The common view has it that during the Enlightenment the theoretical study of religion broke decisively with its theological past. Recently, this view has been contested by S. N. Balagangadhara, who argues that the explanations of the origin of religion from Hume to Freud simply smuggled in theology as the science of religion. This article takes Ludwig Feuerbach’s theory of religion as a test case and shows that it is founded on a number of Christian beliefs concerning the relation of Christianity to humanity and its various “religious” traditions. The full scope of the argument is revealed when it turns out that the intelligibility of contemporary theorizing on the causes of religion is equally dependent on the background presence of the framework of Christian theology.

I have only found the key to the cipher of the Christian religion, only extricated its true meaning from the web of contradictions and delusions called theology.

—Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity

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A PARADIGM SHIFT?

If contemporary scholars were asked to write the history of religious studies, most would place the revolutionary turn in the development of the discipline in the Enlightenment and its dethronement of Christian theology as the basic frame of reference of western thought. In his book on the subject, Samuel Preus traces the emergence of the "naturalistic paradigm," which appeals to natural causes to explain religion—as opposed to the theological accounts, which have appealed to the supernatural. "If there is one person . . . whose achievement might be marked as the completion of a paradigm shift," Preus writes, it is David Hume, who "produced a thoroughgoing naturalistic critique of all available theological explanations of religion" (xiv). The main question of the new paradigm is the following: "If 'God is not given,' how is one to explain religions—that is, their universality, variety, and persistence until now? . . . Alternative explanatory theories had to be constructed, and this is what the naturalistic program undertook to do; its specific agenda, insofar as it broke decisively with theology, unfolded as an address to that fundamental problem" (Preus: xv). From Hume to Freud, the naturalistic explanations intended to reveal the origin and cause of the universal phenomenon of religion by locating it in some natural feature of the human condition.

Today, Preus continues, it appears that the question of the origin of religion is no longer a topic of interest; it is "virtually ignored, and even demeaned as a futile question or worse" (xv). The explanatory ambitions of the Enlightenment have given way to an attitude of "scientific" modesty: "'Religious studies' as it is normally carried on seems comfortable with a quasi-theological or metaphysical 'solution' (or paradigm), by which the origins or causes of religion are placed beyond investigation on the ground that the source of religion is 'transcendent.' From such a perspective it is both unnecessary and impossible to advance any further in explaining religion" (Preus: xviii). Basically, Preus’s concern is the following: While the shift toward the naturalistic paradigm has created the theoretical domain of religious studies and emancipated it from its theological moorings, the discipline has lost its interest in the question of origins and causes around which the paradigm shift turned, and this development is to be deplored because it prevents us from advancing in our understanding of religion.

In his "The Heathen in His Blindness . . ." S. N. Balagangadhara suggests that we look at this issue from another perspective. What he finds striking about the naturalistic paradigm is its explanandum: all of these explanations account for the universality of religion. Clearly, if we locate the origin of the phenomenon in the nature of the human psyche or the
structure of human society, we assume that religion is a universal property of humanity. Now, Balagangadhara points out, neither before nor during the Enlightenment was the belief that religion is a cultural universal considered as a problem in need of empirical or theoretical clarification. On the contrary, the incomplete ethnographies that were available all started from the assumption that there had to be religion in the cultures they intended to describe, and the naturalistic paradigm itself was “a succession of theories that accounted why religion had to exist in all cultures, why religion is a cultural universal, and why humankind had to create religions” (Balagangadhara: 159).

To make sense of this situation, we should become aware that the doctrine that God implanted religion in humankind is a basic truth of the Christian religion. According to Balagangadhara, the Enlightenment merely restricted this belief in its scope and transformed it into the claim that all human cultures have religion. Consequently, this modified Christian belief was presented as the explanandum of the theories of religion, and it turns out that these “theories” themselves consist of speculative explanations that are based in Christian theology. More generally, Balagangadhara proposes that the shift toward the naturalistic paradigm was not a break with theology, as Preus claims, but, rather, consisted in a secularization of theology in which some specific beliefs were detached from the larger framework of Christian doctrine and converted into the basic claims of the theorizing on religion. The paradigm “smuggles in theology as the science of religion” and “[its] theories—those from Bodin to Freud—are merely sets of claims which are only prima facie plausible. Three quarters of theology and a quarter of illiterate ethnology, such is their nature” (Balagangadhara: 186).

Surely this is a harsh indictment, and, if true, then it would have important consequences for our understanding of the historical development and the contemporary state of religious studies. In this article I assess Balagangadhara’s controversial claims concerning the emergence of the naturalistic paradigm through an inquiry into the thought of one of its main contributors, Ludwig Feuerbach. His The Essence of Christianity supplied a prototypical model to the theoretical study of religion by explaining the phenomenon as a consequence of the specific properties of the human psyche. The resulting theory of religious projection had a sensational impact on the progressive intelligentsia of nineteenth-century Europe, and today many thinkers consider his idea that God is a product of human consciousness to have contributed a profound change to the modern understanding of religion. According to Peter Berger, “A good case could be made that not only Marx’s and Freud’s treatment of religion, but the entire historical-psychological-sociological analysis of reli-
igious phenomena since Feuerbach has been primarily a vast elaboration of the same conception and the same procedure” (46). First, my analysis focuses on the content of Feuerbach’s influential explanation of the origin of religion and examines how much it owes to Christian theology. Next I look at the epistemological structure and explanatory value of the general category of theories that follow the same procedure of explaining religion in terms of some property of the human psyche. Finally, the fact that such explanations still prevail in contemporary religious studies brings us back to Balagangadhara and his claim that all empirical and theoretical study of religion has taken place within the conceptual frame of Christian doctrine and that the concept of religion itself is a part of this larger frame.

