Summary: Although the Marxism and religion debate has returned with renewed vigour of late, it has still not engaged with the full range of texts by Marx and Engels on religion. Roland Boer offers this annotated bibliography, organised according to the main religious themes. The following collection begins with Marx, drawing occasionally on joint works with Engels, before focusing in the last two sections on Engels’s life-long interest in religion.

Marxism and Religion: A Complete and Annotated Bibliography

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December 1, 2012

The Marxism and religion debate has returned with renewed vigour of late. However, we have not as yet engaged with the full range of texts by Marx and Engels on religion, for early in the debate a few texts were chosen as a ‘canon within the canon’, leaving a host of other texts out in the cold. In order to bring attention to those writings, I offer this annotated bibliography, organised according to the main religious themes discussed by Marx and Engels. The following collection begins with Marx, drawing occasionally on joint works with Engels, before focusing in the last two sections on Engels’s life-long interest in religion.

1. Preliminary

The first item shows that Marx had, like most gymnasium students, studied religion and the history of the church:


But he also had to sit a final examination, in which one of the six essays required him to write a piece of biblical interpretation:


By the time Marx began working as editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* in the early 1840s, he found that he needed to respond to the overwhelmingly theological nature of public debate, writing a piece in which many of the later elements of his thoughts on religion were first expressed – church and state, fetishism, philosophy and theology.


He had also come into contact with a very Christian communism espoused by Weitling, Cabet and others:


2. Bruno Bauer

Marx had a complex relationship with the Young Hegelians, forging his arguments in response to theirs, especially in light of the overwhelmingly theological nature of public debate in the 1830s and 1840s. The longest and most significant relationship was with Bruno Bauer, the biblical critic and radical political writer, who first taught Marx the biblical book of Isaiah at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin.

Marx’s PhD thesis on Epicurus shows the strong influence of Bauer, but it also marks an effort to outflank theological debate by going back well before theology itself emerged. Who better than the pre-Socratic materialist, Epicurus?


Bauer and Marx planned a number of projects together, such as a journal of atheism, and a two volume work on Hegel and theology. At this time, Marx publically defended his collaborator.


Part of this collaborative project involved what is now a lost, extensive but incomplete manuscript called ‘On Christian Art’. Marx’s inability to complete the manuscript led to Bauer publishing his part of the first book on his own (*Die Posaune des jungsten Gerichts über Hegel den Atheisten und Antichristen: Ein Ultimatum*, Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1841). Marx sought another publisher, Arnold Ruge, to whom he wrote on a number of occasions concerning the ever-growing manuscript on Christian art.


The friendship was becoming estranged, until at last the break became public with Marx’s polemical response to Bauer’s *Zur Judenfrage* [On the Jewish Question] (1843) and follow-up article, ‘Die Fähigkeit der heutigen Juden und Christen, frei zu werden’ [The Capacity of Today’s Jews and Christians to Become Free] (1843). Marx found Bauer’s argument, that the basis of freedom is a thoroughly secular state and the release from the false universal of religion, a reinforcement of the deeper logic of the ‘Christian state’.


The polemic against Bauer continued, in letters and in sections of longer pieces.


It came to head once again in the most sustained argument against Bauer in the first joint work with Engels. Marx argues that for all his espousal of atheism and of radical politics through biblical criticism, Bauer remains a theologian.

By contrast, in the next joint work, Bauer receives far less attention, for the key arguments against Bauer had already been made.


Yet this fierce polemic was by no means the end of the relationship, for Marx and Engels continued to keep up with Bauer’s prolific writing, and Bauer visited Marx when in London.


3. **Max Stirner**

Like Bauer, the engagement with Max Stirner (a pseudonym for Kaspar Schmidt) was deeply polemical. Unlike Bauer, it was relatively brief and intense. Yet the neglected and endless pages on Stirner in *The German Ideology* are vital for understanding the genesis of historical materialism. Stirner sought to recast the history of the world by means of the individual ego, which thereby becomes the lever of history (using the human Jesus as a signal example). Marx and Engels are drawn to respond on one topic after another – money, labour, class and so on – so that they begin to formulate the first rough outline of historical materialism. In the second draft of *The German Ideology*, the more substantial sections were moved to the opening part of the book on Feuerbach.

Stirner, Max. 2005 [1845], *The Ego and His Own: The Case of the Individual Against Authority*, translated by Steven T. Byington, Mineola, New York: Dover
4. Ludwig Feuerbach

In contrast to the polemic directed Bauer and Stirner, the approach to Feuerbach was far more positive. In his early letters to Feuerbach, Marx cannot find enough praise for Feuerbach.


