"Religion is the opium of the people"—this would have been the most well-known statement by Karl Marx concerning religion. It seems to mean that religion is no better than a drug that dulls the senses; it makes one forget one's sorrows, and causes bodily and psychological harm. Not only is this assumption incorrect, but it is also a caricature of Marx's complex position on religion. To provide a more comprehensive and nuanced picture, I will outline the main points of Marx's thoughts on religion in relation to philosophy. It involves relating his work to the Young Hegelians, Bruno Bauer, Max Stirner and Ludwig Feuerbach. I then deal with the ambivalence of the opium metaphor in the context of the passage in which it appears. I close with the most interesting and significant of Marx's arguments concerning religion, namely, the fetish. As these features of Marx's reflections on religion unfold, it will become clear how they are crucial to the nature of his work as a whole.

Biography, context and writings on religion

Before proceeding, some biographical and contextual material is needed. Marx was born in 1818 (two years before his closest friend and lifelong companion, Friedrich Engels) in Trier, Prussia. He was a brilliant student at the gymnasiuim, before obtaining a doctorate from the Friedrich Wilhelm IV (now Humboldt) University in Berlin. Through an eventful 63 years, Marx had to flee Prussia, then France, then Belgium, since the police were on his tail for revolutionary activities. He and his family settled in London, living in poverty until Engels was able to supply them with resources from his family firm. In London, Marx and Engels organized the International Working Men's Association, or First International, and fostered communist movements around the world. Marx died from overwork in 1883.
The context into which Marx was born was the backward economic and political status of the German states. Economically, they lagged well behind the Netherlands, England and France in the development of capitalism; politically, the Prussian king, Friedrich Wilhelm III and IV, sought to ensure the continuity of the monarchy, stifle any reform movements and foster the "Christian state." When the new Prussian king, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, took power in 1840, he continued the same policies, which were met with reaction from all sectors of society. Despite a few vague hints at reform to keep the liberals happy, Friedrich Wilhelm IV sought to wind back the clock even further. The "Christian state" would be maintained no matter what stood in its way: one by one, the reforms of 1830-15 (reluctantly granted by the king during the Prussian revolution) were rolled back. In effect, they were trying to hold back the push for political power from a newly wealthy bourgeoisie, a push they saw as anti-church, anti-aristocratic and democratic.

Unlike France, with its revolutionary experiences and the radical atheism of Voltaire and company, and unlike England, with its burst of industrialisation and the growth of dissent, in the German state debate over modern issues was mediated through theology and the Bible (see Drechsel 1999). As Engels put it, in order to form a religion for the German public opinion in politics and religion in fact in a book "over Germany itself" (Engels 1841, 108). They waged furious controversies over the Bible, especially the New Testament and its Gospels. In short, the role of Jesus in the Gospels was the battleground in the political powder-kiel, precisely because political and ideological power hung on this figure. If theology was nothing less than the "vanguard of public debate in Germany for most of the first half of the nineteenth century, then the Bible was the terrain of battle for the future of political struggles over representation, politics, parliamentary representation, freedom of the press, bourgeois democracy, individual rights, secularism, reason and religion. Thus, to create the Bible or Christianity, was to create the reactionary political situation. It is no surprise, then, that the most controversial work of mid-nineteenth century Germany was the work of David Strauss, Bruno Bauer argued against through biblical interpretation, arguments, and Feuerbach's proposal (1841, 1842, 1843, 1844, 1845, 1846) for religious and human beings as deeply revolutionary, since it

The young and theological Hegelians

Although he studied theology at the gymnasium, Marx never felt any religious commitment. Indeed, he found the connection between the church and the ruling class objectionable. However, given the way philosophical and political thought was mediated through theology, not given the that the most radical thinkers in the
German states were the Young Hegelians (a radical group of philosophers working to develop Hegel's thought), both Marx and Engels had to negotiate this thought to develop their own positions. The following focuses on three important philosophers and theologians. Against Bruno Bauer and Max Stirner, Marx began to define his own position, especially since their positions too were radical. In contrast, Ludwig Feuerbach influenced Marx deeply, and he used Feuerbach as a springboard for his own approach to religion.

