



# Feuerbach, religion and post-theism

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How subject and object relate is perceived differently. This has been identified and discussed by philosophers. Hegel built on Plato's notion that true reality only exists in ideas and is, therefore, objectively true. Hegel argued that the world we encounter is the objectification of the divine mind. Empiricists argue that material things can be engaged through the senses and are, therefore, real. But how do we know that spiritual things are real since they cannot be engaged through the senses? Feuerbach reacted against the Enlightenment thoughts of his time by postulating that god is not real since it is a projection of human qualities. Feuerbach inverted Hegel's theory by stating that the divine is an abstraction and reification of human thought. With this theory, Feuerbach stated that religion is human-made and redundant. Feuerbach's theory of the non-existence of god was created during the 19th century and corresponds with post-theism. De Botton also denies the existence of god, but declared that religion has many valuable functions for society. Feuerbach, from a philosophical and De Botton, from a sociological perspective, both deny the existence of god, but differ on the role religion play in society. Feuerbach's theories proves to have relevance to current studies of religion.

**Contribution:** This contribution investigates the position of Ludwig Feuerbach and tries to indicate the influence his ideas had on current post-theistic theories, such as that by Allan de Botton.

**Keywords:** Feuerbach; religion; post-theism; Hegel; naturalism; De Botton.

## Introduction

How does one encounter reality? The world consists of elements that can be encountered through the human senses and also elements obscure to the senses. When is something encountered then real? Is experience through the senses conditional to proving the existence of everything? Can reality only be accessed through rational processes? As Hegel (1979:19) famously stated, 'what is rational is real and what is real is rational', emphasising Plato's contention that reality relates to a higher idea. To this ancient dilemma of metaphysics, many have, over the centuries, attempted answers. Compare the research captured in the publication by Stoker and Van Der Merwe (ed. 2012).

At the root of Feuerbach's theory of religion lies his understanding of the relationship between humans and reality. How does one engage with reality? Hegel focused on ideas. Feuerbach focused on the material. In the preface to his second edition of the *Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach indicates his position regarding engaging reality (2008):

I differ *toto coelo* from those philosophers who pluck out their eyes that they may see better, for my thought I require the senses, especially sight; I found my ideas on materials which can be appropriated only through the activity of the senses. I do not generate the object from the thought, but the thought from the object, and I hold that alone to be an object which has an existence beyond one's own brain ... It does not identify the idea of the fact with the fact itself, so as to reduce real existence to an existence on paper, but it separates the two and precisely by this separation attains to the fact itself; it recognises as the true thing, not the thing as it is an object of the abstract reason, but as it is an object of the real. (p. 7)

When applying this approach to understanding religion, Feuerbach reacts in a typical rational empiricist fashion by acknowledging only that which can be experienced through the senses. Feuerbach (2008:8) describes his philosophy as follows: 'It generates thought from the opposite of thought, from matter, from existence from senses'. This preoccupation with matter and objects led David Chidester (2016) to proclaim that the ideas of Feuerbach lie at the root of material religion.

**Note:** Special Collection: The Contemporary Study of Religion: Philosophical Perspective, sub-edited by Mohammed (Auwais) Rafudeen (University of South Africa).

The observation by Feuerbach – ‘true seeing’ – leads him to deny the existence of god. But Feuerbach (2008) denies refuting the concept of god. According to him, he allows religion to speak for itself:

I, on the contrary, let religion itself speak. I constitute myself only its listener, its interpreter, not its prompter. Not to invent but to discover, ‘to unveil existence’ has been my sole objective, to see correctly, my only endeavour. (p. 9)

Feuerbach comes to the atheistic conclusion claiming that it is religion itself that says so:

[B]ut religion itself that says: God is man, man is God; it is not I but religion that denies the God that is not man but an *ens rationis* – since it makes God become man and then constitutes this God, not distinguished from man, having a human form, human feelings, and human thoughts, the object of his worship and veneration. (p. 9)

If this is considered atheism, Feuerbach (2008) responds by indicating that religion is a-theistic:

Atheism – at least in the sense of this work – is the secret of religion itself; that religion itself, not indeed on the surface, but fundamentally, not in intention or according to its own supposition, in its heart, in its essence, believes in nothing else than the truth and divinity of human nature. (p. 9)

To understand Feuerbach, one has to understand Feuerbach and his times and his journey to reach the post-theistic conclusions mentioned above.