MYSTIFIED THEOLOGY

How did Feuerbach come to the belief that an explanation of religion that locates its origin in the structure of the human psyche is viable? He discloses the starting point of his theory in the opening sentence of Das Wesen des Christentums—as it is translated by the novelist George Eliot: “Religion has its basis in the essential difference between man and the brute—the brutes have no religion” (1). Although he feels the need to tell his readers that the personal observations of the famous naturalist Cuvier have made it sufficiently clear that uncritical thinkers on natural history were wrong in attributing “the virtue of religiousness” to the elephant and that “the religion of elephants belongs to the realm of fable” (1), Feuerbach does not provide more empirical or theoretical proof for his claim. In fact, he appears to consider it self-evident that once it is asserted that no “brutes” are known to have religion, it is also clear that religion has its basis in some difference between “man” and “brute.” Now, to be able to come to the conclusion that humans have some property $x$ that makes them essentially different from “the brutes” and that this property $x$ leads to religion, one has to take one of the following two paths.

To take the first path, one must discover property $x$ in the physiological or psychological structure of the human being and one must succeed in demonstrating unambiguously that there is a necessary connection between human property $x$ and religion, that is, that $x$ has to lead to religion and that it cannot lead to other social phenomena such as nationalism, state, art, and so forth. It is highly unlikely that this is what happened to Feuerbach. Even today, with the recent explosion of knowledge of the human genetic code, it still remains impossible to establish a necessary connection between some specific human trait and a social phenomenon as complex as religion. Besides, as we shall see later, Feuerbach certainly
does not succeed in proving that his “essential difference” necessarily leads to religion.

Or, to come to the second possible path, one starts from the assumption that religion distinguishes “man” from “the brute” and speculates about some human property \( x \) that might be the cause of this fundamental difference between humans and other animals. I propose that this is how Feuerbach came to his explanation about religion. Apart from the premise that no brutes have religion, he was working with the assumption that religion distinguishes “man” from “the brute,” in other words, that all humans have religion. Why does Feuerbach not mention or discuss this crucial premise of his opening statement? Why does he not even consider providing empirical proof for this premise, though he does find it necessary to tell his readers that empirical observation makes it undisputable that elephants cannot have religion? The only reasonable answer to these questions is that the idea that religion is a human universal was so deeply ingrained in his thinking that he took it to be a self-evident truth of human knowledge.

In the year 1841 the knowledge of nonwestern cultures and religions was limited to scholarly work on traditional texts in Greek, Arabic, Sanskrit, and other languages and the reports and stories of travelers, missionaries, traders, and government officials of the colonial powers. This limited number of studies and reports would have formed a rather unstable foundation to allow Feuerbach to make the induction that all humans have religion. It is also highly doubtful whether it was these writings that had created a commonsense consensus among his readers that made it so easy for him to carelessly presuppose that religion is a human universal. In the middle of the nineteenth century many cultures had not been studied or described at all, and it would take fifty more years before ethnologists and anthropologists initiated the “scientific” study of different cultures. Clearly, it cannot have been the accumulated empirical knowledge concerning human cultures that turned this idea into an undisputable truth for Feuerbach and his readers. Because the assertion that religion distinguishes the human being from all other animals precedes and supports his theorizing on religion, it would be pointless to suggest that Feuerbach is presenting one of the findings of his own theoretical research in his opening sentence. This leaves the option that the assumption was implanted in his thinking through other theoretical writings, and that brings us to the question of which writings could have provided him with this fundamental belief concerning the religious nature of humankind.

The answer is obvious when one is aware of Feuerbach’s educational background. For several years he had been a student of theology at the universities of Heidelberg and Berlin. Important theologians like Friedrich
Schleiermacher were among his teachers, and they familiarized him with their own ideas on religion and with those of several Christian thinkers from the fathers of the Church to the fathers of the Reformation. The relation between “man and his God” was of supreme importance to the latter, and one of the related theological certainties frequently asserted during the Reformation was that religion is the distinguishing feature of humanity. A characteristic formulation of this belief can be found in John Calvin’s 1559 Institutes of the Christian Religion:

There is . . . no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a God. And they who in other aspects of life seem least to differ from brutes still continue to retain some seed of religion. So deeply does the common conception occupy the minds of all, so tenaciously does it inhere in the hearts of all! Therefore, since from the beginning of the world there has been no region, no city, in short, no household, that could do without religion, there lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all. (vol. 1: 44)

Calvin in his turn is referring to the old Christian belief that the true religion—a gift from God—had been present in humankind from the beginning of time and that it had been corrupted by the devil and his minions until it was restored in Christianity. In Augustine’s words, the Christian religion “had never been wanting from the beginning of mankind until the incarnation of Christ, and from then on the true religion, which had already been in existence, began to be called Christian” (Retractationes i.13, in Balagangadhara: 64–65).

