a thinker who attacks Christian religious belief and tries to establish the actual nature of man and religion. Warren Breckman remarks that,

"Feuerbach was perhaps the first Hegelian to attack the nexus of Christian faith, politics, and society; accordingly, it is to his work during the 1830s that we turn first." (Breckman & Marx, 1999, P. 90.)

Feuerbach belongs to the left-wing young Hegelian because, shortly after Hegel's death, Hegel's followers have been divided in to the three groups, 'right', 'center' and 'left' Hegelian. The right

wing Hegelians focus on traditional Christianity, the left-wing young Hegelians give emphasize on atheistic and Humanistic approaches and the center Hegelians emphasize on different religious dogma. Feuerbach is a philosopher who belongs to left-wing young Hegelians. Left wing young Hegelians also include young Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. (Khan, 1995, P. 42.)

Among the left-wing young Hegelians we find a tendency to develop the spirit of Hegel's philosophy beyond Hegel. They have tried to transform Hegel's philosophy to the philosophy of humanity of the material world. This tendency towards the transformation or humanization of Hegel's philosophy laid the foundation of the Left wing Young Hegelian philosophy or the young Hegelian movement. John Toews in his article "Transformations of Hegelianism 1805-1846" points out that, "This secularization or humanization of the Hegelian perspective has usually been defined as the foundation of the Hegelian Left or the radical young Hegelian movement." (Toews, 1993, p. 391).

Among those in the left-wing young Hegelian movement, Feuerbach is the only one who has given a serious critical explanation of Hegel's philosophy. Marx, who is a student of Feuerbach, expresses his views in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844,

Feuerbach is the only one who has a serious, critical attitude to the Hegelian dialectic and who has made genuine discoveries in this field. He is in fact the true conqueror of the old philosophy. The extent of his achievement, and the unpretentious simplicity with which he, Feuerbach, gives it to the world, stand in striking contrast to the opposite attitude [of the others]. (Marx, 1977, P. 135.)

While criticizing Hegel's philosophy Feuerbach claims that, when Hegel argues that through the dialectical method consciousness attains absolute knowledge that is absolute Spirit, this absolute Spirit is not the conscious absolute spirit rather it is the self-consciousness of the human-species being or human essence. Feuerbach opines that, man is the subject or object of history. John Toews points out that, "The true content of the Hegelian metaphysics of a self-conscious absolute spirit was thus affirmed as

self-consciousness of human species-being or human essence. "Man" was the authentic and real "subject/object" of history." (Toews, 1993, p. 396.). Thus Feuerbach tries to give a human-based discussion to Hegel's philosophy.

Feuerbach himself considers him as a natural philosopher in the domain of mind (Feuerbach, 1881, p. viii.) and according to him a natural philosopher cannot work or think without instruments or without material means. He accepts the outer existence of things. In other words, material things exist outside our self. Feuerbach points out that, "I have many things outside myself, which I cannot convey either in my pocket or my head, ..." (Feuerbach, 1881, p. viii.). He actually tries to discover a material philosophy and keeps himself in direct opposition to the Hegelian philosophy.

He criticizes the historical form of religion and regards it as anti-human and anti-natural. Religion for him is the understanding of the inner nature of man. There is nothing that is supernatural. In the preface of *The Essence of Christianity* he regards his philosophy in its principle as not the substance of Spinoza, not the ego of Kant and Fichte, not the Absolute identity of Schelling, not the Absolute Mind of Hegel. (Feuerbach, 1881, p. viii.) In short, he does not accept anything which is abstract or merely a conceptual being. He accepts the real world. For him, our thoughts generate from the opposite of thought, from matter, from existence and the senses which have direct relation to the objects.

Feuerbach denies only the traditional or historical form of religion but he never denies the importance of true religion. At the beginning of *The Essence of Christianity* he regards religion as the unique quality of man which differs men from the brute. For him, "Religion has its basis in the essential difference between man and the brute - the brutes have no religion" (Feuerbach, 1881, p. 1.) Religion, for him, is realization of the inner nature of man. It is the self-consciousness of man. According to Feuerbach, religion is identical to the consciousness of man about his own nature. Feuerbach points out that, "Religion being identical with the distinctive characteristic of man, is then identical with self-consciousness - with the consciousness which man has of his nature. But religion expressed generally, is consciousness of the

infinite; thus it is and can be nothing else than the consciousness which man has of his own – not finite and limited, but infinite nature.” (Feuerbach, 1881, p. 2.)

