Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were born within two years of each other. Marx 1818 in Trier and Engels in 1820 in Barmen (Wuppertal). While Marx received a formal education, obtaining a doctorate from the Friedrich Wilhelm IV University in Berlin, Engels was largely self-taught, since his father put him to work in the family business the moment he matriculated from the gymnasium at the age of seventeen. Although Marx was the deeper thinker of the two, Engels was by far the better writer. Both beat their own path to historical materialism, until their meeting of minds in Paris in 1844. From then on they were collaborators, settling finally in England to escape political persecution. From here they organized the International Working Men’s Association, or First International, which quickly spread to other countries. Marx died from overwork at the age of sixty-five in 1883, while Engels lived on until 1895, eventually succumbing to throat cancer from his love of fine tobacco, wines and beer.

Since Marx and Engels made their living by writing, they wrote an immense amount of material. Much of it was journalism for various newspapers and magazines in Europe and North America, but a great deal also comprised substantial studies of economics, philosophy, history, politics, military matters and, last but not least, religion. The most complete collection of their works is the fifty-volume Marx and Engels Collected Works, published between 1975 and 2005. The German edition, the Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe remains incomplete at forty-two volumes and there is more material still turning up. Now under the guidance of the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam, it is hoped that the German edition will finally be completed.

1975a) and the *Theses on Feuerbach* ([1845] 1976a). Written during his early years of journalism and research, these are only the most substantial among them. Many of his works contain comments and observations but it is impossible to list them here. Engels wrote a number of key texts on religion over his lifetime, including *Letters from Wuppertal* (Engels [1839] 1975c), observations on religious life in Bremen while he was there ([1839–42] 1975a–f,y), three essays on Schelling’s lectures in Berlin ([1841–2] 1975g–i), religious satire ([1842] 1975b), extended correspondence with his friends the Graeber brothers on matters theological and biblical ([1839–41] 1975j–x) and then a series of major works: *The Peasant War in Germany* ([1850] 1978), *The Book of Revelation* ([1883] 1990a) and, towards the end of his life, the influential *On the History of Early Christianity* ([1894–5] 1990c). Two other joint texts are also steeped in religious matters, namely *The Holy Family* (Marx & Engels [1845] 1975) and *The German Ideology* ([1845–6] 1976). Some, but not all, of these works, have been gathered in various collections over time (see "Further reading").

While Marx never seems to have had any religious commitment, Engels grew up in a pious Calvinist household in Wuppertal. Through great struggle he eventually gave his Calvinism away, but not before it had left him with a deep knowledge of the Bible and a life-long interest in matters biblical and religious.

**THE RELIGIOUS TURN OF GERMAN PHILOSOPHY**

The most well-known and influential argument of Marx and Engels is that religion cannot be considered apart from its social and economic conditions. While Marx tended to view religion as the expression of alienation, Engels was more prepared to grant it a liberating dimension. Yet there is far more to their views on religion than this argument. It is my task to explore some of those other dimensions in what follows. In fact, religion appears in the work of Marx and Engels in three ways: the context in which they first developed historical materialism, the use they make of religion in developing their own arguments, and explicit arguments concerning religion.

Beginning with the context, for a number of historical reasons Germany and Prussia dealt with a whole range of modern issues through religion, which really means Christianity and the Bible. While France had the radical atheistic criticism of Voltaire and company and while England had the deists, in Germany the debate was restricted to the nature of the Bible. So we find in the early part of the nineteenth century the bombshell of David Strauss’ *Das Leben Jesu* (The life of Jesus; 1835, 2006), where he argued that the accounts of Jesus in the Gospels are mythological, or the arguments of the biblical critic Bruno Bauer (1838, 1840, 1841, 1842) for a democratic self-consciousness, or those of Ludwig Feuerbach ([1841] 1986, 1989) that religion is actually the projection of what is best in human beings, a projection that leads us to create an entity called ‘God’. Through these theological
and biblical works all of the central questions were debated, such as democracy, freedom (of the press), reason, republicanism, parliamentary representation, and so on. It cannot be stressed enough that these debates took place above all on the territory of the Bible. It was there that Marx and Engels began their philosophical and political work.

AGAINST THE THEOLOGICAL HEGELIANS

In order to develop their own system of thought, Marx and Engels had to distinguish themselves from the overwhelming theological frame in which German thought operated in the 1830s and 1840s. For a time Marx counted himself as a friend of Bauer, hoping for a university appointment under his patronage. For his part, Engels identified closely with the Young Hegelians in Berlin, especially during his year of military service (1842). His works on Schelling ([1841–2] 1975g–i) and the satirical poem The Insolently Threatened Yet Miraculously Rescued Bible ([1842] 1975b) come from this period. However, as their collaborative work progressed, they had to come to terms with the major Young Hegelians, especially in the two rambling joint works, The Holy Family ([1845] 1975) and The German Ideology ([1845–6] 1976).