As Calvin never doubted the unquestionable truth that the knowledge of God has been naturally implanted in the minds of men, so Feuerbach never considered that some empirical proof was required for what was to him the self-evident fact that all humans are religious. Calvin would never have denied that he was a Christian theologian establishing theological truths. Feuerbach, on the contrary, claimed that he was no longer a theologian but that he had become a “natural philosopher in the domain of mind” (xiv). Although he admits that in his work he is obliged to use the expressions of theology, or even appears to speculate and turn theologian himself, he asserts that he is really analyzing speculation, that he is reducing theology to anthropology (xxiii). His opening sentence certainly is the expression of a Christian theological idea, but this is not a case of reducing theology to anthropology; it is a case of transforming a theological claim into an anthropological fact. Thus, a first glance at The Essence of Christianity confirms Balagangadhara’s claim that the theories on the origin of religion merely accept the Christian belief that religion is universal as a fact in need of explanation.
Perfect God and Alienated Man

Feuerbach's explanation of religion begins by pointing out the unique feature of humankind that makes humans inevitably religious: we have a higher consciousness than the brutes. Like all other animals, we are conscious of ourselves as separate individuals, but what makes our consciousness higher is that we are also aware of humanity as a "species": "Consciousness in the strictest sense is present only in a being to whom his species, his essential nature, is an object of thought" (Feuerbach: 1). Feuerbach calls this the I–Thou structure of human consciousness: the consciousness of every human being is divided into a self-consciousness and a consciousness of the other, of the "not-I," of humanity. Religion comes into being because humanity is aware that the species is perfect and the individual is imperfect. Human beings are conscious of the perfection and infinity of the species, and this causes them to also become conscious of their own imperfection and their own limitations. The cleavage between the individual and the species makes humans objectify the perfect predicates of the species—namely, Perfect Reason, Perfect Will, and Perfect Affection—and project them onto God. This process of objectification and projection has the inevitable consequence that each human being is estranged from the perfection of the human species. According to Feuerbach, atheism—which is the true secret of religion—can remove this alienation and make humankind see that it is actually worshiping its own perfect essence.

Focusing on the first part of Feuerbach’s account, one can again identify a salient parallel with the theological basics that are eloquently exposed in the earlier quoted part of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin says that every human household has religion because a sense of deity is inscribed in all hearts; Feuerbach claims that every human has religion because—in opposition to the brutes—they are conscious of the species. Apart from differences that are merely terminological, the main difference between these ideas seems to be that "God" is replaced by "the species." Besides taking over from Christian theology the belief that religion is a human universal, it appears that Feuerbach has also transformed the theological account concerning this belief into the foundation of his philosophy of religion through the substitution of one variable.

If the above summary of Feuerbach’s explanation of religion is reconsidered with the hypothesis in mind that he has borrowed truths from
theology and has written species where there should be God, it becomes more and more clear that a divine source of inspiration constituted his theory building. The source I am referring to is the Scripture, more precisely, the biblical account of the Original Sin and the subsequent Fall. The common theological interpretation of this account can be roughly summarized as follows: Man was made in the image of God. God is perfect, and He created man in the likeness of His perfection. But then the serpent seduced Eve, and Eve seduced Adam, and they both ate the forbidden fruit. With this Original Sin came the Fall. Man was estranged from God, and this included being estranged from His perfection. Man became sinful and imperfect. As the early Christian Father Irenaeus wrote: “We lost, in Adam, the privilege of being in the image and likeness of God” (in Bettenson: 74). Compare this to the following story: The human species is perfect. Every human being is limited, but each carries part of the essential perfection of humankind inside. The origin of religion lies in the objectification and projection of the human perfection: “Man denies as to himself only what he attributes to God” (Feuerbach: 27). Thus, in religion the human being is alienated from the perfection of the species, or, paraphrasing Irenaeus: “We lost, in religion, the consciousness of being in the image and likeness of the species.”

There is a bizarre similarity between the biblical story of the Fall and Feuerbach’s account of the origin of religion. Naturally, the serpent and the fruit have disappeared, and God has received a new name, but the congruencies in the two accounts cannot be denied. Despite his aversion toward common theology, “a kind of trash from which [he] rather [kept] as clear as possible” (xvii–xviii), Feuerbach’s anthropology is constituted by a framework of mystified theology. He insisted that he was simply inverting the claims of theology to reveal the essential truth that he thought was present in religion, and this method could well account for the strong resemblances between religious theology and his philosophy of religion. Nonetheless, it is the inversion of Christian theology that is supposed to produce a new philosophical—or even scientific—anthropology. Thus, he has simply reproduced the truth claims of Christianity by transforming its doctrine into the theoretical foundation of the true knowledge of humankind. In other words, by way of his transformative method Christian doctrine has been modified so as to supply the basic conceptual scheme for his explanation of religion.