## Feuerbach and his times

The intention is not to provide an exhaustive biography of Feuerbach but to focus on the experiences and ideas that influenced his philosophy.

Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach was born in 1804 in Bavaria and died in 1874 in Rechenberg, near Nurnberg in Germany. He was the third son of a famous jurist and part of an academically inclined family (his brothers excelled as archaeologists and mathematicians). The Feuerbach family were considered to be devout Protestants (Gooch 2020).

Ludwig attended the University of Heidelberg, intending to pursue a career in the church. Ludwig’s father wished for his son to study under the rational theologian H.E.G. Paulus, but Ludwig preferred the lectures of the speculative theologian Karl Daub, who was instrumental in arranging a visit in 1816–1818 by the German philosopher Georg Hegel in Heidelberg (Gooch 2020). At Heidelberg, Ludwig was introduced to the work of Hegel. Without completing his degree at Heidelberg, he enrolled for studies at the University of Berlin to study directly under Hegel. After two years, his enthusiasm for theology waned, and he completed his studies in natural sciences at the University of Erlangen, where he also completed a PhD. Feuerbach was offered a position at the conservative university in Erlangen, teaching history of philosophy. Many faculty members had close connections with the neo-Pietist awakening. When Feuerbach

exhibited sympathy for the anti-Pietist movement, his employment at the university was terminated. He married in 1837 and wrote books as an independent scholar while his wife’s family business provided income (Gooch 2020).

At first, Feuerbach defended the philosophy of Hegel enthusiastically. This is evident from the first three books he published as an independent scholar. Hegel died in 1831. The publication by D.F. Strauss in 1835–1836 of the two-volume work entitled *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* led to the question whether Hegel’s philosophy was compatible with the Christian faith (Gooch 2020).

Upon this, Feuerbach started to critically engage with the ideas of Hegel, resulting in an essay entitled ‘Toward a Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy’, which Feuerbach published in 1839 in the *Halle Annals for German Science and Art*. In this article, Feuerbach indicated his departure from Hegelian philosophy, emphasising a return of the human spirit to nature. He elucidated this with a naturalistic explanation of the mysteries of Christianity and religion in general. In 1841, with the publication of *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Feuerbach reached the height of his fame. Later, Friedrich Engels would report that this publication of Feuerbach had ‘a liberating effect’ on him and Karl Marx. According to Engels, Feuerbach broke the spell of the Hegelian system and established the truth that human consciousness is the only true consciousness that exists, and this human consciousness depends on the physical existence of human beings as part of nature (Engels 2000:17). We will later return to Engels’ analysis of developing German philosophy and Feuerbach’s role in it.

After publishing several more books during the 1840s, Feuerbach was forced because of financial considerations to move to Rechenberg, near Nurnberg (Gooch 2020). During this period, mainly due to deteriorating health, his productivity as an author diminished. One last important publication was in 1866. The 10th version of his collected works (first published in 1846) was entitled *Gottheit, Freiheit und Unsterblichkeit (God, Freedom and Immortality)*. According to Gooch (2020), what is significant is the inclusion of an essay entitled ‘Spiritualism and Materialism: Especially in Relation to the Freedom of the Will’. In this essay, Feuerbach addresses ethics and the drive to happiness.

One may ask what the main influences were on Feuerbach’s life and thought and especially what caused this seismic shift from being a fervent follower of Hegel to becoming one of his biggest critics.

One has to understand Feuerbach from the context within which he existed. Although Feuerbach grew up as a Protestant, he was exposed to liberal and conservative theologians, as well as Pietist thought. Religious thought was considered a rational endeavour. Rational thought was determined by the philosophical streams of the day.

Feuerbach's naturalism existed for some time in Germany. Heinrich Heine, a highly influential German philosopher according to Engels (2000:8), already in 1835 acknowledged that naturalism had become the secret religion of Germany. Feuerbach restored the importance and prominence of nature. Where Hegel emphasised the idea, abstract and nature as being created by a divine being, Feuerbach emphasised the existence of materiality and the prominence of nature (Kahl 1999:15). All that exists, according to Feuerbach, is nature and humans. Gods are figments of human imagination.