Feuerbach’s famous inversion, concerning the projection of the gods by human beings, becomes the moment when the criticism of religion is complete – although Marx does not miss the dialectical point that the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism.


But Marx would soon make his crucial move beyond Feuerbach, arguing that Feuerbach had gone only halfway, focusing on religious alienation. The real task remained, namely to deal with alienation here on earth, with its material conditions.


Marx, Karl. 1845, Theses on Feuerbach, Volume 5, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976, pp. 3-8. Available at
Marx was, however, not averse to availing himself of slightly odd arguments, mentioning the work of a certain Daumer, who argued that early Christians did indeed – as the Romans alleged – slaughter human beings and eat them during the Eucharist.

Engels too would follow a similar path to Feuerbach, moving from the assumption that Feuerbach had said the last word on religion, providing thereby the philosophical basis of communism …
1990, pp. 353-98. Available at 

a. On Opium

Perhaps the most well-known slogan of Marx is that religion is ‘the opium of the people’. Yet, the image is quite ambivalent, for opium was perceived as both a common medicine and source of poetic inspiration, and, especially towards the end of the nineteenth century, as a social curse. It was both vital economically for the British Empire and yet it led to some of the worst elements of colonialism. Marx himself used opium as a medicine for his many ailments, as Jenny points in a letter to Engels.


For an excellent study of the ambivalence of the opium metaphor and the implications for Marx’s statements on religion, see:


b. Marx and Luther

A rarely acknowledged feature of Marx’s engagements with religion is his almost uniformly positive appreciation of Luther, the monk who inaugurated the German revolution, albeit inadequately.


Marx’s frequent citations, whether in jest or in serious economic analysis, are always appreciative, for Marx found Luther’s economic criticisms very pertinent.

http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1856/letters/56_03_05.htm.


5. Marx, Hegel and the State

Marx’s detailed notes on Hegel indicate the depth of both the influence of Hegel and the need for Marx to step beyond him. Here Marx argues that Hegel’s theory of the state suffers a similar problem to theology, indeed that Hegel’s argument is itself deeply theological: he begins with theology and thereby projects from sensuous human beings a world spirit or abstract thought which becomes a great over-riding force of history with its own existence and power. Marx suggests that Hegel’s dialectic begins with the estranged and abstracted infinite thought, its negation becomes the negation of the infinite and the positing of real, sensuous existence, and the negation of the negation is nothing less than the reassertion of the absolute and the banishment of sensuous existence.

Greater clarity of Marx’s argument may be found in both a note from the Kreuznach notebooks and, a little later, the section on Hegel in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*.


At the same time, Marx was writing on the question of the ‘Christian state’ promoted by Friedrich Wilhelm IV, arguing at first that theology, as an other-worldly concern, should have nothing to do with the worldly concerns of the state.


Soon, however, he would make a far more interesting dialectical argument: the secular state is in fact an attempt to resolve the contradictions of the ‘Christian state’, so much so that the secular state embodies those contradictions and is therefore the ultimate expression of the ‘Christian state’.

Engels makes a very similar argument in a delightful piece on Friedrich Wilhelm IV, outlining the impossible contradictions of a ‘Christian state’.


Or indeed the English constitution:


We find a similar line in the later *Communist Manifesto*: in the bourgeois revolution of the eighteenth century, Christian values became those of liberty and freedom of conscience.


Similar issues continue to appear in works through to the early 1890s.


*a. On grace*

A thread in these discussions concerns grace (*Gnade*), which may be read as the theological form of revolution, as the basis for the ‘social principles of Christianity’, or as the justification for the pure arbitrariness of the Prussian king, who is appointed ‘by the grace of God’ (a phrase found on Marx’s passport).


And then, many instances of polemical emphasis on the Prussian king’s favourite phrase, ‘by the grace of God’:


So much so that God’s love even diverted a bullet intended for his breast:

6. Fetishism

Perhaps the most interesting and complex engagement with a religious idea in Marx’s work is that of fetishism. He first encountered the term while reading, in its German translation, Charles de Brosses’s *Du culte des dieux fétiches ou Parallèle de l’ancienne religion de l’Égypte* (1760). De Brosses deployed a term that had arisen from Portuguese encounters on the African west coast in order to produce a wide-ranging theory of religion, using that material in order to reconstruct the religion of ancient Egypt.