The True Essence of the True Religion

Throughout The Essence of Christianity a peculiar ambiguity regularly surfaces in Feuerbach’s thinking about religion; he tends to use the terms Christianity and religion as though they were synonyms. In some sentences
it is not clear whether he is ascribing certain properties to Christianity or to religion in general: “Religion, at least the Christian, is the relation of man to himself” (14); or similarly: “Religion, at least the Christian, is abstraction from the world; it is essentially inward” (66). In another sentence Feuerbach seems to equate Christianity with religion: “My principal theme is Christianity, is Religion, as it is the immediate object, the immediate nature of man” (xxii). Many passages are confusing because Feuerbach talks about the importance of God in religion: “To every religion the gods of other religions are only notions concerning God, but its own conception of God is to it God himself, the true God—God such as he is in himself” (16–17, emphasis added). He even goes so far as to define religion as “consciousness of God” (13). These claims are not intended to refer to Christianity or to monotheism in particular; on the contrary, their subject is religion in general, and that includes the religions of “the Greeks” and “the Hindoos,” which are frequently cited in the same work. Considering the diverse pantheon of gods existing in the latter traditions, the various statements regarding religion and the relation of man to God do not make much sense—to say the least.

When Feuerbach elaborates his general theory on the origin of religion, his equivocal use of Christianity and religion inevitably generates grave problems. He obviously cannot only be talking about Christianity when he claims that religion, as the alienation of the species’ perfection, is a consequence of the I–Thou structure of human consciousness. Consequently, he also refers to religion in general when he says that human-kind projects its own perfections—Perfect Will, Perfect Reason, and Perfect Affection—on God or, I presume, on different gods. This account might have some prima facie credibility as long as it is confined to the perfect God of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. A slight problem arises once one turns to the religion of “the Greeks” or “the Hindoos”: the multiple gods of these religions do not seem to be embodiments of human perfections. On the contrary, many of these gods are characterized by such imperfections as capriciousness, cruelty, weakness of will, greed, lust, jealousy, and so on.

Feuerbach explains the differences among the gods of different religions as follows: “God is the nature of man regarded as absolute truth,—the truth of man; but God, or, what is the same thing, religion, is as various as are the conditions under which man conceives this his nature, regards it as the highest being” (19). Although the confusion once again surfaces in this explanation, it is clear which point Feuerbach wants to make; in the words of Van Harvey, he claims that “various cultures will project different kinds of deities because the cultures embrace different images of humanity and, consequently, different ideals” (63). This claim is con-
tradictory to many of Feuerbach’s earlier theses. After all, he begins building his theory by revealing the essential nature of humans, not as it is conceived in Christianity but as it is in reality:

What, then, is the nature of man, of which he is conscious, or what constitutes the specific distinction, the proper humanity of man? Reason, Will, Affection. To a complete man belong the power of thought, the power of will, the power of affection. . . . Reason, love, force of will, are perfections—the perfections of the human being—nay, more, they are absolute perfections of being. To will, to love, to think, are the highest powers, are the absolute nature of man as man, and the basis of his existence. Man exists to think, to love, to will. . . . True existence is thinking, loving, willing existence. (3)

There is a way to explain the contradiction between this description of “the essential nature of man,” which is projected onto God in religion, and the claim that different cultures will project different kinds of deities. It is possible that Feuerbach thought that in Christianity the true and perfect essence of humankind was revealed, whereas the gods of other religions were the result of the projection of a less perfect or false image. The proposed explanation has the virtue of pointing out a direction in which to search for answers to the questions raised by the problems described in his thinking.

Why was Feuerbach completely unaware of the problems his ambiguous use of Christianity and religion generates? How does he come to define religion as “consciousness of God”? Why does he repeatedly forget that not all religions are monotheisms? Why does he not see the absurd implications of his theory when it is applied to religions other than Christianity? Earlier I refer to the Christian belief that God gave the true religion to humankind at the beginning of time and that the different religious traditions are corrupted versions of this original divine gift. As I have said, Feuerbach reproduces this theological claim by presupposing that all humans have religion. Again, it is the same framework that put further constraints on his thinking about religion. In Christian theology it is self-evident that Christianity is the true religion and that the other religions are pale and erring variants of this true religion. That is why the equivocation of Christianity and religion came so naturally to Feuerbach; Christianity was religion to him, in the sense that it was the original religion and that the other religions could be nothing more than closely related variants of this ur-religion.

In enthusiasm for revealing the essence of religion, Feuerbach goes further than most theologians would in his belief that all religions are like Christianity. It appears that the belief dominated so strongly in his think-
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ing that even his explanation of the Holy Trinity is not confined to Christianity: “Man’s consciousness of himself in his totality is the consciousness of the Trinity” (65). Basically, he claims that the Trinity is an objectification of the I–Thou structure of human consciousness, in which God the Father is I, God the Son is Thou, and the Holy Spirit is the love between the I and the Thou. This explanation brings Harvey to the following question: “If the doctrine of the Trinity follows from the practical relationship between the I and the Thou, and this is a universal structure of human existence, why is it that the doctrine of the Trinity is unique to Christianity?” (79). It seems that Harvey is not fully aware of the absurdity of the situation. Feuerbach explains the Christian doctrine of the Trinity—which is the result of a specific development in Christian thought and which was, after severe dispute, made into a dogma by the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E.—in terms of the structure of the consciousness of the human species. Athanasius and the other Trinitarians, I presume, must have belonged to those privileged human beings who had a full insight into the nature of human consciousness more than fifteen centuries before Ludwig Feuerbach would reveal it to the rest of humankind. It is difficult to understand how this philosopher came to write such nonsense about the Trinity and its relation to human consciousness. He was so deeply convinced that Christianity was unadulterated and true religion that he simply presented the Trinity as the perfect projection of human consciousness. Thus, this absurd explanation also originates from the theological framework that made it so obvious to Feuerbach that other religions were but pale and erring variants of Christianity and that, consequently, his theorizing on the essence of Christianity was at once a disclosure of the essence of religion.

