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ABSTRACT

Though their methods differ, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche are allied on one major point: the refutation of religion. Marx describes religion as a drug used to soothe the misery of the masses, while Nietzsche considers it a tool employed by the weak to manipulate the nobility. Despite their shared disbelief in transcendent beings, both philosophers came to express themselves through a secular redemption; reflections of the religious doctrines they were taught as children. In analyzing man's state, Marx sees an opportunity for man to transform from a stratified society to an egalitarian one, whereas Nietzsche sees an opportunity for a reversal of the master-slave relationship into a more distinct separation, between the common man and the *Overman*. On the path to redemption, Nietzsche proclaims the death of God, where Marx predicts the death of capitalism. Both preach for a redemptive end result.

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Redemptive Narratives in Marx and Nietzsche

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Believe me, my brothers! He died too early; he himself would have recanted his teaching, had he reached my age.

Nietzsche on Jesus, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*

Though their methods differ, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche are allied on one major point: the refutation of religion. Marx describes religion as a drug used to soothe the misery of the masses, while Nietzsche considers it a tool employed by the weak to manipulate the nobility. Despite their shared disbelief in transcendent beings, both philosophers came to express themselves through a secular redemption; reflections of the religious doctrines they were taught as children.

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Marx and Nietzsche's heritages play an important role in their respective philosophies. Marx was the heir to a rabbinical tradition, yet was also influenced by his father's ardent secular humanism. His family was directly affected by the Napoleonic emancipation of the Jews. Although his father converted to Protestantism in order to keep his job, Marx's mother persisted in her religion until the death of her parents.¹ Marx may not have identified himself as Jewish in his adult life, but he had always been aware of his roots in a persistently persecuted ethnicity. In Marx's defense of the oppressed, his heritage played a defining role.

¹ David McLellan, *Karl Marx* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 5.

Nietzsche was a product of his heritage as well, but it did not lead him to question suffering as it did for Marx. Nietzsche did not experience or empathize with the discrimination that Marx faced, because his family belonged to a state-condoned religion and he was the son and grandson of Protestant pastors. His profession was secured; it was only by his own devices that he escaped his historical trajectory and instead took a position as a professor at Basel University.² It can thus be said that Nietzsche's philosophy was not only influenced by his religious origins, but also by his positioning as a privileged white Christian male.

Admittedly, Marx and Nietzsche's ideologies have vast differences. Both designed their radical theories from the fabric of their cultural moments, in which religion had a dominant role. That given, both produced a philosophical redemption that echoed the theological redemption they had learned at home and in church.

The groundwork for Nietzsche's philosophy arises directly from his religious origins. He was the immediate descendant of two pastors, and spent his early childhood living in a parsonage.³ Though his father existed only in memory for Nietzsche, because of his mother and sister's influence he was bombarded by religiosity, to the extent that he was unquestioningly destined for a degree in theology.⁴ Perhaps owing to the death of his father, Nietzsche was sufficiently liberated from his Christian origins to think critically about religion. At an early age he grew to view the Bible not as an historical work but as simply one more inspirational epic myth. Nietzsche disapproves of the privileges of the priestly caste, which he sees as based upon superstition and opportunism and counter-productive to man's redemption. He faults Christianity for a rampant philosophical malaise in Germany. In the *Genealogy of morals* Nietzsche articulates his attack on Christianity, a theme that is sustained throughout Nietzsche's work. Though Nietzsche's later works are typically viewed as a scathing deconstruction of Christianity, I posit that they are not so much a deconstruction as they are a secular reconstruction of the Christian paradigm of redemption. Nietzsche proposes an optimistic salvation free from the constrictions of religious dogma.