Ludwig Feuerbach’s projections

Alongside Strauss’ Life of Jesus, Feuerbach’s The Essence of Christianity ([1841] 1986, 1989) was one of the most significant texts of the time. Marx saw the idea that religion and the gods were projections of human beings as a huge breakthrough. He used and extended what may be called the ‘Feuerbachian inversion’ at a number of points in his own work. Feuerbach’s idea is an inversion since it argues that previous thought about religion began at the wrong point, namely in the middle. God was not a pre-existing being who determined human existence; rather, human beings determine God’s existence.

Marx takes this argument and claims that it marks the end of the criticism of religion: ‘For Germany the criticism of religion is in the main complete, and criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism’ (Marx [1844] 1975b: 175; [1844] 1976b: 378). He goes on to suggest that the first great phase of criticism – the criticism of religion – began with Luther and ended with Feuerbach. The next revolutionary phase begins after Feuerbach and Marx is part of that new phase.

For Marx, Feuerbach was the last word on religion. Statements such as the following are pure Feuerbach:

Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d’honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal

189
basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. ([1844] 1975b: 175; [1844] 1976b: 378)

However, Marx also wanted to go beyond Feuerbach on two counts. First, since human beings project religion from within themselves, the place to begin analysis is not in the heavens, but here on earth with flesh-and-blood people. Secondly, the fact that people do make such projections was a signal that something was wrong here on earth. If people placed their hopes and dreams elsewhere, then that meant they could not be realized here and now. So the presence of religion becomes a sign of alienation, of economic and social oppression. That needs to be fixed. We find this theme very strongly in the famous Theses on Feuerbach, especially the fourth and eleventh theses:

Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-estrangement, of the duplication of the world into a religious world and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. But that the secular basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must, therefore, itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionized in practice. Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be destroyed in theory and in practice. The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it. (Marx [1845] 1976a: 4–5)

Marx would go on to use the 'Feuerbachian inversion' in a number of ways, not least to argue that Hegel's position on the state was exactly the same as theology: it began with abstracted ideas such as state, sovereignty, constitution and tried to make human beings fit (see Marx [1843] 1975a). Much later on, in 1886, Engels would fill this picture out in his lucid prose and show why Feuerbach was so important for the development of historical materialism (Engels [1886] 1990b).

Bruno Bauer's A-theology

Given Feuerbach's importance, it is not for nothing that the first section of The German Ideology should be devoted to his work. There is also a section given over to Bruno Bauer. In a number of writings Marx would come back to Bauer, initially to defend him (Marx [1842] 1975f), but then later to attack him mercilessly. Why? The basic reason is that Bauer achieved a radical republican and democratic position through his biblical criticism and theology. Marx in particular was thoroughly opposed to such a possibility: theology dealt with heaven and was
not concerned with earth — *that* was the task of the new historical materialism. For Marx, Bauer was far too much under the influence of Hegel's idealist method and in many respects Marx's distancing from Bauer is an effort to come to terms with Hegel. So we find the repeated and often heavily satirical criticism (especially in *The Holy Family*) that 'Saint Bruno' Bauer left matters in the realm of theology and thereby stunted his critical work. Marx was also excising the influence of someone who had been a close friend, first as joint members of the Young Hegelian *Doktorklub* from 1837, later as a teacher of the book of Isaiah at the University of Berlin in 1839 and as one who might have gained Marx a position. The problem was that Bauer was dismissed from Berlin in 1839 for his radical theological and political positions. He argued that the church was ossified and dogmatic, for it claimed universal status for a particular person and group. In the same way that we find a struggle in the Bible between free self-consciousness and religious dogmatism, so also in Bauer's own time the religious dogmatism of the church needed to be overthrown. In its place Bauer argued for atheism, a democratic Jesus for all and republicanism.