**Bruno Bauer**

The first to influence Marx deeply was Bruno Bauer (1809–82), the radical biblical critic. Bauer taught and deeply influenced Marx, especially during the latter's studies at university. Not only did Marx study the biblical book of Isaiah under Bauer's direction (1839), but Marx's doctoral thesis on Epicurus reveals Bauer's influence (1841). In the early 1840s, they planned numerous works together, including a journal and a jointly authored book. Marx, however, was unable to complete his part, which became the now lost work, *A Tractate on Christian Art.* Marx's close connection with Bauer was also pragmatic, for he hoped for a university position under Bauer's patronage. This was not to be, for Bauer's radical theological work and political republicanism saw him removed, first from his post at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin in 1839, and then from Bonn in 1842. With no prospects left within a university as his license to teach was revoked, he purchased a small farm, ran a tobacco shop and wrote—as prophetically as ever—in the evenings until his death in 1862.

As for Bauer, he argued that the church was ossified and dogmatic, since it claimed universal status for a particular person (Christ) and group (the church). In the name of free self-consciousness, he argued that the church's religious dogmatism should be overthrown and replaced with atheism, democracy, and republicanism. Marx was initially impressed, but he later came to criticize Bauer sharply, especially in reply to Bauer's *On the Jewish Question* (Bauer 1843b, Marx 1844 1975e). Why did Marx change his tune? Bauer had reached a radical republican and democratic position through his theology, but for Marx this was the wrong approach. The Marx of this time held that theology dealt with heaven and not earth—that is the task of the new historical materialism. In the end, for Marx, Bauer was too much under the influence of Hegel's idealist method. So, we find the repeated criticism that "main Bruno" left matters in the realm of theology and thereby stained his critical work.

**Max Stirner**

Marx Stirner was the nom-de-plume of Johann Kaspar Schleiermacher (1800–56). His book, though long forgotten, seemed quite a stir when it was first published and even post-modernism. Stirner's central category was the individual, in the radical sense: this individual was born of any social, state, family, church or collective connection so as to stand solitarily before history. Indeed, Stirner set out in a somewhat rambling fashion to explore the understanding of history itself in light of what he felt was a new approach. For Marx and Engels, Stirner's book was crucial, so they devoted over 300 pages to refuting it in *The German Ideology.* It prompted them to develop the first coherent statement of historical materialism in response to Stirner's account of world history. That is, Marx and Engels offered an alternative theory of world history as they developed their critique of Stirner. The way they wrote the manuscript (which was never published in their lifetimes) is important: as they wrote on Stirner they found that increasingly coherent statements of an alternative position began to emerge. Some of these statements remain in the Stirner section, while others were moved to the beginning of the manuscript and placed in the Feuerbach chapter (especially sections II and III). In contrast to Stirner's radical focus on the individual, Marx and Engels developed a collective focus. Instead of Stirner's use of Jesus as the last great individual human ego, 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 devoted so much attention to him is that they too wanted a schema of world history that overturned Hegel. The difference was that while Stirner made the leap of history the radical individual ego modelled on a very human Jesus, Marx and Engels located the leap in the mental contradictions of class, economics and modes of production. The long struggle with Stirner was an effort to overcome this residual religious influence. One needs only look at the structure of their criticism—moving through the major books of the Bible and quoting the Bible ad nauseam, criticizing Stirner's prophetic role and theological abdication—to see that religion is at stake. Out of that intense struggle the new clear statement of historical materialism arose.

**Ludwig Feuerbach**

Thus, Marx developed his position by criticizing the work of Bauer and Stirner. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) was a different proposition. For Marx drew deeply on his work. In Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841, 1864), Marx found the proposal that religion and the gods were projections of human beings immensely helpful. As its core is what may be called the "Feuerbachian inversion"—previous thoughts about religion began at the wrong point, namely in the middle, working from God to human beings. Instead, argued Feuerbach, God is not a pre-existing being who determines human existence; rather, human beings determine God who then comes to be seen as the cause of human existence.