Scholars widely recognize the Christian theme of redemption in Nietzsche's work. The most radically pro-Christian view of Nietzsche's philosophy is a politicized interpretation by Karl Jaspers from the early 20th century, who claims that Nietzsche was dissatisfied with the state of Christianity because people were

² R. J. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: the man and his philosophy* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 42.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

not authentically Christian. According to Jaspers, Nietzsche was an ardent follower of Christian morality, but “from childhood on, Christian contents, literal Christian teachings, Christian authority lacked real meaning for him”.⁵ Jaspers' work is peppered with quotes that support his discussion of Nietzsche's hidden reverence for Christianity. For example, he claims that Nietzsche praises the church as an institution because it “brings superior minds to the top,” and that “priests of a certain type filled Nietzsche with a respect bordering on awe”.⁶ Jaspers goes on to declare that “only superficial readers blinded by his aggressive extremism can see in him nothing but hostility to all things Christian”.⁷ According to Jaspers, Nietzsche is grossly misunderstood, and at the heart of his criticism of Christianity he actually wants men to become ultra-Christians: “Nietzsche wanted ‘everything Christian to be overcome by something super-Christian, not merely to be abandoned’”.⁸ As Jaspers sees it, this wish is so strong in Nietzsche that his entire life “seems like a sacrifice for our time”.⁹

Though very few share such a distinctly pro-Christian interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy, Nietzsche's quest to redeem Christian society is a theme of frequent recurrence. In a recent interpretation, Giles Fraser writes on the “piety” of Nietzsche's “unbelief”: he labels Nietzsche's works as “primarily soteriology: experiments to design a form of redemption that would work for a post-theistic age”.¹⁰ Fraser claims that due to Nietzsche's early Christian influence, he “is obsessed with the question of human salvation. [D]espite the fact that he becomes an atheist, [Nietzsche] continues passionately to explore different ways in which the same basic instinct for redemption can be expressed in a world without God.”¹¹ Fraser concludes that although Nietzsche's philosophy is “designed to be atheistic, Nietzsche borrows a great deal from the Christian past he eschews”.¹² This redemptive element culminates in the form of the Overman. In the *Anti-Christ*:

we begin to see Nietzsche advance the idea of the *Übermensch* as his own version of what redeemed humanity ought to look like. This leads on into an examination of what is arguably the pinnacle of Nietzsche's soteriological experimentation, the enigmatic eternal recurrence of the same. With the development of the eternal

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche and Christianity* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1961), 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, ix.

¹⁰ Giles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche: on the piety of unbelief* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

recurrence, Nietzsche believes himself to have given birth to an idea capable of offering genuine redemption, albeit to very few, and those not yet born.¹³

Thus Nietzsche's philosophy, though irreligious, arises from Christianity and reflects many of its major themes. He is not preaching a new religion, but rather a modified version of the faith of his childhood. And the vessel of Nietzsche's new faith is none other than his prophet, Zarathustra.

Another contemporary interpretation by Weaver Santaniello discusses the impact of *Thus spoke Zarathustra* as a religious exposition: "it is rich in Biblical symbolism, and Zarathustra emerges as the prophet of a new age who challenges Christianity."¹⁴ As Santaniello explains, Nietzsche is indeed reworking Christianity:

The book is pivotal to Nietzsche's critique of Judeo-Christianity, for his overarching goal is to replace traditional Christian concepts with new ones... the will to power replaces God as the ground of creation; the *Übermensch* signifies the historical Messiah who has yet to appear.¹⁵

If Nietzsche is simply reworking the Christian framework, what then does he object to? In addition to the heinous priestly power struggle and the usurpation orchestrated by the slave class, Nietzsche is deeply disturbed by Christianity's perversion of the concept of redemption. Instead of living in the world, Christian practitioners invest themselves in mythical otherworlds. "According to Zarathustra, the believers of true faith have not only invented afterworlds to comfort themselves and threaten others, they have invented them to compensate for incapacities."¹⁶ Nietzsche accuses man of using the old religion to shelter himself from his true being, and "because Zarathustra wants to create meaning for the earth, the unhealthiness of Christianity's otherworlds, which has dominated Western culture for centuries, must be exposed and abolished."¹⁷ The eternal life and death of Christianity is, for Nietzsche, "psychologically grounded in a state of repression."¹⁸ Thus, the fundamental flaw of Christianity is the gross misappropriation of the human theme of redemption.

Far from taking refuge in irreligious pessimism, Nietzsche is working to free men from the shackles they have unwittingly accepted. Nietzsche, through

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Weaver Santaniello, *Nietzsche, God, and the Jews: his critique of Judeo-Christianity in relation to the Nazi myth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 69-70.

¹⁵ Ibid., 70.

¹⁶ Ibid., 73.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 78.