Awaiting the Second Adam

Feuerbach goes even further in reproducing the truth claims of Christianity. He adopted a view on the history of humankind that has been extremely influential throughout all thinking of Christendom and western culture on this subject. The view I am referring to was first formulated by the father of the Church Eusebius in his Praeparatio Evangelica. In this work Eusebius writes that all human nations and cultures were merely the preparation of the Gospel, that is, they were just laying the red carpet for the coming of Christ and the birth of Christianity. This early theological belief has surfaced in various shapes in religious, philosophical, and even so-called scientific writings. It is still common practice among western thinkers to describe preceding and contemporary cultures as phases in the development of western culture and to see western civilization as the climax of cultural evolution. The work of this Church father pinpoints the Christian origins of that inclination to appropriate the his-
Eusebius’s ideas are incorporated smoothly in Feuerbach’s theory as “the progressive development of religion, which is identical with the progressive development of human culture” (20). From a state of savagery and wildness in which nature gods were worshiped, humankind moved through different stages of culture, such as Greek civilization with its Homeric gods and ancient German civilization with its warrior gods, in a straight line to the triumph of Christianity. How to reconcile this idea with Feuerbach’s “anthropotheism”? “The course of religious development which has been generally indicated consists specifically in this, that man abstracts more and more from God, and attributes more and more to himself. This is especially apparent in the belief in revelation. That which to a later age or a cultured people is given by nature or reason, is to an earlier age, or to a yet uncultured people, given by God” (31). In other words, “what was at first religion becomes at a later period idolatry; man is seen to have adored his own nature. Man has given objectivity to himself, but has not recognized the object as his own nature: a later religion takes this forward step; every advance in religion is therefore a deeper self-knowledge” (Feuerbach: 13). How are we to understand the history of religions according to this scheme of the religious progress of humankind? Feuerbach suggests that a later religion is always a forward step; it is “an advance in religion.” Does this mean that the cult of Isis is an advance on, say, Buddhism? If so, where exactly does the cult of Isis reveal its deeper self-knowledge, where does it recognize that people adored their own nature in the “idolatry” of Buddhism, or where does it abstract more from God and attribute more to humans than Buddhism does? Any attempt to conceive answers to these questions, I think, reveals that Feuerbach’s notion of religious progress becomes incomprehensible if we try to apply it in our present understanding of the history of the different religions of humanity.

The evolutionary scheme is crystal clear, though, when viewed from the perspective of the theological claim that Christianity is the fulfillment of all other religions, that it is the religion that brings humankind back to divine truth. From this perspective Feuerbach’s scheme must merely show that Christianity is the ultimate advance in religion, that it is the climax of the progressive development in religion, and that the other religions are but less advanced versions of the true religion. In Eusebius’s account the relation among the different non-Christian religions is of no real importance; it is only the relation between Christianity and the other religions that matters, and it is precisely this relation that Feuerbach can explain in terms of his conception of religious development. Not surprisingly, it is Christ who has the leading part in this explanation: “Only in Christ is the last wish of
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religion realised, the mystery of religious feeling solved:—solved however in the language of imagery proper to religion, for what God is in essence, that Christ is in actual appearance. So far the Christian religion may justly be called the absolute religion” (Feuerbach: 145). Human beings have mistaken the essential nature of the species for an object outside them and have attributed it to God, and in Christianity this perfect essence is incarnated back in a perfect human; humankind has projected its own perfection onto God, and now God has become human again. Thus, Feuerbach thinks of human history as a straight line forward to the realization of “the last wish of religion,” to Christ as the fullest revelation, to the Demonstratio Evangelica. There is only one last step left to be taken now, namely, the step toward Feuerbach’s own anthropotheism, in which humanity attains perfect consciousness of our essential nature. Displaying a modesty that reminds one of his former teacher Hegel, Feuerbach lets cultural—or religious—development reach its climax in his own writings.

In the above excerpts it can be seen how Feuerbach has ingeniously blended two accounts of Christian theology. Eusebius’s view on the history of humankind is fitted into the basic structure of his theory, which is in its turn a rendition of the account of the Fall. This last account tells us that humankind was alienated from God by the Fall, that in Adam’s Sin we lost the privilege of being in the image and likeness of the Perfect God. Some of the early Christian fathers drew a parallel between the creation of Adam and the incarnation of Christ and thus saw Christ as a second Adam. An example can be found in the following passage from Irenaeus’s Adversus Haereses: “As Adam was first made from untiiled soil and received his being from virgin earth (since God had not yet sent rain and man had not yet cultivated the ground) and was fashioned by the hand of God, that is by the Word of God, ‘by whom all things were made’ . . . ; so he who existed as the Word restored in himself Adam, by his birth from Mary who was still a virgin, a birth befitting this restoration of Adam” (in Bettenson: 82–83). Christ was a perfect and divine man; He “restored in himself Adam”—that is, the perfect Adam as he had been before the Fall—and thus He reduced the human alienation from God that the Fall had created. This belief is basic to the Christian understanding of redemption as it is elaborated in Anselm’s doctrine of atonement. In the now more or less familiar process of mystifying transposition, Feuerbach translates this to Christ as the symbolic reduction of the alienation of humankind from the perfection of the species, as the image of the deeper self-knowledge that humanity has attained in Christianity.