## Influence by Hegel

Feuerbach reacted to Hegel. Therefore, to understand Feuerbach, one needs to understand Hegel (compare Van der Merwe 2011:323). The line of development in German philosophy was traced by Russell (2004:652) from Kant to Leibniz to Hegel. For Russell (2004:654), the development of philosophy in Germany was closely linked to the political context. Prussia played an important role in determining German identity. Fichte and Hegel were under Prussian influence, being 'mouthpieces of Prussia' (Russell 2004:654). Hegel was described as a 'loyal servant of the State' (Russell 2004:661). Although Feuerbach resided in Rechenberg (close to Nurnberg) for some time, the region was never considered part of Prussia. After Hegel died in 1831, Russell (2004:654) states that German philosophy remained traditional. Hegel's influence, however, extended beyond the borders of Germany – at the end of the 19th century, philosophers of the United States of America and the United Kingdom were considered Hegelian (Russell 2004:661).

In discerning Hegel's thoughts, Russell (2004:661) indicates that 'Hegel's philosophy is very difficult'. According to Engels (2000:7,14), Hegel's thoughts determined German existence on all levels. Hegel's work included studies of aesthetics, history, metaphysics, jurisprudence and political philosophy. Hegel's philosophy developed over time, so the earlier works of Hegel might present different concepts in comparison to his later works. His relevance to a discussion of Feuerbach would be to limit our focus on Hegel's idealism of metaphysics, which was closely linked to his understanding of the limitations and nature of human cognition.

A short excursion into Hegel's thought may help us understand that to which Feuerbach reacted. Hegel focused on the relationship between humans and reality. What is real can be engaged only within a rational manner. Everything visible is not real. What is real is the ideal that can be rationally encountered. Finite things are an illusion, and they can be real only in terms of being part of a whole – known as the Absolute, which is spiritual (Russell 2004:662). Regarding his statement referred to earlier that what is rational is real and what is real is rational (Hegel 1979:19), it should be noted that what is real is only accessible through the rational. Hegel's statement that the real is rational and what is rational is real does not refer to the empirical real. What is empirically real is

irrational. It becomes rational only once real is interpreted as from their part within the whole (Russell 2004:662). Hegel also professed that what is real is necessary. When something real becomes unreal, it loses its necessity and becomes unnecessary and loses its right to exist and may then be destroyed (Engels 2000:9). Hegel's system resulted in an understanding that there is no Absolute truth, everything is transient and relative truth is only attainable through the positive sciences (Engels 2000:14). The nature of reality is that it should not be contradictory; therefore, the emphasis is on logic (Russell 2004:662).

As to Hegel's thoughts on religion, Hegel was influenced by Kant's understanding of god (Van der Merwe 2011:323). To know something outside of oneself (sense-perception), one needs to exercise sceptical criticism of the senses – then, the object one is aware of becomes a subject. This culminates in a stage of self-knowledge where the subject and object are indistinguishable. Self-knowledge is thus the highest form of knowledge. For Hegel, the highest knowledge is the knowledge possessed by the Absolute (Russell 2004:664). This argument led Russell (2004:665) to conclude that for Hegel, the Absolute Idea is pure thought thinking about pure thought. God is the Idea that thinks itself. Hegel's philosophy can be labelled as idealism in contradiction to materialism. In this regard, Feuerbach eventually differed from Hegel. For Hegel, god, the Absolute as the ultimate reality, is to be arrived at only through rational human thought.

According to Hegel (in Harvey 1995:26) in his explication of the philosophy of Spirit, the Absolute Spirit is gradually being manifested throughout the evolutionary development of religions. The development from animism to monotheism are all stages in the process where the Spirit manifests in different ways. The result is that Christianity should be viewed as the culmination of the history of religion, which should be regarded as a progressive revelation of the truth of the Absolute Spirit. In this way, the Absolute is to be perceived not as an impersonal substance but as a subject (Harvey 1995:26). For Hegel (see Harvey 1995:27), the infinite comes to self-realisation in the life of creation and nature; thus, the infinite is being poured into the finite world and reconciles with the objectified world. Therefore, according to Hegel, religion is the revelation of the infinite in the finite. Feuerbach reacted to the Hegelian thought system.