We may see Feuerbach's influence in the midst of Marx's most famous statement on religion, in the introduction to his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law.*

Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point of view, its enthusiasm, its moral
At the same time, Marx went beyond Feuerbach on two counts. First, since human beings project religion from within themselves, one begins analysis not in the heuristics, but here on earth. Marx still tended to see theology as an other-worldly concern, while the basis of philosophy and political criticism is this-worldly (see also Marx [1843] 1975a). In doing so, Marx missed the dialectical nature of Feuerbach's argument, for he was both radically theological and radically materialist. Feuerbach sought both to ground theology in human reality and thereby purify theology in the process. Second, the fact that people make such projections is a signal that something is wrong here on earth. For if they place their hopes elsewhere, then they cannot realize them here and now. Religion becomes a sign of social and economic alienation and that needs to be fixed. We find this theme very strongly in the fourth and eleventh Theses on Feuerbach, the most developed of Marx's engagement with Feuerbach.

Feuerbach went on from the fact of religious self-estrangement, of the duplication of the world into a religious world and a secular one. His work focuses in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. But the secular has lifted off from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the cloud. Marx's analysis is only by the inner strife and internal contradictions of the religious world. The inner must, therefore, itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionized in practice. Thus, for instance, once the unhappy family is discovered to be the secret of the unhappy family, the former must then be destroyed in theory and in practice. The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.

(Marx [1843] 1975a, 176-7)

On the nature of historical materialism

Thus far, we have found that Marx developed his own philosophical position in response to the work of Feuerbach and Saint-Simon, and used Feuerbach as a springboard to reach much deeper conclusions. This position came to be known as "historical" or "dialectical" materialism. Rather than the monism of naive materialism, in which all aspects of reality are produced out of matter, Marx's materialism is dialectical. The key is not to see a diachronic opposition of idealism, in which one argues over causation in terms of ideas or matter—are ideas the primary cause of reality, or is all our reality caused by matter? Rather, the materialism in question is able to account for the nature and reality of idealism. As the quotations concerning Feuerbach show, Marx did not reject the idea of ideality, indeed, he sought to understand it in a different materialist fashion. At times, this position leads Marx to oppose a vulgar form of materialism, in which religion among other idealistic forms are mere evocatives of the brain. Although this vulgar form remains a part of Marx, it is always used with sophisticated dialectical formulations, in which ideas are produced by material conditions and contribute to the production of those conditions. The complex dialectic is found at the heart of his argument concerning fetishism and exploitation.

This materialism is also historical, in the sense that economic and social factors play a crucial role in producing the world and who we are as human beings. This approach has become so commonplace today (feeding into the understanding that we are socially constructed beings) that its origins with Marx and Engels is often forgotten. If we return to the quotations concerning Feuerbach, the historical conditions are the "inner strife and internal contradictions" of our everyday world. Of course, the point of historical materialism is not merely to understand this strife hidden world, but to change it.

Opium and the ambivalence of religion

One text from Marx's engagement with Feuerbach has caught the popular imagination in relation to Marx's theory of religion. It comes again from the introduction to his Grundrisse zu der Kritik der Hegelschen Philosophie des Rechts.

Religions suffering is, as in 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] 1975a, 1:27)

The phrase "opium of the people" is understood in a negative fashion. Opium is understood by the vast majority of readers to designate a drug that dulls understanding of the phrase. To understand "opium of the people" we need, first, to consider the sentences that precede it. Religious suffering may be an expression of real suffering and religion may be the sigh, heart and soul of a heartless and soulless world, but it is also a protest against that suffering. The key is the ambivalence of the opium metaphor. Second, the context of nineteenth-century Europe enhances that ambivalence (Mckinnon 2000). Against our own associations of opium with
Idols and fetishes

I have left the most significant aspect of Marx's approach to religion until last. It concerns the fetishes. Perhaps the most real section of Marx's Capital is "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Therein" (Marx [1867/1996, 35]). Marx concludes his work on commodities and the secret therein, as he sees it. At the end of the chapter, he concludes that the relationship between man and nature, the relationship between sickness and human beings, has changed. In this case, he sees it not as an alienation of the human individual from nature but as an alienation of the commodity from nature. Marx's conclusion is a statement of the opening of this section in Capital: "A commodity appears in its true and proper form, and as a thing, it is really a commodity, without us being told that it is a thing" (Marx [1867/1996, 83]).