*Max Stirner's world history*

So we find Marx and Engels at the point where Feuerbach's inversion has enabled them to step beyond the criticism of religion and focus on the criticism of the earthly conditions of human struggle, and Bauer's radical theology had to be negated since religion cannot provide one with a radical critique. The engagement with Max Stirner is a little different. Most do not bother with the endless pages of *The German Ideology* given over to a detailed refutation of Stirner's *The Ego and His Own* (1845, 2005), preferring to stop after the early description of the new historical materialist method. However, the Stirner section is crucial for the following reason: Marx and Engels develop the first coherent statement of historical materialism, which really is a theory of the workings of world history, in response to Stirner's own theory of world history. The way they wrote the manuscript (which was never published in their lifetimes) is important: as they wrote sections on Stirner they found that increasingly coherent statements of an alternative position began emerging in their own thought. Some of these statements remain in the Stirner section, while others were moved to the beginning of the manuscript and placed in the Feuerbach section. What we find is that in contrast to Stirner's radical focus on the individual, Marx and Engels develop a collective focus. Instead of Stirner's valuation of spiritual religion, they sought an approach that was very much of this world. Above all, Stirner wanted to provide a schema of world history that was pitched against Hegel. The reason why Marx and Engels devote so much attention to him is that they too want a schema of world history that overthrows Hegel. The catch is that the very effort at producing a theory of world history is a religious act. One only has to look at the structure of Marx and Engels' criticism, moving
through the major books of the Bible and quoting the Bible ad nauseam, criticizing Stirner’s prophetic role and theological dabbling, to see that what is at stake is religion. In the same way that the final edited form of the Bible moves from creation to the end of history and the new Jerusalem, so also does Hegel offer a theory of world history in terms of the unfolding of spirit, so also does Stirner do so in terms of the ego, and so also do Marx and Engels in terms of the march of modes of productions, each one collapsing owing to internal contradictions.

THE TWO SIDES OF OPIUM: THE AMBIVALENCE OF RELIGION

Try the following game: begin a discussion on religion and then after a while mention Marx; then ask for the first word that comes into people’s heads. Invariably the answer will be ‘opium.’ The key passage, over which much ink has been spilled, is as follows: “Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression 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 soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people” (Marx [1844] 1975b: 175; [1844] 1976b: 378). Too often we assume that Marx felt that he (or rather Feuerbach) had put the last nail in the coffin of religion. And too often we assume that he did not hear the knocking from the inside of the coffin. However, Marx was a little more astute than that, as the preceding quotation shows. Here we find a profound awareness of the ambivalence of religion. It is both expression of suffering and protest against it; it provides people with a sigh, a heart, a soul in the midst of a heartless and soulless world. Now, Marx wants to set about changing that oppressive and soulless world, but what he also recognizes is that religion is politically ambivalent. We may put this more strongly and say that here we find the possibility that religion may be both revolutionary and reactionary, that it may seek to overturn the world and build it up from scratch or it may seek to preserve the old one and its comfortable position within it. Or even that a single religion such as Christianity has this tension within it. Even the famous phrase ‘opium of the people’ carries this ambivalence: Marx himself, like so many of his contemporaries, used opium as a medicine to relieve his many ailments. It was regarded as a blessed relief before the days of aspirin. Yet there was increasing concern over the negative effects of opium and a growing opinion that it was more of a panacea than a cure.

IDOLS, FETISHES AND GRAVEN IMAGES

One of the most read sections of Marx’s Capital is the one called “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” (Marx [1867] 1996: 81–94; [1867] 1962: 85–98). Here Marx traces the way commodities gain a life of their own and begin to interact with one another as though they were social beings. At the same time,
human social relations suffer for they have become like the relations between things. It is as though commodities and human beings have swapped roles. Yet, this is by no means the first time Marx has made such an argument. It derives ultimately from the study of religion. Marx offers the following hint at the opening of this section in *Capital*: “A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx [1867] 1996: 81; [1867] 1962: 85).

So let us follow his hint and see where it leads. The first stop is with the emerging study of world religions, where data and studies were becoming available from Latin America. In criticizing the various decisions by the Rhine Province Assembly (a gathering of nobles) back in 1839, Marx compares the Spanish fetish of gold (in the eyes of the Cubans) to the nobles’ fetish of wood, for they wished to punish the peasants who helped themselves to fallen wood (Marx [1842] 1975a: 262–3). There is also, tantalizingly, the lost manuscript *On Christian Art*, which apparently dealt with fetishism. A little later (1844) Marx would develop the argument that money as a mediator of exchange is analogous to Christ the mediator. Christ is projected by human beings as the ideal mediator, whom we must worship, from whom we have our being, without whom we are worthless, and above all as the one who mediates between us and God and enables our salvation. So also does money become a quasi-divine mediator: before it too we must kneel, we gain our worth from money, its pursuit becomes our goal in life, and it mediates between objects and us (see Marx [1844] 1975c: 212). In other words, the criticism of money and commodities has a distinctly religious angle to it.

