

**Book Report - Philosophy 9C  
Dr. Sleeper**

**Book - The Essence of Christianity  
by Ludvig Feuerbach**

**Andrew Goodman  
March 23, 1964**

### The Gist of the "Essence of Christianity"

Thy Lord God in heaven is thyself on this earth, exclaims Ludvig Feuerbach time and again in his Essence of Christianity with increasing intensity at each exclamation. Love of thy God is love of thyself. God is not love, but, in fact, Love is God. The unity of man's conscious rationality is alone absolute. His individual love of another is the only divine unity and infinity of his nature. Love of God is a delusion, and its consequences for man's morality and sense of truth is catastrophic.

If the above sounds like a mystical missionary speaking backwards, this is what Feuerbach essentially does in explaining the essence of Christianity. By no means should that be taken as a criticism of Feuerbach's work. On the contrary, it is an excellent method. In effect, the sermon approach defeats the theologians at their own sacred game. That is to say, Feuerbach considers the world and man to be reallysacred, whereas he would contend that the theologians are engaged in an unfortunate game. Feuerbach speaks from the heart and for that reason he opens himself to the glib criticism that he preaches as if that were in itself an act of naive stupidity. He believes that man's love, man's morality and his unique ability to view himself as an object are sacred attributes of man. He believes in man's infinity but recognizes this to be an attribute of man, not of man through God. In fact he has for man (to use a term which should not be taken religiously) a divine love. The difference between Feuerbach and a theologian is that he has a sacred love for man as opposed to a mortal love for God. This attitude of love for man finally leads Feuerbach to denounce religion as a sensuous egotism and to hail humanism as a love of true substantive morality and a yearning for real truth; to denounce mysticism and faith in God as supporting an empty moral

-2-

structure built on fear, and to hail love of man as creating a real morality, believed in for its own sake. But as the above are his conclusions, it is time to move on to the theory itself.

The more violent denunciations of religion come only after Feuerbach has established his humanist theory and upset the notion of an objective divine existence. The first part of his book, entitled The true or Anthropological Essence of Religion lays the foundations for his criticism of religion by explaining the concept of God in terms of materialistic human faculties and attitudes; the first of which is the ability of man to possess attitudes, materialistic or otherwise.

Understanding, according to Feuerbach, is a unique attribute of man. By process of reason, man can control his attitudes and consciously understand his environment. Whereas the "Brute" can react to his environment, only man can endow his environment with significance and understand it rationally. In other words, man can unify his environment by comprehending relationships between different objects. Further, he can treat himself as an object, thus freeing the consciousness from the traditional subject-object relationships. The ability to become self-conscious enables the understanding to be self-sufficient because it does not depend on an external subject to comprehend it. God, on the other hand, needs man to comprehend him and is therefore (if by nothing else) at least limited by man's rationality. In fact, however, Feuerbach denies the actual existence of God and explains it in terms of man's wish to objectify his understanding in order to insure his superiority over the brute; and to endow the universe with a rational existence which he can comprehend as an actual divine object. For Feuerbach, rationality itself, not God, is the justification for the world. Even the concept of God is conditioned by reason. That is to say that God could not be God unless he were humanly rational. Even God's omnipotence seems very

similar to the self-sufficiency of man's reason. His omnipotent nature, however, is simply man's objectifying of his own omnipotent reason.

If, however, the Christian God were simply the objectifying of man's self-sufficient attribute, i. e., reason, he would not be man-like and would retain an essentially divine nature. Man is not self-sufficient but needs other people in order to be able to identify himself as an individual. Man needs people who love him for his own individuality, who take an interest in him for his own sake. If God took no interest in man, if he did not love man, he would indeed be different from man. If God simply exemplified moral perfection, without forgiving man his moral imperfection, he would not be a loving God. The Christian God, however, does love man. He does excuse man his finite nature and hence he gives up his right to remain a god. He becomes identical with loving human beings; he is infinite in reason but finite in love and is therefore man.

Although God's partaking in human emotions completes the evidence that God is projection of human nature, Feuerbach goes on to explain that the consequences of the belief in the objective existence of a separate divine being are quite as real as the concept itself. The first consequence is the belief that by exalting God as more important than the world, one has to commit nature to a secondary position. At the same time, by exalting God, one has to exalt human individuality above nature and above man in general. Hence God is superior to man, who is in turn superior to nature. Man loves God and obeys moral laws in His name, therefore losing sight of the substance of morality while obeying it out of fear of divine retribution.

The second consequence has to do with a provision of the first. In so far as man believes himself to be superior to nature, in so far as he has faith in divine Providence and miracle, he believes that by praying, God will intervene for him

-4-

supernaturally. Natural causes will suddenly cease to exist and his wish will come true automatically. The result is a disregard for truth. Hence faith in God which is based on an egotistical illusion is basically antithetical to faith in human sense and reason. Truth has no place where there is a faith in miracle. In fact, since faith itself is considered to be a miracle, truth has no place in faith itself.

The third consequence is a neglect of human love. In order to truly love, says Feuerbach, you must give up "egotistical independence". This is not necessary for the love of God which is simply self-love, but for human love this is quite necessary. True love of God excludes love of man as is evidenced in the monk and the priest.

In short, morality, truth, and love are destroyed when love of God is affirmed. This continues into the second part of the book where religious theology is attacked along similar lines. I need not go into detail about the substance of the argument which is similar to the first part except to say that the logical inconsistencies of theology are stressed in the second part, whereas the argument of the basically human character of God was stressed in the first part.

At this point it is pertinent to discuss the style and diction of the book. To begin with, the title might be construed as a misnomer. The book might just as well have been called "the substance of humanism" rather than the Essence of Christianity. As one might have noticed, Feuerbach does not stop at simply explicating The Essence of Christianity. In fact, throughout the entire book he uses the dramatic technique of setting up his humanist philosophy as the nice, lovable incarnation of the "good guy" and religion as the incarnation of the "bad guy". It is more than an ironic coincidence that this idea is analogous to the conception of God and the devil. In fact, his humanistic philosophy requires an antithesis for its very existence. It would be absurd to waste time and energy in explicating

-5-

a concept exalting the perfection of man if there were no contrary notion affirming faith in something else. That Feuerbach is driven to declare religion as a positive evil is understandable in light of the fact that the opposing views are of a different genre. If the question were simply a matter of logic where there existed opposing views, Feuerbach might have calmly discussed the matter. But religion does not simply attack a logical question, but it attacks logic itself. As religion attacks the very essence of humanism, so does the devil attack the essence of divine goodness.

The emotional effect of this dramatic situation of good versus evil is quite overwhelming if commitment is truly inspired and technique is artistically employed. Feuerbach is sufficiently endowed in both cases. As regards his inspiration, there can be no doubt. He truly loves men and he truly has faith in man's ability to reason and his capacity to love. His technique is on a par with his inspiration. His style is so fluid, the issues are so clear that the reader, if he is not careful, will endow the issues with a personality of their own and cheer for one side or the other as if he were watching a football game which is slightly contrived.

It is precisely this recognition of emotion in Feuerbach's philosophy and in his technique that makes the book as strong as it is. The role of love and morality in his philosophy and the use of moral implication in his style and presentation make The Essence of Christianity a truly great work. His sensitive insight into human emotion, coupled with a convincing and rational argument, make it a valid work. In effect, then, Feuerbach treats the whole man. He appeals to the heart and the mind and lets the one fortify the understanding of the other. The mind is not left peacefully alone and the heart is not allowed to vibrate uncontrolled.