Let us follow his line. Twenty-five years earlier Marx had become interested in the phenomenon of "Commodity." In the early 1840s, Marx read Charles de Brosses' De Cultu de Divi Nominibus (1844) and his La Religione Antica de Nigritie (1870). A pioneering work in ethnology and the history of religion, it made the term "fetish" a central category for the analysis of religion, arguing that it was a phenomenon shared by all human societies. Marx's analysis of fetishes was based on the idea that the commodity, as a product of labor, is a social product that is not only a material object but also a symbol of social relations. In the context of the commodity-form, the fetish is seen as a form of abstraction that masks the social relations underlying the exchange of commodities. The fetish is not simply an object but a metaphor for the relationship between labor and capital, between the commodity and the labor that produced it. Marx's analysis of fetishes is thus a critique of the commodity-form, which he sees as the basis of capitalist exploitation and the source of all social alienation.
the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.

(1867) 1996, 82-83

At the beginning of this section, I mentioned that Marx's well-known idea of the feudalism of commodities appears in an early section of Capital. Many interpreters assume that this is the final wood on the fetish; as Marx attempts to uncover the secret of capital, to represent what can not be represented. However, a careful reading of all three (or four if one includes Theorien des Surplus-Wertes [Marx (1861-63) 1965]) volumes of Capital reveals that this section in volume one is merely the introduction to a significant development of the idea. After this introduction, Marx expands the fetish well beyond the commodity. Now we find a whole range of items that form the many workings of capitalism: interest, rent, wages, profit, land, landlord, capital, labour, machinery, circulation, world market, etc. All of them face the labourer as pre-existing, objective, alien realities that rule his life. He works and sees ‘the worker and confront him as ‘capital’ (Marx [1861-63] 1994, 457-30).

This expansion of what counts as a fetish is really the preliminary to a dissolution of the fetish. In the third volume of Capital, Marx actually identifies there even features of the feudal capital, land and labour. These form what Marx calls 'The equity formula' (Marx [1894] 1998, 801-16), with capital producing interest, land producing ground rent and labour producing wages. The key is that the processes by which interest, ground rent and wages are produced are pushed into the background and forgotten, so that it seems as though interest, ground rent and wages are produced in and of themselves. Marx sums up:

In capitalist-society, or still better-capitalist-interest, land-rent, labour-wages, in this economic society, represented as the connection between the component parts of value and wealth in general and its sources, we have the complete mystification of the capitalist mode of production, the conversion of social relations into things, the direct equivalence of material production relations with their historical and social determinations. It is an unsanctioned, pretented, topography, in which Montesquieu and Montesquieu's characters and at the same time directly as matter-things.

(1894) 1998, 817

As last we come to the heart of capitalism itself and Marx seeks a single formula, of capital: money, capital, or the alienation of the market, is the ultimate expression of expanding of its own accord without the mediation of the commodity. He invokes the beautiful simplicity of the formula of "M-C-M,' in which money is mediated by the commodity to produce yet more money. However, in the case of interest-bearing capital, the crucial issue of the commodity (i.e., its dependence on production and circulation) disappears. Instead, the essence of capitalism is simply "M-M.'

Money produces yet more money of its own accord. Interest, financial speculation, the very mechanisms of the modern stock market—these are expressions of the pure fetish.

What has happened to the fetishism of commodities, let alone all the other instances of fetishism? In light of this argument, each of them has become a localized instance of fetishism, an example of a much more basic operation. Unlocalized to its pure essence, the fetish is none other than capital itself, and the fetish relation operates in terms of "M-M'—'the original sanctity of capital' ([1894] 1998, 389). That is, capital apparently produces surplus value in and of itself, unassisted by the processes of production and circulation. The argument concerning fetishism has expanded far beyond that initial foray in the first volume concerning commodities, let alone the first experiments concerning Russian laws concerning honour and falls. Now all that has gone before, the full range of items from commodities through to the personification of the landlord, have become incarnations of capital's 'pure fetish form' ([1894] 1998, 801-2). To express this argument that the fetish functions at the core of capitalism, providing the secret of its workings, Marx coin a new term, eliding capital and fetish as "Faktalkapital" (Marx [1894] 1973, 417).