At this point I should perhaps remind the reader that we are dealing with an extremely critical and influential nineteenth-century thinker and that the deficiencies in Feuerbach’s theory of religion cannot be explained
by suggesting his intellectual frailties. As I have been at pains to point out, the origin of the lack of intelligibility in his ideas about religion lies in other constraints imposed on his thinking: the problems are easily accounted for once we are aware that his ideas were constituted by the underlying grid of Christian theology. Naturally, the theology has been mystified by inverting it, by blending several doctrines, by adding some variables and removing others, and by introducing a new terminology. However, the fact that Feuerbach has thus designed a fashionable garb for the body of theological doctrines does not make the latter into a secular or nonreligious theory of religion. Rather, it merely demonstrates that his “secular” thought has emerged within the larger religious framework of Christian doctrine and that his philosophical ideas are the result of a secularization of some specifically Christian beliefs, which merely translates these beliefs into a new idiom. The conclusion, then, of my inquiry into Feuerbach’s thought is that it does consist in “three quarters theology and a quarter of illiterate ethnology” and that Balagangadharma is right in accusing the naturalistic paradigm of smuggling in theology as the science of religion.

Instead of calling for a revival of the question of the origin of religion, as Preus does, we would better contemplate the consequences of the insight that both the question and its speculative answers make sense only because of the background presence of Christian theology. Or as Balagangadharma remarks, “The real question is not about the universality of religion but about the intellectual belief that it is so” (186). The belief that religion is a cultural universal is certainly not confined to the naiveté of nineteenth-century armchair anthropology. In fact, it has become a trivium of western common sense and the scholarly consensus on the subject. Furthermore, the belief appears to be constitutive of the concept of religion itself and of the entire conceptual domain of religious studies. Therefore, to reveal the full scope of Balagangadharma’s argument, I will now investigate the continuities between Feuerbach’s explanation and some of the contemporary theories on the psychology of religion.

THEOLOGY AS AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL WEB

Feuerbach’s account shares its epistemological structure with the larger category to which it belongs—the theories that explain religion in terms of some distinct property of the human psyche. Obviously, the first common feature of these accounts is that they start from the assumption that religion is a human universal. Although contemporary theorists rarely make the claim explicitly, their hypotheses would not make sense without the hidden premise of the universality of religion. Because this claim has not become the subject of empirical inquiry in the intervening de-
cades—indeed, it has never even been regarded as an empirical problem—we cannot but conclude that all of these theories on the psychology of religion have simply adopted as a pre-theoretical truth the Christian belief that religion—the gift from God—is a distinguishing feature of humankind.

Once the universality of religion has been established as a fact of nature, theory formation on religion inevitably takes the form of speculation regarding some essential feature of humanity, which should explain why humans have to be religious animals. Drawing heavily on his theological background, Feuerbach chose to concoct a story about the rift between “the I” and “the not-I” in human consciousness and the way this rift brings about an experience that leads to the universal alienation of religion. In his later work he developed a similar hypothesis that has been reappraised by Harvey in his study Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion: Feuerbach now claims that the human feeling of absolute dependency on nature generates an existential anxiety that forces humanity to create religion—in which the anxiety is mitigated through the projection of human agency in nature and the suggestion that the divine agents can be appeased. More recently, theorists of religion have placed the psychological cause of religion in the self-consciousness that the human being has of the incompleteness of his or her perception of the world (Sierksma), or in the urge of the human organism to flourish and expand and its anxiety in the face of necessity and death (Becker), or even in the neurological structure of the human brain (Gazzaniga). One could construct a multitude of equivalent accounts by placing the “essential feature” in any supposedly unique aspect of human psychology (or physiology) that—one way or another—might cause humankind to develop religion. For instance, let us say that the essential feature lies in the fact that humans have the ability to think conceptually whereas “the brutes” do not. Human beings think of the world as a series of concepts, and this inevitably leads to the need to explain the world by establishing certain relations among these concepts. In other words, because we have the ability to conceptualize, we begin to ask ourselves why things are as they are. We do not find a satisfactory answer to this question, and, therefore, we create divine beings and, in religion, explain the world in terms of their agency. With some imagination and the necessary elaboration, hundreds of similar stories on the origin of religion can be invented that sound as convincing as those presented by Feuerbach and the contemporary theorists of the psychology of religion.