## Feuerbach's understanding of religion, divinity and nature

### Religion

Much of Feuerbach's theory on religion should be understood as a direct response to the philosophy of Hegel (compare Harvey 1995:26; Kahl 1999:15). Hegel is often hailed as the father of idealism, emphasising the concept that reality lies in ideas rather than in things. This exposes Hegel's emphasis on the objective reality of essences or universals, a concept already put forward by Plato (compare Harvey 1995:26). Hegel tended to rationalise ideas behind phenomena



(compare the publisher's note in Feuerbach 2008:6). This stands in opposition to how Feuerbach would view reality as something only to be experienced through the senses.

When trying to identify the original elements of religion, Feuerbach declared that religion is based on the basic human feeling of dependence (Feuerbach 1908:41,98). The essence of religion is the feeling of dependence.<sup>1</sup> Religion is the result when humans discover their inabilities and limitations, of which the greatest is being mortal (Feuerbach 1908:41). According to Feuerbach (1908:41), the tomb – the place of human death – becomes the birthplace of the gods and the reason for creating religion. The reality of death drives humans to reach out to the only possible immortal beings – gods. Without the fear of death, no religion would exist (Feuerbach 1908:42). The external power that humans fear and feel dependent on fills humans with psychic power, which is nothing but egoistic concerns, without which there can be no power within humans and no ability to feel dependent. The will to act, feel and speak is an urge placed inside humans by an outside power on which humans feel dependent to act, feel and speak. According to Feuerbach, feeling dependent on another being is only the dependence on one's own being, ideals, wishes and concerns (Feuerbach 1908:99). The external power on which humans feel dependent is nothing else than an elongation of the inner self.

The existence of multiple religions corresponds with the different histories of different cultures. The characteristics of a god reflect people's cultures (Feuerbach 1908:21). According to Feuerbach (1908:22), as Christians are cosmopolitan and pagan gods are only nationalistic, the god of Christians is also cosmopolitan. The difference between polytheism and monotheism is also explained in a similar manner. According to Feuerbach (1908:22), polytheism and monotheism exist because of the difference in type and category. There are many types but only one category. In monotheism, humans adhere to the category of god, but in polytheism, humans elevate the different types as absolutes.

The first and oldest religion, according to Feuerbach (1908:42), was a religion where humans focused on nature.<sup>2</sup> Nature consists of plants and animals on which humans are dependent. It might have happened that animals, which humans depend on, became venerated and worshipped as gods (Feuerbach 1908:50). The festivals celebrated in early nature religions commemorating the different seasons were expressions of nature's influence on humans (Feuerbach 1908:44). The awareness of the continuous changing rhythms in nature – light and darkness, heat and cold, life and death – is all part of religions focused on nature (Feuerbach 1908:44). Religion used to be part of everyday existence for humans. No separation between the sacred and the profane existed. Compare Durkheim's (2008:36) division between the sacred

1. It is significant that Feuerbach referred here to an aspect similar to the works by Schleiermacher (1991:52) that religion starts with an intense feeling of dependence.

2. This term is difficult to translate from the German. The more acceptable description would be to use the expression 'primal religion'.

and profane. No separation is necessary, as everything in life has to do with religion (Feuerbach 1908:44).

The original gods of ancient cultures were spirits of nature before they became spiritual, political or war gods (Feuerbach 1908:42). Nature used to be the object of veneration (Feuerbach 1908:43) and was never the symbol of an obscure deity. The relationship between divinity and nature is a key area of interest for understanding Feuerbach.

## Divinity and nature

When it comes to divinity, Feuerbach inverts Hegel's scheme. According to Feuerbach (compare Harvey 1995:27), the finite spirit externalises or objectifies itself in the idea of god. Therefore, religion is not the revelation of the infinite in the finite but rather the self-discovery by the finite of its infinite nature (Harvey 1995:27). 'God is the form in which the human spirit discovers its essential nature' (Harvey 1995:27). Humans project their being into objectivity and turn themselves into objects to be projected as an image of themselves. By doing this, humans become a subject, although a subject perceiving of themselves as the object of another object (Feuerbach 2008:29). The consciousness of god is self-consciousness; knowledge of god is self-knowledge as the two are identical (Feuerbach 2008:84) – 'God is the manifested inward nature, the expressed of self ...' (Feuerbach 2008:84).