Summary and conclusion

We have travelled far from the caricatures of Marx's understanding of religion. It should be clear by now that his thoughts on religion are far more complex and dialectical. The public and political context in which Marx began his work was saturated with religion, so much so that he had to begin by responding to theological positions via Bauer, Stinner and Feuerbach. His own initial development beyond Feuerbach, with the opium metaphor, revealed a significant and lasting concern concerning religion. Yet, Marx's most sustained engagement was with the idea of the fetish. Over four decades he transformed the idea for political criticism, the analysis of labour, money and commodities, to identify the core of the capitalist. I would suggest that this development of the fetish constitutes Marx's sublation, or transformation, of religion in his work. Religion is thus negated, preserved and transformed in Marx's work. Marx has not simply kicked away the ladder of religion, but pulled it up and then used the materials to construct something quite new.

The Marx's insight into religion still valid today? I suggest that the use insight was into the formation of capitalism, especially the financialization of the market, the idea that money simply money, the role of labour and material remains central to the produce money, affecting the role of labour and material remains central to the produce money.
of the market misses this insight (see Meeks 1989; Loy 1998; Godchild 2002, 2003). Further, the ambivalence over religion that Marx reveals through his image of opium is a real insight. I refer to the political ambivalence of religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which may be both politically reactionary—compromising their political, social and economic competition and revolutionary, seeking to overthrow those regimes. It is not the case that one is the true one and the other an aberration or external but that both senses are part of the very nature of these religious traditions.

Notes

1 Baur’s published in his 1st Book (Baur 1841 [1841]).
2 Even in the early twentieth century, opium was used by doctors to treat melancholic and other ailments. As the left-leaning theologian, Metropolitans Vvedensky of Moscow and in 1923, opium is not merely a drug that dulls the senses, but also a medicine that “soothes” pain in the soul, from this point of view, opium is just as powerful a tool to heal the “disease” as the doctor who gives it. (Vvedensky 1925).
3 This comes from a very popular debate between Vvedensky and Anasly Lunachasky, the Commission for Enlightenment in Soviet Russia, on September 20–21 in 1925. This observation is the first observation concerning the ambivalence of the opium image.
4 “The relation of spatial assume their most external and most brush-like form in [inhabitants’] form” (Marx 1844 [1844]).
5 Aufhebung is almost untranslatable, for it is drawn from Hegel and means both cancellation and transformation, typically local, where it takes on a much more complex, all-inclusive discussion of Marx’s Aufhebung of religion and economics in my book. In The Fate of Truth (Bert 2014, 4–27).

References

Who are we? Where are we going? How do we bring about a better world? These are the essential questions which concerned Ernst Bloch (1885–1977), the German-Jewish philosopher, Marxist, and cultural critic. The breadth and scope of Bloch's work is vast: his *Gesamtausgabe* runs 17 volumes and traverses a range of topics including music, literature, mythology, everyday life, the political and social realities of his day, eschatology, the Bible and the self. Though he remains little-known in the English-speaking world, his thought has been influential on a wide range of thinkers including György Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, Frederic Jameson, and Slavoj Žižek. Moreover, through Adorno in particular, he has had a marked influence on liberation theology. Perhaps some of his obscurity stems from the difficulty of his texts, which are often couched in a prophetic tone, which seems to proclaim its truth through dense, genealogical phrasing. Yet despite this difficulty, it is possible to detect a red thread, a conceptual signature that runs through Bloch's thought: a vision of the world as radically open towards a transformation into utopia. Utopia, for Bloch, however, is not a strange, obscure fantasy a "building of castles in the sky," as German say. Rather, Bloch's utopia is concrete, built on materials already present within the world. Utopia is a latent tendency within reality itself. As already within the world, utopia realizes itself through our dreams of a better life, through our deepest desires and longings. Bloch's work as a whole seeks to explore the traces of utopia in our lives, to bring them to light, and show their trajectory.

In approaching Bloch, it is important to bear in mind that, though his writing emerges as systematic, Bloch's oeuvre goes as a fluid, closed system. Rather, his works are deeply experimental. His thought constantly pushes itself beyond its boundaries, following the threads of the new material it digests. Hence the title of Bloch's magnum opus, *The Principle of Hope* ("Thinking means moving beyond" [Bloch, 1966b, 5]). By its very nature, Bloch's thought follows an ever-changing...