According to Feuerbach, the highest form of self-assertion, the form which we can think of as a superiority, a perfection, a bliss, a good, is nothing but consciousness. For him, thinking of a reason to be limited is our delusion or error. He admits that a man as an individual distinguishes himself from brutes or other natural objects. In this sense, the man is limited or finite. But man can become conscious of his limits or finiteness because he can realize or perceive the perfection or the infinitude of his species either as an object of feeling, of conscience or of the thinking consciousness. (Feuerbach, 1881, p. 7.) Such consciousness of man is his infinite nature. Religion for Feuerbach is nothing but the realization of this inner nature of man. Feuerbach argues that, no being can deny its own true nature. No being is limited to itself, ‘every being is in and by itself infinite – has its God, its highest conceivable being in itself’. (Feuerbach, 1881, p. 7.) But if anyone forgets its true nature and regards himself to be finite and projects his personality to one external or supernatural infinite being, he becomes alienated from his own true nature.

In his book, *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach tries to develop a religious understanding. He tries to establish that the secret of religion is man. True religion according to Feuerbach is the relation of man with himself or with his own nature. It is the revelation of man’s own intimate thoughts. Feuerbach says that, “The essence of religion, its latent nature, is the identity of the divine being with the human;” (Feuerbach, 1881, p. 247.) He observes that, “By his God thou knowest the man, and by the man his god; the two are identical. Whatever is God to a man, that is his heart and soul; and conversely, God is the manifested inward nature, the expressed self of a man, - religion the solemn unveiling of a man’s hidden treasures, the revelation of his intimate thoughts, the open confession of his love – secrets.” (Feuerbach, 1881, p. 12-13) If the human essence is said to truly belong to God then man becomes alienated from himself. According to Feuerbach, “If this essence is viewed as more truly belonging to God, then man is deprived of it.

Man is separated from himself and becomes alienated. The richer God, the poorer is man." (Guha, 2006, pp. 56-57.)

Feuerbach establishes that, superstitious belief in religion is the cause of alienation. He says, "Religion is the disuniting of man from himself;" (Feuerbach, 1881, p. 33.) According to Feuerbach, what we call God in religion is nothing but the projected personality of man. Feuerbach observes, "The personality of God is nothing else than the projected personality of man." (Feuerbach, 1881, p. 226)

He regards God as man. In his word, "...man is the real God." (Feuerbach, 1881, p. 230). God is not such a thing which exists beyond man. We cannot separate God from man because separation of God from man is nothing but the separation of man from man. Feuerbach points out that, "...the separation of God from man is therefore the separation of man from man, the unloosening of the social bond." (Feuerbach, 1881, p. 247.) Therefore, he rightly says that, the God is nothing but the projected personality of man. He believes that the secret of all religion is nothing but man. Worship and devotion to God is just the expression of human emotion. If we think that God is something different from man then man becomes separated from himself and ultimately he becomes alienated. (Guha, 2006, p. 56.)

While discussing the true nature of religion Feuerbach in his book *The Essence of Christianity* says that,

Religion, at least the Christian, is the relation of man to himself or more correctly to his own nature (i.e., his subjective nature); but a relation to it, viewed as a nature apart from his own. The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man made objective- i.e., contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature. (Feuerbach, 1881, p. 14.)

Therefore, religion does not mean projecting man to something which is external.

Feuerbach recognizes his own concept of religion to be very much similar to Spinoza's 'pantheism'. Where Spinoza unites God with nature or the material being, Feuerbach regards pantheism to be theological atheism or theological materialism. Nasir Khan remarks that, "Feuerbach incorporates Spinoza's pantheism in his religious anthropology. 'Pantheism is theological atheism or theological materialis'" (Khan, 1995, p. 51.)

Feuerbach in his book *The Essence of Christianity*, wants to reveal that the Christian theology and religious consciousness are nothing but the psychological and historical culmination of self-alienation. (Khan, 1995, p. 48.). Feuerbach's main attack is on historical forms of religion where God has been conceived as different from man. According to Feuerbach, God is nothing but the creation of man and we cannot differentiate God from the human being. In religion the human being projects his own essence on God. Therefore, according to Feuerbach, what we normally think of as the divine being is nothing but the human being.

Here it is notable that in religious discussion, Feuerbach's purpose is not to prove the existence or non-existence of God. Rather, his main purpose is to prove that God is nothing but the human creation. Where Hegel argues that the man is the revealed form of God, Feuerbach argues just reverse to it that is God is the revealed form of man. Hegel's proposition that man is the revealed God, is transformed into Feuerbach's proposition that God is the revealed man. Feuerbach asserts the real relation of thought to being is as follows: 'being is subject, thought is predicate'. Thought proceeds from being not being from thought. (Guha, 2006, p. 57.). As such Feuerbach emphasizes upon being and he tries to establish that thought cannot come without being.

