

Karl Marx: context

(from a “proposed work” A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right)

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. **Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.**

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.

Criticism has plucked the **imaginary flowers on the chain** not in order that man shall continue to **bear that chain** without fantasy or consolation, **but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower.** The criticism of religion disillusion man, so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that he will move around himself as his own true Sun. **Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.**

It is, therefore, the task of history, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world. **It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked.** Thus, the criticism of Heaven turns into the criticism of Earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.

Marx had more to say about religion in his introduction. A little over half-way through, he wrote this (my emphasis added): To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is man himself. **The evident proof of the radicalism of German theory, and hence of its practical energy, is that it proceeds from a resolute positive abolition of religion. The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest essence for man – hence, with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence...**