Feuerbach (1908:21) starts off his description of 'his teaching, religion or philosophy' by summarising his theory that theology is anthropology. Later, in his explication (Feuerbach 1908:26), he adds that theology is anthropology and physiology to emphasise the materialistic expression and manifestation of human characteristics. With this premise, he indicates that what is called god in other cultures is nothing else than human essence. For Feuerbach (1908:21, 23), god is nothing else than the deified human characteristics or the expression of human nature, or as Harvey (1995:25) summarises Feuerbach's view, 'God is a composite of human predicates' and 'what is worshipped as divine is really a synthesis of the human perfections'.

What does Feuerbach then propose, if worshipping gods is actually self-worship? What should then be in its place, if anything at all? For Feuerbach (1908:25), human nature is directed towards nature and not towards any god. Human existence is impossible to comprehend without nature.

The concept of a divine being – god – originated in the human mind (Feuerbach 1908:127). As the original cause, god is an idea, a concept of the mind and is without real existence (Feuerbach 1908:129). For Feuerbach, god is not the cause of human existence. There are several causes of human existence: lungs cause humans to breathe and maintain life, and blood causes the body to function and maintains life. Nature is the last resort of our existence (Feuerbach 1908:129). God does not reveal himself in nature. The opposite is true:

nature reveals itself in god (Feuerbach 1908:129). God is the abstraction of nature. Nature is concrete and material and therefore constitutes true being. God as abstract cannot be known through the senses (Feuerbach 1908:130) but only in the mind as created by the mind.

Humans have not created themselves. The essence of being human does not derive from any divine being but is to be found in nature (Feuerbach 1908:26). For Feuerbach, the word 'god' is too mysterious, vague and laden with meaning. He prefers the word 'nature', as it is a clear, meaningful and unequivocal word (Feuerbach 1908:26). Nature existed before all other living beings. Therefore, nature has supremacy, not in a chronological or ethical way but as the first to exist. Humans are the embodiment of nature – the being in which nature becomes a personal, conscious and thinking entity (Feuerbach 1908:26).

Feuerbach separates religion into two categories: theism and nature. Theism causes the separation between humans and nature, because it creates the impression of the existence of another being existing besides humans and nature (Feuerbach 1908:43). Theism isolates humans as if they are set apart and above nature as if a hierarchical structure exists, placing nature at the bottom, humans in the middle and the gods at the top as the most powerful entities (Feuerbach 1908:43). Religion originally expressed that humans were in union with nature (Feuerbach 1908:43). It will appear as if Feuerbach perceives gods as the enemy of religion. For him, religion should maintain the close bond between humans and nature. The gods, as jealous beings, intervene and separate humans from nature.

Feuerbach (2008) emphasises the union between humans and nature:

[M]an is dependent on nature ... man exists in union with nature ... man is child of nature ... man is part of nature ... nature is base and source of man's existence ... nature is source for man's well-being (physical and spiritual). (p. 46)

Humans and nature are presented as equals, as this is the original human state of being (Feuerbach 1908:46). As the feeling of dependence is the origin of religion and as nature provides in that which humans need, it is only logical that the human feeling of dependence should be directed at nature and not at anything else (Feuerbach 1908:98).

Nature provides, not only in a physical sense in terms of sustenance, but it also provides inner energy, spiritual guidance and cognitive clarity (Feuerbach 1908:44–45). The result is that nature's provision ensures that humans can survive and flourish within nature while humans remain dependent on nature. Feuerbach alludes to the original existence of humanity as being utterly dependent on nature (Feuerbach 1908:43), although this ought to be confirmed or denied by anthropologists and ethnologists. As nomadic hunter-gatherers and later as static agrarian communities, human existence has always depended on nature.