Zarathustra, is here to preach man's liberation from religious dogma and constricting morality: "Nietzsche favors an anthropological view which posits humans, not god(s), as the creators, sustainers, and redeemers of the earth."¹⁹ Nietzsche is here to mend the chasm that Christianity has created between God and humans, and to restore humans to their true divinity. Responding to what he sees as Christianity's desecration of humans, he seeks "to remake the image of human beings."²⁰ Because Nietzsche "sees Christianity as the greatest objection to earthly survival primarily because of its fetishism with the afterlife"²¹ in his philosophy he does away with the afterlife and gives man access to redemption here on earth. He strips Christianity of its impurities, thereby giving men the gift of determining their own immortality.

Nietzsche despairs when his vision is irreverently received. Zarathustra descends to the marketplace to preach to the masses, only to be met with ignorance and unworthiness.²² Thus Nietzsche modifies his philosophy to serve only those who are worthy of his message. "In contrast to the preachers of equality, Nietzsche's approach is spiritually, not racially—or religiously—aristocratic. Some human beings, Nietzsche holds, *are* nobler than others and should serve as models for humanity," and it is these free spirits who "are able to overcome themselves and rise above the all-too-human mass."²³ Though Nietzsche's spiritual liberation is reserved for a "small group of spiritual elites",²⁴ this does not detract from his philosophy's overwhelming redemptive quality.

William Newell expands on the aristocratic aspect of Nietzsche's redemption, defending him with the following: "His love is not so much universal—and whose is, really?—but one reserved for the talent whom narrow-minded Protestantism and Catholicism had crushed."²⁵ Newell describes Nietzsche's philosophy as a means to finding one's own divinity, or the "kingdom within," independent from the Christian framework, a practice that is "only for the courageous few... only for the few who have the grace to go that preternaturally lonely way."²⁶ The idea is not that this new religion be aristocratic, but that its followers protect themselves from inferiority through exclusivity: Nietzsche "hated a religion that preached happiness on the plain and opted for one that

¹⁹ Ibid., 70.

²⁰ Ibid., 88.

²¹ Ibid., 73.

²² Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1954), 166.

²³ Santaniello, 79.

²⁴ Ibid., 80.

²⁵ William Lloyd Newell, *The secular magi: Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche on religion* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1986) 188.

²⁶ Ibid., 181.

preached it on the mountaintop for those who were willing to be creative geniuses, when nature has determined them to be so; this rather than peaceful mediocrities.”²⁷ Nietzsche’s form of redemption is so individualized that it can only be achieved by man coming, of his own design, to the transformative and holy thought of Eternal Recurrence.

In contrast to Nietzsche’s notion of redemption, Marx engages all of mankind in redemption rather than just a select few. Nietzsche has taken refuge from the masses, while Marx revels in them and relies on the proletariat to both provoke the revolution and structure the new society that will ensue. Although Marx was not raised with the same vigorous religiosity as Nietzsche, influences from his theological upbringing manifest themselves in his mature theories. Marx was influenced by his father’s use of religious conversion as a social leverage, as well as his mother’s loyalty to the family’s rabbinical lineage. The tension between the Judaism and Protestantism of his early household impacted Marx in multiple ways.²⁸ Firstly, though raised with two religions, he fully belonged to neither, and thus had no cohesive religious identity. Secondly, his father’s open preference for humanism over religion, and “sympathy for the rights of the oppressed,” affected Marx as much as did the religions of his household.²⁹ Thirdly, due to the status of Jews in Germany, and Marx’s disconnection from the Jewish community, he perhaps was influenced more by Protestantism than by his maternal religion.

The question of whether Marx’s redemptive theory was more influenced by Christianity or by Judaism seems to be hotly debated. Julius Carlebach examines the claim that Marx was a “secular nineteenth-century version of an Old Testament prophet”,³⁰ and concludes that Marx’s “passionate devotion to the proletariat” is a “displacement of the ‘chosen people’” and that Communism is nothing more than a reconstruction of Judaism with Marx as its new prophet.³¹ What is more, there are four major tenets in Judaism that resurface in Marx’s theories: “The *equality* of men as a matter of right and not of grace. *Justice* as a matter of principle and not convenience. *Reason* based on learning as a virtue and a duty, and *this-worldliness* which demanded the search for perfection on earth.”³² William Newell, weighing in on Marx, carefully treads the same path: “There is

²⁷ Ibid., 179-80.