That angle, I would suggest, is the criticism of idolatry. The logic of idolatry is as follows: a worshipper makes an object of wood, stone, metal or even plastic. She shapes it into an appealing figure, places it in a prominent place and whenever she looks at it she is reminded of her god. However, at some point the symbolic connection is broken and the figure itself becomes the object of veneration. Now it is raised to divine status, granted superhuman powers, controls one’s life and so on. The term ‘fetish’ is merely a more neutral term for ‘idol’ but the logic is strikingly similar. One could argue that Marx’s criticism of capital, especially its fetishism of commodities, is also a criticism of the mystical, religious air that capital acquires. The criticism of religion has become the criticism of capital.

**THE BIBLICAL TEMPTATIONS OF ENGELS**

As mentioned earlier, Engels grew up in a very pious Calvinist household and was clearly committed until his late teens or early twenties. In the process he came to know his Bible very well, could read the New Testament in Greek and could quote almost any verse at will. And for all his efforts to become a staunch atheist, he was never quite able to excise the Bible from his thought or the tendency to make a
ROLAND BOER

biblical allusion or quote a verse here and there. In his early works two features of the Bible show up that were to continue to have an influence in the way he thought: a liking for apocalyptic biblical texts and the challenge of contradictions.

I begin with the question of contradictions. The burning issue that turns up again and again in Engels' early texts is: what do we do with contradictions in the Bible? For example, how can Gideon have asked God to stop the sun in Judges if the earth revolves around the sun? Or why do we find two very different genealogies for Jesus, the son of God (who should not need a genealogy), in Matthew and Luke? The problem is by no means new and has taxed biblical critics for millennia. But for Engels and his Calvinist peers, a contradiction in a text that was written by an all-powerful and unchanging God was a problem. Did it mean that the Bible was not the ipsissima verba of God? Did he put them there deliberately? Is he fallible? A contradiction or three in the text raised profound questions about the nature of God and one's faith. For Engels, in his correspondence with the Graeber brothers (Engels [1839–41] 1975j–x) and in his poem The Insolently Threatened Yet Miraculously Rescued Bible ([1842] 1975b), the issue of contradictions is absolutely central. It is one of the major factors that would lead Engels, like so many other students of the Bible, to lose his faith. But in the process contradiction became a central feature of historical materialist analysis, albeit now between classes and above all between the forces and relation of production.

As for apocalyptic, Engels often made use of the scene of final judgement at the end of history, whether playfully, in critical satire or in order to express his own sense of the times. So we find him characterizing his close friend Friedrich Graeber (a minister in the church) playing cards oblivious to the final battle of good and evil that rages around him ([1839] 1975o). Then there are his mock depictions of the battles between the orthodox theologians and 'The Free', as the Young Hegelians of Berlin called themselves ([1841] 1975q; [1842] 1975b). And then at the close of his booklet Schelling and Revelation ([1842] 1975g), he makes a very different use of the book of Revelation. Flushed and excited with the new discoveries, having just read Feuerbach's The Essence of Christianity and feeling the shackles of his old narrow belief structure snapping open, Engels celebrates with a rousing image of the final battle between free thought and obscurantism, all of which ends with the arrival of a New Jerusalem.

Marxism is often accused of being a secular version of apocalyptic history, with its struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie that will eventually lead to communism. Marx himself might have become excited at times (he was known to get red-faced and nervous before speaking in public), but this element would seem to be a legacy of Engels rather than Marx. It shows up later on, after he gave away his faith, in two respects. First, Engels became a respected military analyst and correspondent, writing a huge number of sparkling newspaper articles and books on the military. Secondly, late in life he came back to the book of Revelation to make use of the newly established historical criticism of the Bible (Engels [1883] 1990a). The purpose was to defuse the wild speculation and excitement
the biblical book has generated over time by showing that the lurid imagery actually has a mundane historical reference point in the Roman Empire, for it refers to the expected return of Nero and his defeat by God's forces.

**ENGELS' THEOLOGICAL ESSAYS**

There is one last feature of Engels' essay on the book of Revelation that is vitally important: he points out that Christianity was actually a revolutionary movement and that the book of Revelation is an expression of that movement. This argument would become the centerpiece in two final works to be considered here, his *On the History of Early Christianity* and *The Peasant War in Germany*.