As to how Feuerbach perceives nature, note how he elucidates his understanding of the concept of nature by indicating that for him, nature is all that humans are not (Feuerbach 1908:113). However, this does not imply that nature is filled with divine qualities as assumed and as Baruch Spinoza, the 17th century Dutch philosopher-theologian, would claim (Feuerbach 1908:113). Spinoza (1994:116,118–119) stated there are metaphysical qualities to nature, to such an extent that god and nature are equivalent and interchangeable entities. Feuerbach would deny such a claim, stating that god comes from nature and does not reside in nature.

During Feuerbach's time, the public debate on Spinoza was concerned about Spinoza's theory that divinity and nature, spirit and matter were considered of equal value (Kahl 1999). Spinoza's theory is pantheistic, as he sees god and nature as exchangeable entities. For Feuerbach, there is a difference between the two: either god or nature. For Feuerbach, god comes from nature and not the other way around (Feuerbach 1908:21,26).

Nature is material and not mystical and can be experienced through the senses (Feuerbach 1908:113). It is also clear that nature is not the result of any human creative process (Feuerbach 1908:113). Nature is considered the first cause, resulting in the existence of plants, animals, water and celestial bodies (Feuerbach 1908:114). Nature has no beginning and no end (Feuerbach 1908:126). Elements in nature are connected and related. Everything simultaneously causes results. Nature does not have a hierarchical structure (Feuerbach 1908:126).

The essence of being human is determined by being part of nature (Feuerbach 1908:116). Because nature exists, it is possible for humans to exist. For Feuerbach, it is clear that the same power, the original cause that brought nature into existence, brought human beings into existence. Human death is the return to nature and not an experience to be feared (Feuerbach 1908:46). However, the original cause is not a physical entity but a concept, at most a being existing in our thoughts (Feuerbach 1908:117). It would appear that Feuerbach implies that the original creative power resides within humans. However, he is not clear about the nature of this 'original cause'. Therefore, it is difficult to deduce whether Feuerbach considers the existence of a divine metaphysical being as the 'original cause'.

## Evaluation of Feuerbach's theory

In his explanation that religion is the human focus and attention directed at nature, leading to dependence on nature, it appears as if Feuerbach chooses to ignore the application of a biological theory of evolutionary development of religion. The evolution theory applied to developing religion would imply that religious thought would develop and evolve over time. Religion as a human response to external impulses would change as contexts change. If the human focus on nature characterised the original religion, according to

Feuerbach, it appears as if he suggests this condition ought not to change and has not changed. This is questionable, as human attention to nature eventually included veneration and worship of animals and celestial bodies.

It is not clear how the supernatural nature of nature professed by Feuerbach is constituted. Feuerbach denies that he implies pantheism, as Spinoza did (Feuerbach 1908:46–47,112). However, this can be contested. For Feuerbach, the belief in the supernatural character of nature is an expression of the unity between the abstract and the empirical. For Feuerbach (1908:109), humans can only believe in the existence of things that manifest in human existence through acts and signs that can be experienced through the senses. It is in the nature of religion to be experienced through the senses. According to Feuerbach (1908:108), truth lies in sensory experiences. This stands in opposition to Hegel's idealism. The implication of Feuerbach's theory is that human senses are divine because if the deities are sensory beings, human senses must also be divine (Feuerbach 1908:109). Humans encounter deities through the senses. The divine character lies in the senses and not in the nature of deities. The truth in the nature (primal) religions is based on the fact that nature can be experienced through the senses.

Feuerbach can be criticised for over-emphasising the union between humans and nature. He, however, denies implying that nature is divine, resulting in pantheism (Feuerbach 1908:46–47). According to Feuerbach (1908:47), pantheism makes too much of nature, just as idealism, theism and Christianity do not make enough of nature. Nature's role in being religious cannot be over-emphasised. According to Feuerbach (1908:47), nature should be seen for what it is, namely our Mother. It is not clear whether Feuerbach here implies that nature has female divine qualities. In light of his understanding of nature, he most probably is not implying that. When nature is perceived as our Mother, we should treat her parallel to how we treat earthly mothers: not through the eyes of 'religious children', but through the 'eyes of adults, self-aware human beings' (Feuerbach 1908:47). The implication is that when humans worship something as an object outside of ourselves, we add to the object of veneration and no longer see it for what it is.