²⁸ McLellan, 4-5.

²⁹ Ibid., 8.

³⁰ Julius Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the radical critique of Judaism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 315.

³¹ Ibid., 311.

³² Ibid., 314.

messianic hope here...the kind that kept the Jews going for millennia, as they waited for the Messiah.”³³

In the same vein, Michèle Bertrand notes several similarities between Marx's socialism and “primitive” Christianity: both are movements of the oppressed; both are composed of persecuted individuals who despite their persecution victoriously and irresistibly blaze their own paths. Most importantly, “both preach of a *forthcoming deliverance* from servitude and misery.”³⁴ Listing themes ranging from martyrdom to sympathy for the oppressed, Bertrand concludes that there are a certain number of constants inexorably linking Christianity and Socialism.³⁵ Yet whether the redemptive element in Marx's socialist revolution is derived from Judaism or Christianity, it is recognized that it is based in a historically theological model.

Marx's redemptive exercise does away with religion and supplants his reconstruction in its place. Newell claims that Marxism was “an openness to the goodness of both people and things...the incarnation not of Christ but of man and woman...the heart of Marx and Engels' thought is a communitarian humanism, a noble incarnationalism that bespeaks a faith in what *is*.”³⁶ Marx thus eliminates the former deity and sculpts his ideology from the shell that Christ once inhabited. The masses become their own deity, and in the glow of their redemption, they are enlightened and ennobled by their own divine purpose. The proletariat need not be taught the principles of the post-revolutionary socialist state; they will attain a new state of being by light of their moral purity. As a redeemer, God “has been rendered otiose.”³⁷ Marx himself deems communism “the real *appropriation of the human* essence by and for man” and “the complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i.e., human) being.”³⁸

Indeed, Marx does not object to the ideals of religion as much as to its manipulations in the hands of the privileged classes: “the central critique of Marx against religion is a critique of how elites have used and still use their religion—

³³ Newell, 65.

³⁴ Bertrand, Michèle Bertrand, *Le statut de la religion chez Marx et Engels* (Paris: Editions sociales, 1979), 176-77, my translation.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 182. Bertrand writes that:

Thus there are, from Christianity to socialism, a certain number of constants: conviction, subjective motivation sometimes erring towards martyrdom; a sense of celebration, of the liberty experienced here and now in the form of symbolic acts, an openness to the forgotten and the oppressed (182, my translation).

³⁶ Newell, 55.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁸ Robert C. Tucker, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 84.

to give themselves, for example, a sense of legitimacy for their privilege or “meaning” in the face of personal tragedy.”³⁹ With religion, as with all other aspects of society, Marx employs his all-inclusive standard and advocates for universal, not individual, liberation. As early as 1844, Marx writes that:

there must be formed a sphere of society which claims no traditional status but only a human status...which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all the other spheres of society, without, therefore, emancipating all these other spheres, which is, in short, a *total loss* of humanity and which can only redeem itself by a *total redemption of humanity*. This dissolution of society, as a particular class, is the *proletariat*.⁴⁰

Marx’s representation of redemption relies on a heaven-on-earth vision of worldwide harmony attained through Socialism, where every human will partake in an equal, primarily material, happiness. This redemption excludes no one, and focuses especially on providing for those who were disadvantaged by previous social structures.

The similarities between these two seminal thinkers are remarkable: they were contemporaries, their lives overlapping by four decades, and they both rose from privileged classes in Germany. Their concerns were strikingly similar. Each one strove to moor the human psyche in an increasingly fragmented world. To achieve this, each sublimated his early religious influences into a philosophical doctrine, emphasizing the importance of an earthly redemption over a mythical redemption in the afterlife. But there the similarities end. While the Overman attains solitary spiritual redemption, the proletariat attains redemption based on a communal harmony that provides for men both spiritually and materially. While Marx places man’s salvation in the embrace of collective humanity, Nietzsche finds it in high solitude, far from the madding crowd.

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³⁹ Karl Marx and John C. Raines, *Marx on religion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 169.

⁴⁰ Tucker, *Marx-Engels reader*, 64.