For very useful background, see also:


a. Idols and Fetishes

Significantly, de Brosses made heavy use of biblical material as ‘evidence’ of ancient Egyptian religion, especially the biblical texts on idolatry, which were now subsumed under the new category of fetishism. Marx’s most extensive religious usage of fetishism seems to have taken place in the lost manuscript *On Christian Art*. However, we can find various elements of his approach to fetishism in a number of other publications at the time.


Marx continued to make use of the specifically religious dimension of fetishism throughout his writings, most notably in the notes on John Lubbock, made in the early 1880s.


b. On Moloch

The Ethnological Notebooks also show that Marx never forgot the insight he acquired from de Brosses, namely, that the category of idolatry may be subsumed under and thereby be transformed by the category of fetishism. In that light, both he and Engels deploy a favoured biblical motif, the god Moloch, known for demanding child sacrifice – an apt image of the myriad modes of exploitation.


Yet Marx did not rest content with religious fetishism, seeking to expand and reshape the term in an economic direction. So we find it used in order to explain the alienation of labour:


Or the mediatory role of money:


Or as the key to the commodity-form:


Finally, in the extraordinary *Economic Manuscripts of 1861-63* as well as the third volume of *Capital*, Marx expands this economic sense of fetishism to include all the abstractions from the real, social process of labour, such as the capitalist as a personification of capital, the productive powers of capital, use value and exchange value, the application of forces of nature and science, the products of labour in form of machinery, wealth and so on. They confront the worker as alien, objective presences in advance that rule over him. In short, capital itself becomes a power before which the worker is powerless: all these items ‘stand on their hind legs vis-à-vis the worker and confront him as capital’. Indeed, just like the commodity-form, capital ‘becomes a very mysterious being’. It is not for nothing that Marx writes of the ‘religion of everyday life’.


And then, in the twenty-fourth chapter of the third volume of *Capital*, Marx locates the fetish at the centre of capital. In the pure fetish formula, M-M’, in which money simply produces money (the financialised market), Marx coins a new term, *Kapital-Fetische*. Now the fetish is distilled as the essence of capitalism itself.


d. Roman Catholicism and Protestantism

A minor note that anticipates Weber in some respects is Marx’s repeated observation that whereas the external forms of Roman-Catholicism are appropriate for a monetary system, Protestantism is the appropriate reflex of the internalised world of credit and commodities. As with some of his key ideas, Marx picked this suggestion up from Engels’s early comment that Adam Smith was the ‘economic Luther’.


7. Engels’s Biblical Temptations

In contrast to Marx, who never seems to have had a religious commitment, Engels’s was a devout and sincere Reformed (Calvinist) Christian. With much angst and struggle, he gradually turned away from his faith, although he maintained a lively interest in Christianity, eventually coming to terms with it close to the end of his life with a thoroughly intriguing argument.

a. Reformed Faith

Engels was born and baptised into a sincere and devout Reformed (Calvinist) family.


He shared the same faith as his parents, not without devotion, as a poem written when he was 16 suggests.


And the church was so much a part of their lives that it would appear in the lively letters between Engels, while he was in Bremen, and his sister, Marie.

Yet he was not without his questions, contrary views, strength of opinion, so much so that his parents worry about him, while at the same time opening a small window into a pious and rowdy home (five children).


This critical edge shows up the youthful writings of his late teens and early twenties. Published in magazines and newspapers under pseudonyms (at least initially), they lambast the pietism of his home town, Elberfeld (Wuppertal, when Barmen is included as a twin town), and manifestations of conservative Christianity wider afield.


Later, after the 1848 revolutions and the issuing of a warrant for Engels’s arrest, his mother wrote to him, attempting to call him back to the fold of the faithful.


As Engels was to put to Conrad Schmidt many years later: he had to come to terms with his own ‘pious ultra-reactionary family’.


See also:


b. Krummacher

A crucial figure who influenced Engels deeply was F. W. Krummacher, head minister of the Reformed parish in Elberfeld and thereby the youthful Engels’s own minister. Engels finds Krummacher simultaneously unbearable and fascinating, an affront to reason and yet persuasive, an apparent reactionary who partially conceals a potentially more radical streak. These contradictions in Engels’s response to Krummacher were to characterise his approach to Christianity.


c. Biblical Debates

Contradictions also become a vital issue in what was the most crucial territory for the young Engels, the Bible. Reading the latest biblical criticism – David Strauss, Bruno Bauer – as well as the work of other Young Hegelians, Engels found his Reformed assumptions challenged and reshaped. All of which revealed in the extensive correspondence with his close friends and ministers in the church, the Graeber brothers.