When humans set themselves up in front of a divine being in religion, the true higher being is nature (Feuerbach 1908:25). The divine being portrayed in religion is considered the cause of nature (Feuerbach 1908:26). Different religions have different gods, as religions have different people belonging to those religions, and because people are worshipping their divine character in religion, religion is nothing more than human history (Feuerbach 1908:25).

Nipkow (2001:30) warns of the equation of god being the human expression of human thought, as Feuerbach would declare. According to Nipkow (2001:30), one would presume that being human implies being good, especially for projecting the best of human qualities and referring to it as god. Feuerbach

assumes humans are good. Therefore, the projection of god is that of a being filled with good qualities. The question will eventually be who defines whom. Is it humans defining god or god defining humans? For Nipkow, the idea of human projection might be illusionary and self-deceit.

Much of Feuerbach's theory on religion and divinity results from a negation of divinity. This corresponds to the notion of post-theism.

## Post-theism

To trace the origins of post-theism is an impossible task. Some might argue that post-theism refers to a label of a new phase in developing studying religion as opposed to theism (compare Schwöbel 1994:180). I would argue that there have always been people standing averse to the idea of a personal god since the first traces appeared as to what is referred to as theism. The intensity of the objection and the number of scholars sympathising with the theory might have varied over time. The matter is further complicated as there are many related terminologies. Therefore, it is difficult to delineate exactly what we are talking about when discussing post-theism. For example, what is the difference between post-theism, atheism, agnosticism and secularisation? Do they all refer to the same phenomenon or only highlight specific aspects of the same phenomenon? I am inclined towards the latter.

Adriaanse (2000:33<sup>3</sup>), in introducing the matter of post-theism, indicates that theism in its traditional form has lost its credibility. Adriaanse (2000:35) concludes this based on his arguments around coherence, probability and plausibility. With regard to theism, Schwöbel summarises Adriaanse's theory by stating that Adriaanse provides a statement of bankruptcy and an obituary, announcing the end of theism. To this, Schwöbel (1994:172,180) responds by indicating that theism is neither insolvent nor dead. Theism 'remains a live option' (Schwöbel 1994:172), and 'theism is alive and well' (Schwöbel 1994:161). Theism is defined by Schwöbel (1994:169,179) as follows:

- The existence of god is stated as a brute fact.
- God is the source of all possible and actual beings.
- God is a self-explanatory being.
- God is the ultimate explanation of everything.

This understanding of theism corresponds with Swinburne's (1977:1) description of theism as the belief in a personal god of spiritual nature, who is omnipresent and omniscient and all-powerful, the creator and sustainer of the universe. Post-theism constitutes a movement with arguments against such a belief.

Post-theism must thus be seen as an expression of dissatisfaction with theism. It is not the purpose of this article to present Adriaanse's arguments against post-theism but to indicate the levels of similarities between arguments presented by Feuerbach.

3. This article was first published in 1994, and Schwöbel responded to it in 1994.



Schwöbel (1994:173) traces the path of the theistic argument by indicating that it developed in response to two stimuli: the diverse theological positions resulting from the Reformation and the Renaissance atheistic attack on Christianity.

Theism was a theory created in response to different theological confessions originating from the Reformation and counter-Reformation. Theism was an attempt to create a framework of consensus for divergent theological interpretations<sup>4</sup> within Christianity. This framework addressed all existence in reality and was consciously created outside the Christian doctrine and practices to make it universally valid (Schwöbel 1994:175).

In response to the atheistic attack on Christianity picking up renewed momentum during the Renaissance and resulting in the denial of the existence of god, theism was created to suppress atheistic claims (Schwöbel 1994:176). However, Schwöbel (1994:176) identifies a third impulse leading to theism. In response to the development and growing interest in natural sciences, the conclusion was drawn that a personal god adds no explanation to natural phenomena. This manifested in the 17th century development of pantheism, with Spinoza as the most important exponent (Schwöbel 1994:176). Theism attempted to emphasise the existence of a god who becomes the universal and ultimate explanation to all existence and to all that there is and everything that happens (Schwöbel 1994:177).

