

## Karl Marx (1818-83)

### The opium of the people

#### *The ultimate source of religious belief is material alienation*

Marx agrees with Feuerbach: Hegel does get things backwards. But so, Marx thinks, did Feuerbach.

But first Marx praises Feuerbach for what he got right. That we must explain the religious world in terms of its secular basis, by showing how human beings create God in their own image. That people create religion to fulfill something missing in themselves: they put into God what they long for in themselves. That religion involves alienation, or treating as "other" what is really in us. That worshipping God only diverts human beings from realizing their own human powers. And that only philosophy can release us from this self-alienation and so, ultimately, from religion.

The problem is that Feuerbach doesn't understand what our essence as human beings truly is.

For Feuerbach the human essence is an intellectual abstraction, something somehow manifest in each individual human being. In truth, however, our human essence is the ensemble of our social relations: that is, the collection of actual concrete situations in which we find ourselves living with other human beings. We are essentially social and political beings, constantly buffeted about by the very real, material, economic forces of

our everyday life. We must ultimately understand religion and all spiritual matters, therefore, in terms of the material conditions that produce them. Consequently we cannot understand religion without understanding history and politics and, most of all, economics. Our understanding of the heavens depends upon our understanding of the earth.

So Hegel does get things backwards: it's not "Spirit" that drives history, it's history that drives our spirit.

And though religious belief *does* involve self-alienation, as Feuerbach shows, he doesn't properly grasp its material source. Religion is a response to alienation in *material* life, not spiritual life. It is a response to the fact that most people in the modern world do not ultimately own their bodies or their labor; that they must work very long hours in order barely to survive; that they cannot better themselves by their hard work; that their well-being and happiness are in the hands of others; that what they produce with their labor belongs to their employer or to shareholders and not to those who do the labor. We are alienated in our material lives insofar as what is rightfully ours – our bodies, our labor, our fates – is not in fact under our control.

And why is this the case?

Because of the social and political and economic structures of the times. Feuerbach argues that human beings create the idea of God from themselves and then immediately subjugate themselves to it. But the deeper truth is that human beings create their social, political, and economic *structures* from themselves and immediately become subject to *them*. We then create religions as a response to our material suffering, as something in which to find consolation and relief. Religion is thus 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.

All this philosophizing, however, merely interprets the world in various ways; the ultimate point is to *change* it. We must change our social and political and economic structures and liberate the individuals enchained by them. Religion provides an illusory happiness for people who require illusions because their reality is so painful; we must not merely abolish religion but abolish the very conditions that require its consolations.

What we require is a revolution.

#### RELATED CHAPTERS

55 Hegel, 56 Feuerbach, 59 Kierkegaard, 60 Nietzsche.

## Sören Kierkegaard (1813–55)

### Nothing impersonal

*The religious state of mind requires a personal leap of faith – into the absurd*

Hegel's mistakes are deeper than Feuerbach or Marx realized, according to Kierkegaard.

Hegel believes, first, that there is a "spirit of the times" forming and driving the individuals of each given era. And, second, that such "spirits" develop over the ages in some rational order, culminating in human beings coming to grasp the mind of God. But both beliefs are nonsense. For history is the product not of societal "spirits" but of individuals, and the realm of spirit is *in* the individual. And God, and God's mind, cannot be known *at all*: God is utterly inconceivable, utterly transcendent, and utterly "other" for us.

And He is especially not knowable by reason; or even *expressible* in the dogmatic propositions of the faith. For faith is not a matter of propositions. It is rather a way of being, of maintaining a personal relationship to this utterly unknowable object, and it is utterly opposed to reason. It is to the contrary grounded in the absurd – in the paradox of the eternal, infinite, transcendent God becoming temporal, finite, and concrete in the person of the savior. The faithful individual attains this relationship only by *suspending* the rational.

But that suspension doesn't come immediately; typically