

gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse]. As Feuerbach does not deal with this point, he is obliged to:

- (i) abstract from the historical process, to hypostatize religious feeling, and to postulate an abstract – isolated – human individual;
- (ii) to conceive human nature only in terms of a “genus,” as something inner and silent, which is the natural common link connecting many individuals.

7 Feuerbach therefore fails to see that “religious feeling” is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual who he is analyzing belongs to a particular form of society [*einer bestimmten Gesellschaftsform*]. [...]

11 The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; the point is to change it [*Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert, es kommt drauf an sie zu verändern*].

Comment

In his 11 theses directed against Feuerbach’s criticisms of Christianity (see 9.2), Marx argues that Feuerbach has failed to go far enough. It is not enough to explain religion; the point is that social and economic changes must be introduced which will eliminate the causes of religion in the first place. Marx locates the human tendency to “invent” God in socioeconomic alienation, and thus places an emphasis upon practical action in the world, rather than just theoretical reflection. This insight has subsequently been taken up once more within some sections of Latin American liberation theology.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

- 1 Set out, in your own words, what Marx makes of Feuerbach’s approach. Make sure that you can identify their points of agreement and disagreement.
- 2 “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in different ways; the point is to change it.” What does Marx mean by this? And in what way can this be seen as the climax of his critique of Feuerbach?

9.4 KARL BARTH ON CHRISTIANITY AND RELIGION

The Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) developed a distinction between “religion” and “revelation,” arguing that the former is a human attempt at self-justification and the latter is God’s contradiction of human preconceptions about God through divine grace. Barth argues that Christianity loses sight of its distinctive identity if it allows itself to become a “religion,” which Barth interprets as a human construction. See also 2.37, 3.29.

A theological evaluation of religion and religions must be characterized primarily by the great cautiousness and charity of its assessment and

judgments. It will observe and understand and take man in all seriousness as the subject of religion. But it will not be man apart from God, in a

human *per se*. It will be man for whom (whether he knows it or not) Jesus Christ was born, died, and rose again. It will be man who (whether he has already heard it or not) is intended in the Word of God. It will be man who (whether he is aware of it or not) has in Christ his Lord. It will always understand religion as a vital utterance and activity of this man. It will not ascribe to this life-utterance and activity of his a unique “nature”, the so-called “nature of religion”. [...]

Revelation singles out the Church as the locus of true religion. But this does not mean that the Christian religion as such is the fulfilled nature of human religion. It does not mean that the Christian religion is the true religion, fundamentally superior to all other religions. We can never stress too much the connection between the truth of the Christian religion and the grace of revelation. We have to give particular emphasis to the fact that through grace the Church lives by grace, and to that extent it is the locus of true religion. And if this is so, the Church will as little boast of its “nature”, i.e., the perfection in which it fulfils the “nature” of religion, as it can attribute that nature to other religions. We cannot differentiate and separate the Church from other religions on the basis of a general concept of the nature of religion. [...]

We begin by stating that religion is unbelief. It is a concern, indeed, we must say that it is the one great concern, of godless man. [...] Where we want what is wanted in religion, i.e., justification and sanctification as our own work, we do not find ourselves – and it does not matter whether the thought and representation of God has a primary or only a secondary importance – on the direct way to God, who can then bring us to our goal at some higher stage on the way. On the contrary, we lock the door against God, we alienate ourselves from him, we come into direct opposition to him. God in his revelation will not allow man to try to come to terms with life, to justify and sanctify himself. God in his revelation, God in Jesus Christ, is the one who takes on himself the sin of the world, who “wills that all our care should be cast upon him, because he careth for us”

Religion is never true in itself and as such. The revelation of God denies that any religion is true, i.e., that it is in truth the knowledge and worship of God and the reconciliation of man with God. For as the self-offering and self-manifestation of God, as the work of peace which God himself has concluded between himself and man, revelation is the truth beside which there is no other truth, over against which there is only lying and wrong. If by the concept of a “true religion” we mean truth which belongs to religion in itself and as such, it is just as unattainable as a “good man”, if by goodness we mean something which man can achieve on his own initiative. No religion is true. It can only become true, i.e., according to that which it purports to be and for which it is upheld. And it can become true only in the way in which man is justified, from without; i.e., not of its own nature and being but only in virtue of a reckoning and adopting and separating which are foreign to its own nature and being, which are quite inconceivable from its own standpoint, which come to it quite apart from any qualifications or merits. Like justified man, true religion is a creature of grace. But grace is the revelation of God. No religion can stand before it as true religion. No man is righteous in its presence. It subjects us all to the judgment of death. But it can also call dead men to life and sinners to repentance. And similarly in the wider sphere where it shows all religion to be false, it can also create true religion. The abolishing of religion by revelation need not mean only its negation: the judgment that religion is unbelief. Religion can just as well be exalted in revelation, even though the judgment still stands. It can be upheld by it and concealed in it. It can be justified by it, and – we must at once add – sanctified. Revelation can adopt religion and mark it off as true religion. And it not only can. How do we come to assert that it can, if it has not already done so? There is a true religion: just as there are justified sinners. If we abide strictly by that analogy – and we are dealing not merely with an analogy, but in a comprehensive sense with the thing itself – we need have no hesitation in saying that the Christian religion is the true religion.

Comment

Barth here takes a principled stand against the notion of “religion” as a human construction, rather than a datum of divine revelation. He insists that “religion” will continue until the end of time, as a necessary prop or support to faith. Barth’s concern here is to emphasize that, by the grace of God, this “religion” is transcended and surpassed by God. It is something neutral, not negative. Barth uses the German word *Aufhebung*, here translated as “abolition.” Yet this German term has a deeper sense, and could be understood to mean the “transformation” or even “sublimation” of religion. Religion, seen as a human construction and contrasted with divine revelation, certainly needs to be critiqued – yet Barth insists that it serves a useful role.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

- 1 Set out, in your own words, the relationship between “religion” and “unbelief” which Barth advocates in this passage.
- 2 What does Barth mean by “abolishing” religion?

9.5 C. S. LEWIS ON MYTH IN CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER FAITHS

How does Christianity relate to other faiths? For the Oxford literary critic J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973), all religions and worldviews rest on myths – which are attempts to account for reality, expressed in many different ways, as splintered fragments of light, each reflecting only some aspects of a greater whole. For Tolkien, Christianity takes the structural form of such a myth – but it is the real myth, to which all other myths only approximate. His Oxford colleague C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) took a similar view. In this extract, taken from a paper entitled “Is Theology Poetry?,” delivered to the Socratic Club at Oxford in 1945, Lewis sets out why occasional similarities between Christianity and other religions are to be expected, on the basis of the overarching nature of the Christian view of reality. Lewis makes frequent reference to the figure of Baldur, son of Odin, a central figure in Norse mythology. See also 1.1, 2.41, 9.1, 9.7.

There are, however, two other lines of thought which might lead us to call Theology a mere poetry, and these I must now consider. In the first place, it certainly contains elements similar to those which we find in many early, and even, savage, religions. And those elements in the early religions may now seem to us to be poetical. The

question here is rather complicated. We now regard the death and return of Balder as a poetical idea, a myth. We are invited to infer thence that the death and resurrection of Christ is a poetical idea, a myth. But we are not really starting with the datum “Both are poetical” and thence arguing “Therefore both are false”. Part of the poetical