According to Feuerbach, in religion man becomes an estranged, divided being, a dual personality etc. Man cannot understand that religion and God are nothing but the creation of human beings. In religion man cannot realize his own true nature. He surrenders his own essence to something beyond him. Therefore, man becomes alienated from his actual nature when he is under the influence of religion. And according to Feuerbach, the emancipation of man from religion is the only way to remove him from alienation. (Guha, 2006, p. 58.)

According to Feuerbach, God is nothing but man's own idealized essence which they project into a transcendent thing. Feuerbach points out that, "The personality of God is nothing else than the projected personality of man." (Feuerbach, 1881, p. 226.) This projection of human quality to a divine being constitutes the alienation of man from his own essential nature. (Khan, 1995, p. 49.) And when a man can understand this, he overcomes the self-alienation which results from religion. Then a man can keep faith in himself and he comes to realize his own essence. Maya Sarkar remarks that,

According to Feuerbach, once a man understands that 'God' is a name for his own idealized essence projected in to a transcendent sphere, he overcomes the self-alienation involved in religion. And the way then lies open to the objectification of his essence in man's own activity and social life. Man recovers faiths in himself and in his own powers. (Sarkar, 2004, p. 63)

Through criticizing religion, theology and Hegel's philosophy, Feuerbach actually attempts to establish his own materialism. Prof. R.P. Singh writes, "His criticism of religion or theology or Hegelian philosophy in general, is aimed at defending his own materialism." (Singh, 1995, p. 113.). This is why Feuerbach argues that, the task of the modern era is the realization and humanization of God and the transformation of theology into anthropology. (Feuerbach, 1972, p. 34).

While criticizing Hegel's philosophy, Feuerbach criticizes Hegel's logic and dialectic. In the concept of materialism Feuerbach does not accept the dialectical principle. Just like Descartes and Locke, Feuerbach accepts that material things are the same as they are given to us in our sensations. (Singh, 1995, p. 113). After all, he wants to establish that God and religion are not different from man rather the manifestation of human essence or the outcome of this material world itself.

2. Marx's View on Religious Alienation

Marx does not accept Feuerbach's way of expressing materialism. For him, Feuerbach accepts sensuous objects as distinct from

conceptual objects and does not understand that human activity itself is an objective activity. Marx says,

The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things [Gegenstand], reality, sensuousness are conceived only in the form of the *object* or *of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively....Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from conceptual objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity. (Marx & Engels, 1976, p. 615.)

Marx aims to correct the materialism of Feuerbach with the help of Hegel's method of dialectic. It means that, Marx accepts Hegel's dialectical method while formulating his own materialism. Marx and Engels criticize Feuerbach's materialism by calling it un-dialectical. Marx and Engels argue that, just as Feuerbach's materialism is inconsistent, his criticism of religion is also abstract and un-dialectical in many ways. As a result, it cannot express the development of history. Marx and Engels further believe that, Feuerbach, consequently, does not see the "religious sentiment" itself as a social product and that the abstract individual which he analyses belongs to a particular form of society. (Marx & Engels, 1976, p. 617).

Karl Marx in his early years had been very much influenced by Feuerbach's concept of alienation. Though Marx criticizes Feuerbach's materialism and religion, he still gives credit to Feuerbach for finding the first real breach in the system of Hegelian abstractions. Feuerbach is the man who has found the source of alienation in religious superstition and has shown the way of overcoming alienation through a religion of self-love. The way to overcoming alienation, according to Feuerbach is to bring the divine back into man, to reinterpret himself through a religion of humanity, through a religion of self-love. (Guha, 2006, p. 19).

Marx gives a little different interpretation of the concept of religious alienation. According to Marx, it is not necessary to surrender oneself to God or religion. The cause of man's miseries is not something external to us. Miseries cannot be removed through surrendering ourselves to any external power which is beyond

human reach. Marx believes that people should find out the cause of their miseries in the world itself and act resolutely to do away with the conditions responsible for the sad state of affairs in which he is condemned to suffer. Marx thinks that man should not delude himself by seeking a false relief or solace in any religious aspiration for being united with God (Sarkar, 2004. p. 6).

According to Marx religion is an active form of ideological alienation because, in religion man projects his own desire to the God. David McLellan points out that, "In religion, for example, it was God who had usurped man's own position; religion served the double function of a compensation for suffering and a projection of man's deepest desires." (McLellan, 1980, p. 118).