As a child of his time, Feuerbach, during the 19th century, in reaction to theism as an ultimate explanation for all that exists, could not reconcile reality experienced through the senses with a personal god no one has ever seen and who still claims to be the most powerful being. Feuerbach responded by providing a solution as to the ultimate explanation of all that exists, along the line of Spinoza, but now without the notion of theism. Nature is the ultimate explanation of everything.

Alain De Botton represents a unique brand of post-theism. He positions himself among those who find it difficult to believe in miracles, spirits or tales of miraculous things (De Botton 2012:11). He does not see himself as part of the category of atheists who would try and prove that god does not exist, although he admits that it might be an entertaining exercise (De Botton 2012:11). He rather sees himself as part of the group of atheists who denounces the existence of god but still 'sporadically' finds religion 'useful, interesting and consoling' and even considers how to incorporate some religious ideas and practices into the secular environment (De Botton 2012:11–12). De Botton (2012:12) describes it as a search for how to 'balance a rejection of religious faith with a selective reverence for religious rituals and concepts'. His premise is that religions do not have a divine origin, but still, religions address two basic human needs; namely, religion provides the possibility to reside in communities in harmony and to console humans in times of despair. His argument is that although god may be considered obsolete, the reasons humans constructed a concept of god still remain. Humankind

4. In these divergent theological opinions, the different interpretations of the Trinity was the primary point of contention.

has allowed religion to exclusively claim human experiences that should belong to all humankind and even be permitted within the secular realm (De Botton 2012:15). According to De Botton (2012:15), what is needed is for atheists to discover a new process of reversing 'religious colonisation' – 'how to separate ideas and rituals from religious institutions which have laid claim to them but don't truly own them'.

The process De Botton (2012:17,19) suggests is not so much destroying religion but gleaning from religion that which is 'useful and attractive' and to 'rescue what is beautiful, touching and wise'. However, he does not see himself as an apologist for any religion but as an admirer who realises that religion has accomplished a change in the world in a way that no other secular institution has ever achieved (De Botton 2012:18). Although there is growing opposition to the thoughts of De Botton, a critical analysis of his reception indicates that there are just as much support of and in defence of De Botton as 'pop thinker' (compare Abengaña 2018).

There appear to exist several similarities between the arguments presented by post-theists and Feuerbach. Among the most prominent is the conviction that a personal god is redundant. Interestingly, Feuerbach argues against the existence of any god but argues in favour of a religious system, in a way similar to De Botton. The conditions requiring humans to create the concept of a personal god remain. Feuerbach replaces the concept of a personal god with a different powerful entity, namely nature. Although no personal traits are assigned to nature, it fulfils the same function as religion: fulfilling the need to belong to a community and to experience consolation in times of despair (as identified by De Botton).

When discussing the human fear of death, Feuerbach (1908:46) indicates that returning to nature after death ought to bring consolation and allay human fear. Belonging to nature unites all humanity to a monistic origin, creating a harmonious co-existence and cohabitation.

## Conclusion

Any argument must be understood from the context from where it originates, so Feuerbach's theories must be seen against the backdrop of his times. Feuerbach's position testifies to the different ways in which it has been dealt with in divinity, whether the acceptance of divinity (theism), denying it (as in post-theism) or conditionally accepting it (as in pantheism). Some hybrid positions are possible. Some do not subscribe to the doctrine of divinity (like De Botton) but acknowledge religion's use in society.

Feuerbach acknowledges that there is something like religion but focuses excessively on explaining the redundancy of divinity and does not address the function or benefit of religion to society. De Botton has a sociological approach, while Feuerbach has a more philosophical approach to addressing religion.

There are many ways to engage with transcendence. Empiricists trust their senses to deliver proof of the existence of a divine being. Agnostics argue that gods' existence is unnecessary to prove, although religion can have an important function within society. If one asked Feuerbach whether god exists, he would answer, 'No, because I cannot see him or her. I can see nature around me, and therefore, nature is considered of more value than the belief in god.' If one asks De Botton if god exists, he would probably say, 'No, but it is irrelevant. If god exists, I do not need him. Religion has other functions more relevant than the belief in god.'

This article presents the thoughts of Feuerbach as an influential scholar in religion. His theories are compared to more recent developments in post-theism. In this way, Feuerbach's theories still relate to current research on religion.

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