While *The Peasant War in Germany* is mostly concerned with Engels' great love, namely tracing out battle plans, troop movements and assessing tactics, it also has a curious argument concerning Thomas Müntzer. The latter was the leading theologian of the revolt and war in 1525. A reformer who was deeply influenced by Martin Luther (see Vol. 3, Ch. 3), he took Luther's position to its logical conclusion, threw in the need for constant contact with God through dreams and visions and predicted that the final battle of Armageddon would come soon. Needless to say he met a swift end against the heavy armament of the nobility. While many write off Müntzer as a crackpot, Engels wanted to give him his due. Müntzer was, argued Engels, expressing through theological and biblical language the grievances of class oppression and conflict. Religious language was the only way he knew to express such grievances. If he had lived in Engels' own day the language would have been very different. Indeed, Engels gives his argument a strange twist, suggesting that the closer Müntzer gets to economic and class analysis, the more atheistic he becomes. Despite this odd move, the text gained a life of its own and the better parts of the argument were expanded by the likes of Karl Kautsky (2002) and Ernst Bloch (1969). Müntzer also became a hero of the German Democratic Republic.

What Engels had managed to do with this piece on the Peasant War is point to a revolutionary side of Christianity. At this stage (1850) Engels still wanted to separate the revolutionary sharply from the religious; the twain should never meet. Forty-three years later, two years before his death, he wrote *On the History of Early Christianity*, a text that influences biblical studies to this day. The basic argument is that early Christianity was as close as one could get to a socialist movement in the ancient world. In this respect it has a number of parallels with the socialism of Engels' own day: appeal to the downtrodden masses, rapid expansion, collective cooperation and an alternative economic and social network. One reason Engels came to such a position was that it provides an answer as to why one revolutionary movement after another -- such as Müntzer and the peasants, or the Bohemian Taborites, or the French communists, or Wilhelm Weitling and his communist followers in Engels' own day -- drew its inspiration from Christianity.
Another reason is that with the rapid spread of socialism throughout Europe, most notably in the German Social Democratic Party (whose rise gave Engels great hope), many workers with religious commitments were joining the party. Engels wished to reassure them that Christianity and socialism are not incompatible. A further reason lay in Engels’ effort to link the relatively new critical approach to the Bible to historical materialism. Dispensing with dogmatic positions and seeking only what was historically verifiable, such critical readings of the Bible challenged many of the assumptions about the authorship, formation and nature of biblical literature. From this scholarship Engels draws on conclusions concerning the Gospels and the impossibility of knowing anything much about Jesus (here he relies on Bauer, whom Engels admired) and repeats his observations about the book of Revelation.

Above all, this booklet is the brave effort of a mature Engels to come to terms with his background. He has moved from commitment through outright rejection to a realization of how Christianity is still very much a part of him. In other words, he admits that the move from Christian commitment to a communist one is not so strange after all, for there are many elements within Christianity that have been transformed into communism. The paradox is that this text by Engels was to have an abiding influence in biblical studies, especially the argument concerning the appeal of Christianity to the lower strata of Hellenistic society.

‘YOU’D DO BETTER TO READ THE PROPHETS’: REVISITING THE ESCHATOLOGY OF MARX AND ENGELS

The effect of Marx and Engels on the philosophy of religion is complex. They were among the first to stress that the shape and nature of religion is heavily dependent on people’s social and economic situations. They forged the historical materialist method in close response to key radical theologians such as Feuerbach, Bauer and even Stirner. Marx’s hints concerning the ambivalence of religion (it is both opium and protest) is taken much further by Engels, who ended up arguing that early Christianity was a socialist movement. And one of Marx’s key ideas concerning the fetishism of commodities has a complex background in the study of religions and the biblical critique of idolatry.

In conclusion, let me raise an oft-made criticism of Marxism: it is merely a secularized eschatology. The criticism was first made by Leszek Kolakowski in his Main Currents of Marxism (1981) and has been repeated ad nauseam ever since: the proletariat is a collective redeemer figure and communism is the New Jerusalem after the final battle to end history. From what I have considered above, this is a crude caricature. Of course, there is influence, but it is far more complex. Marx for one was not interested in anything eschatological, and his one-time teacher Bauer was dead against it. If anyone had a liking for the apocalyptic, it was Engels: from his early fascination and use of apocalyptic themes as both satire
and celebration, through his immersion in military matters and reflections on
the nature of what a communist army would look like, through to his final argu-
ments concerning the essentially socialist nature of early Christianity, Engels finds
the apocalyptic an appealing literary and social tradition. The best conclusion is
that the influence was mutual: religion and Marxism have actually fed into one
another.

FURTHER READING

Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

On society see also Ch. 21; Vol. 3, Ch. 2; Vol. 5, Ch. 4. On theory of projection see also Ch.
10. On world religions see also Chs 6, 18.