When a man is under the control of religion, the activity of his own imagination of his brain operates the individual as an independent activity or as an alien activity. The person then is controlled by his imaginative thinking and not by his actual thinking. In Marx's word "... in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates on the individual independently of him - that is, operates as an alien, divine or diabolical activity" (Marx, 1977, p. 71).

Moreover, Marx views religion as a type of instrument in the hand of capitalists through which they try to eternalize their class exploitation. Under the institutionalized private property, religion gives the workers a type of imaginary satisfaction for the unsatisfying result of their own activity. (Khan, 1995, p. 147). In such a society, the worker never gets a satisfactory value of his own activity. Therefore, we can say that, religion is the tool in the hand of capitalist people to ensure class exploitation. Denys Turner points out that, "... it is in the interests of powerful people to promote, among those they oppress, beliefs that will encourage them to submit to their oppression ... it is in the interest of the ruling classes that people should indulge in this opiate." (Turner, 1991, p. 321).

Marx has been greatly influenced by the philosophical thinking of Feuerbach and Hegel. In his Manuscripts of 1844 and in all other works of that time, Marx has used the terminology of Feuerbach and Hegel.

Though we can see that, Marx has been very much influenced by the Hegel's thinking especially by his dialectical method, we can still say that, among the young Hegelians, Marx and Engels criticize Hegel more than Feuerbach. According to Marx, his (Marx's) dialectical method is not only different from Hegel's dialectical method rather it is in direct opposition to Hegel's method of dialectic. Marx, in his book *Capital* writes that, "My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite." (Marx, 1995, P. 11.)

According to Hegel, dialectic is a method, in which the contradictory moments of the categories are sublated in the higher one. We know that there are categories like Being, Nothing and Becoming. Being and Nothing are opposed to each other. The antagonism of them is overcome in the category of Becoming. For Hegel, it is the dialectic between ideas. On the other side, according to Marx these ideas are nothing but the material world reflected by the human mind and the human being translates them in the form of thought. Karl Marx argues that,

To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e. the process of thinking which, under the name of 'the Idea', he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of 'the Idea'. With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought. (Marx, 1995, p. 11).

Though Marx criticizes Hegel's dialectical method, he accepts its positive aspects. He argues that it is acceptable if we take it as a process of the objective world. According to Marx, it is true that the Hegelian dialectic has its positive moments if we consider objectification and externalization, negation, alienation and its transcendence as processes in the objective world, as true negation of negations.

Marx formulates his philosophy from a materialistic point of view which is in contrast to a self-oriented philosophical discussion. Marx discusses the development of human history from the standpoint of labour which is opposite to Hegel's discussion of the

development of human history. Marx's original and wholesale rejection of the Hegelian philosophy on account of its idealistic remoteness from social reality soon gave way to a much more differentiated appreciation. It led to Marx developing a materialistic concept of human development.

Therefore, we have come to know that, though Feuerbach does not accept the dialectical method in his philosophy, Marx accepts the positive aspects of the dialectical method of Hegel and he uses the dialectical principle in his philosophy. In the concept of alienation too, Marx has applied the dialectical principle. Marx sees that, it is only through praxis, revolutionary praxis, that the weaker class break the class barriers which sustain the capitalist mode of production, then man can hope to get rid of the economic alienation. This revolution according to Marx is the dialectical movement between two classes namely labour class and capitalists.

Marx has discussed different types of alienation such as religious, philosophical, political, and economic alienation. But he himself argues as work is man's fundamental activity so economic alienation is the fundamental or prominent type (McLellan, 1980, p. 118),

Marx in his early years was deeply influenced by Feuerbach's analysis of religious alienation. Gradually he came to realize that the religious form of alienation is only one aspect of different types of alienation. He then discovered that, the basic form of alienation is economic, rooted in the capitalist mode of production.

From the above discussion one could derive that, religious alienation is a significant type of human alienation to which Marx also agrees. Though in some places Marx criticizes Feuerbach, he still accepts that, Feuerbach is the first thinker who tried to overcome the gap between idealistic thinking and the Material world. Through criticizing the traditional religion, Feuerbach tries to apprise that the actual religion is there among the human beings. There is nothing beyond man to which we should project our human essence. Marx also has a similar perspective that we should not search for the reason for our miseries beyond the material world but rather try to find out the actual reason for our miseries in the world itself. Thus, we can say that, both Feuerbach and Marx

have tried to find out the reason of human alienation and the way of overcoming the problem of alienation in the material world itself.

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