The methodology of explaining religion in terms of some specific property of humankind leads to a second epistemological feature of these accounts: their structure makes them perfect examples of both petitio
principii and ad hoc theory formation. On the one hand, these accounts exemplify petitio principii because they take for granted the truth of an assertion though it is precisely this truth that they have to prove. A brief example can clarify how this falsifies the accounts in question. Imagine the following: One day I claim to have found a brilliant explanation of happiness. “People are happy,” I say, “because deep down we know that God is good.” A critic notes that my explanation starts from the assumption that all human beings are necessarily happy even though this is clearly not the case. “Don’t be fooled by appearances,” I reply to his objection. “Of course they are happy; deep down all people know that God is good, and that leaves them no option but to be happy.” The problem in my “argument” is that I take my thesis on happiness, which is logically dependent on the assumption that all humans are happy, as the premise from which I infer the truth of precisely that assumption. Thus, the argument does not prove anything, and as my explanation hinges on the validity of the argument, it loses its explanatory value; it does not really explain anything. The same is true for accounts that explain religion as a necessary consequence of some typically human property $x$. Because they are based on the belief that all humans are religious, they have to provide either empirical or theoretical grounds for that assertion. Empirical evidence is not offered, and the only theoretical “argument” the accounts can provide is the following: because religion follows from human property $x$, all humans are necessarily religious. Again, the premise presupposes the truth of the conclusion, and this exposes the faulty structure of the accounts. They are but exercises in the fallacy of petitio principii.

On the other hand, the accounts are ad hoc because they are specifically invented to explain the pre-theoretical claim that all human beings have religion. They are not based (and cannot be based) on independent empirical evidence because the only evidence for the explanans is the explanandum itself. As is characteristic of this kind of explanation, Feuerbach’s account cannot be tested because it does not have any empirical consequences. How can we possibly test whether a certain human being has an I–Thou consciousness that causes him or her to be religious? We cannot ask this human being, as Feuerbach explicitly says that humans are not aware of their religious identity: “When religion—consciousness of God—is designated as the self-consciousness of man, this is not to be understood as affirming that the religious man is directly aware of this identity; for, on the contrary, ignorance of it is fundamental to the peculiar nature of religion” (13). Harvey’s “rational reconstruction” of Feuerbach’s later thought shares this deficiency: Because it speculates about the feelings of “dependency” and “anxiety,” which are hidden in the deeper layers of the human psyche, we cannot make any empirical inquiries into its
theoretical claims. And the same is true for the more recent theories that claim, for example, that self-consciousness of the limits of human perception causes humanity to project gods to account for the mysterious and hidden dimensions of reality (Sierksma) or that the anxiety of the human self in the face of death and the individual’s need for self-esteem bring about the creation of religious systems that “raise men above nature” and “assure them that in some ways their lives count in the universe more than merely physical things count” (Becker: 4). It is impossible to provide empirical counterexamples to these accounts. Because they make religion the inevitable consequence of the inscrutable structure of the human psyche, the possibility of human beings who are not religious appears to become inconceivable. This is a property that these ad hoc explanations share with their theological ancestors: they simply cannot be refuted on empirical grounds.

A third feature, which proves the deficiency of the structure of the psychological theories of religion, is the absence of a necessary connection between explanans and explanandum. In the account of The Essence of Christianity there is an obvious lack of a necessary connection between the premises on the I–Thou structure of human consciousness and the human property of religiosity that is inferred from it. As Feuerbach has substituted some variables in the account of the Fall and presented the result as a theory of religion, it is possible to substitute the same variables in this theory and present it as an explanation for a completely different phenomenon. We could, for instance, replace species with nation or people and transform the theory into an explanation of nationalism. Every human being is conscious of him- or herself and, at the same time, conscious of the nation or the people. The breach between the imperfection of the individual and the perfection of the people makes “humans” objectify the perfection of their nation, “the national characteristics,” and project them onto the national heroes. Thus, “humans” are estranged from the perfection of their nation or their people. And nationalism is the expression of the human longing for this national perfection. Feuerbach’s premises on “the essential nature of man” are supposed to make it clear why human-kind necessarily had to develop religion. Still, his hypothesis on the I–Thou structure of human consciousness could just as well be the starting point for an infinite number of ad hoc accounts about all kinds of phenomena in the social world. The necessary connections are equally absent among the concepts of “the feeling of absolute dependency,” “human anxiety,” and “religion” in the existentialist model of religion of Harvey’s later Feuerbach. For instance, we could easily argue that the obsessive behavior of certain computer fanatics comes into being because they feel absolutely dependent on information technology and that this feeling generates
an anxiety that causes them to relate to computers as though they were human agents who may be appeased. The conceptual cluster of dependency, anxiety, and religion in the account is so arbitrary and vague that it can also be applied to “interpret” an immense variety of social phenomena. And the same point can be made for the contemporary explanations: it is totally unclear as to why the specific property of the human psyche they invoke leaves no option to humanity but to create gods and worship them in religion.

These features do not present a beautiful picture of the psychological theories of religion: They appear to consist of highly speculative ad hoc explanations that are vexed by fallacious structures, conceptual ambiguities, the absence of empirical consequences, and the adoption of theological doctrines. The strength of Balagangadhara’s argument is that it can explain the prevalence of these deficient accounts: it proposes that it is the underlying conceptual grid of Christian doctrine that provides them with the significance they have both in contemporary religious studies and in western common sense. As Feuerbach’s case illustrates, the specific speculations are related to theology in several ways, but the most convincing proof for this proposal is that all of these explanations have their theoretical foundation in the Christian belief that religion is a human universal. Thus, it appears that, as was the case for Feuerbach, the discipline of contemporary religious studies lives with the illusion of having escaped “from the web of contradictions and delusions called theology” (xvi), while it is in reality as entangled in this web as any Christian theologian.