The Bible was never far from his mind, with other texts from the time reflecting his intense interest in matters biblical. One is a commentary on Karl Gutzkow’s play, *König Saul*, and the other a rather good poem which illustrates the closely interwoven nature of biblical, theological and political debates in the German states.


Over the following years, Engels would maintain his interest in matters biblical, commenting to Marx from time to time on debates, new developments, the latest book he had read – such Ernst Renan’s *The Antichrist* or Rev. Charles Foster’s *The Historical Geography of Arabia* and the relationship between Hebrews and Arabs.


And the discussion over ancient Hebrews, Arabs and Persians:


d. Schelling

Back in the early 1840s, a young Engels was undertaking the obligatory military service in Berlin. The work was not onerous, so Engels availed himself of the opportunity to join in with the Young Hegelians meeting in Hippel Cafe, as well as attend the lectures of Schelling. Called back from retirement by King Friedrich Wilhelm IV (and his advisors) to refute Hegel, Schelling delivered a series of well-attended inaugural lectures in Berlin. Engels’s wrote, still under pseudonym, three pieces: one a collection of lecture notes with commentary, another a more sustained criticism, and the third a satire, written in the voice of a pious champion of Schelling.


See also:

8. Revelation and Revolution

The developments that may be traced in the previous section, especially an awareness of contradictions in the Bible and in Christianity, would lead to a profound sense of the political ambivalence of Christianity in the thought of Engels.

a. Revelation

The path to that ambivalence passes through Engels’s fascination with the biblical book of Revelation. However, lest we think that here at last is concrete evidence that Marxism is merely a secularised Judaeo-Christian eschatology, Engels’s engagements with Revelation are distinctly not apocalyptic. The themes of Revelation may be deployed playfully among friends, as critical satire, and in order to express a profound sense of change in his own life – usually in terms of the effect of the new, free thought.


Later, Engels would return to the book of Revelation, but now through an appreciation of Bruno Bauer’s critical work on the text. The biblical book becomes a historical window into earliest Christianity, with none of the usual beliefs and structures associated. It presents a group of Jews (not Christians) who believed the end would come soon. There is no Trinity, for Jesus is subordinate to God, and certainly no Holy Spirit. There is no doctrine of original sin, no baptism or sacrament of communion, no justification by faith, no elaborate story of the death and resurrection of Christ, and no religion of love. This position would become the basis for Engels’s argument concerning the revolutionary origins of Christianity.


b. Atheism

However, before indicating the readings for that position, it is worth recalling that Engels maintained – in his later life – a staunch, materialist atheism, finding the church and religion in general quite reactionary and rejoicing in the advance of atheism among the working class. The texts are almost endless.


See also:


c. Revolutionary (and Reactionary) Religion

By far the most significant dimension of Engels’s dealings with Christianity is the way he could both castigate it for being thoroughly reactionary and argue for its deep-seated revolutionary tendencies. On the reactionary side, we find the following texts:


It is worth remembering that atheism was, quite deliberately, never an official platform of the International.


More often, however, Engels explored the revolutionary history and potential of Christianity, noting this feature already in the early 1840s.


By the time he came to write his influential piece on Müntzer and the Peasant War, Engels tried to argue that the theological language was merely an outer garment for a radically secular political message.


Yet he was also moving to the point that Christianity itself has a revolutionary core, and that its first emergence was thoroughly revolutionary – so much so that one can find many parallels with the early socialist movement (splits, persecution, struggle for cohesion and so on).


Until at last, not long before he died, Engels published a long study that had been on his mind for almost fifty years. In it he argued that Christianity was revolutionary, that its followers came from among the oppressed and downtrodden classes, that it faced insurmountable problems, that the socialist movement might learn a lesson or two, that it simultaneously overturned the ancient world and offered an other-worldly redemption while doing so. As a teaser he offered an outline of his argument in his introduction to a reissue of Marx’s *The Class Struggles in France*:

> It is now, almost to the year, sixteen centuries since a dangerous party of overthrow was likewise active in the Roman empire. It undermined religion and all the foundations of the state; it flatly denied that Caesar’s will was the supreme law; it was without a fatherland, was international; it spread over the whole empire, from Gaul to Asia, and beyond the frontiers of the empire. It had long carried on seditious activities underground in secret; for a considerable time, however, it had felt itself strong enough to come out into the open. This party of overthrow, which was known by the name of Christians.

1990, p. 523. Available at
http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1895/03/06.htm.

There followed the whole argument.