THE BLINDNESS OF THEOLOGY

From the earliest missionaries to contemporary scholars, we have always approached the investigation of other cultures as an excavation of their religion and its specific belief system. When we try to decide what religion is, we arbitrarily invent hundreds of stipulative definitions whose only merit is that they are so all-encompassing and vague that they cannot but live up to our intuition that all cultures have religion. And when we claim to develop theories or explanations of religion, we simply accept the pre-theoretical claim that religion is universal and concoct ad hoc accounts whose prima facie credibility derives from the basic assumptions of the Christian religion. Because the conviction of the universality of religion precedes and supports all empirical and theoretical study regarding the subject, Balagangadhara cannot but conclude that both the notion of religion and the related notions and claims are sustained by the framework of Christian doctrine, which has faded away into the background. In his own words:
In the name of science and ethnology, the Biblical themes have become our stock-in-trade: that God gave religion to humankind has become a cultural universal in the guise that all cultures have a religion; the theme that God gave one religion to humanity has taken the form and belief that all religions have something in common; that God revealed himself to mankind is sanctified in the claim that in all cultures and at all times there is a subjective experience of religion which is fundamentally the same; the idea that God implanted a sense of divinity in Man is now a secular truth in the form of an anthropological, specifically human ability to have a religious experience. . . . And so the list goes on, and on, and on. Theme after theme from the pages of the Bible has become the “but of course!” of intellectuals—whether Jew, Muslim, Dinka, or Brahmin. (246)

This conclusion generates a crucial question: How come the western understandings of religion and of cultural phenomena in general are constrained by the conceptual frame of the Christian doctrine? In his study Balagangadharan (318–369) initiates the development of an alternative theory of religion, which allows him to sketch a fascinating answer to this question. The answer is too complex to capture in the course of a paragraph or two. Suffice it to say that he sees religion as an explanatorily intelligible account that transforms the cosmos into an entity that is explanatorily intelligible as well. As an explanatorily intelligible account, religion inevitably claims a truth that is unconditional and universal in nature, for it can only be understood as the act of self-disclosure in which God reveals His all-encompassing plan for the universe to humankind. According to Balagangadharan, this universalism leads to a double dynamic of universalization that is intrinsic to every religion. On the one hand, the dynamic consists of proselytization, whereby a religion wins new converts who accept the truth of its doctrine and thus spreads its specific account. On the other hand, it consists of secularization, whereby a religion achieves as formal a level as possible by progressively losing its specific form and thus spreads itself as an increasingly simple and variable account: “As the explanatorily intelligible account for the Cosmos, religion must universalize itself because every concrete form is a restriction on its universality” (Balagangadharan: 437).

Balagangadharan reveals the full scope of his hypothesis when he begins to describe the emergence of western culture in terms of the internal dynamic of universalization that characterizes the Christian religion. We should not understand the Enlightenment and its modern legacy as a decisive break with the religious past, he says, but, rather, as moments in the ongoing movement of secularization in which Christianity progressively loses its specifically Christian properties. This dynamic does not make western culture any less religious. It creates a secular world, but this
secular world lies within the boundaries of the Christian religious world. Here we find an answer to our question: Contemporary thought on religion and culture is simply one of the products of this religious dynamic of western culture. In this dynamic, some beliefs are detached from the larger frame of Christian doctrine that gives them significance; these beliefs are stripped of their salient Christian features, and they become the building blocks of so-called secular or scientific theorizing. And this process accounts for the earlier conclusion that the intelligibility of the conceptual schemes of contemporary religious studies is dependent on the background presence of Christian theology.

ABOUT THE UNHAPPINESS OF A LOVER

In the middle of the twentieth century the Protestant theologian Karl Barth wrote that this ferocious atheist, Ludwig Feuerbach, was in reality “an unhappy lover of theology” (in Harvey: 9). As I mention above, initially Feuerbach had been a student of theology at the University of Heidelberg, but he soon became fascinated by Hegelian Geistesphilosophie. He makes it amply clear in the preface to the second edition of his book that he started to despise common theology because it substituted the real essence of religion with an appearance of religion. In that same preface he also refers to the similarities between Christian theology and the German tradition of speculative philosophy, of “those philosophers who pluck out their eyes that they may better see” (xiv). As Marx Wartofsky explains, Feuerbach’s critique of theology should be taken “as an implicit critique of idealist philosophy itself” (214). He designed his transformative method to attack German idealism and to distinguish himself from the idealist philosophers, whom he thought were merely producing abstract theology. In that sense, Feuerbach’s thinking was revolutionary, and the impact it had on his contemporaries was legitimate, for he had the intuition that western philosophy always ended where it started from—“in the bosom of Christian theology” (in Harvey: 140). However, this intellectual revolution was self-defeating because Feuerbach’s philosophy began and ended in that same frame of religious doctrine. Feuerbach did not see that he was actually taking the next step in the tradition of the secularization of theology, a tradition that would gradually create the theoretical domain of contemporary religious studies. He searched for the real essence of religion, but he was never aware of the fact that his quest was guided by the theologians whom he despised so much. They told him where to look and what to look for; they constituted his thinking and writing. Feuerbach was an unhappy lover of Theologia: though he had forcefully rejected her, she would ever wander through the depths of his mind.
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