

Feuerbach's Conception of Theology or Philosophy of Religion as Anthropology

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Abstract

Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* tries to argue for the claim that it is a mistake to think of God as something objective, transcendent and fundamentally different from human beings, as is traditionally done in theology. Instead, according to his view, God is simply the essence of what is human, projected onto a fictional external entity. For this reason Feuerbach proposes to refer to his undertaking not as theology or philosophy of religion but as *anthropology*, that is, a study of the human. What is both striking and provocative here is that he argues that his radical reinterpretation of Christianity will not undermine it or diminish it; on the contrary, he claims, his theory will help to preserve it. In this paper I critically explore this claim by Feuerbach. Does it make sense to understand the field of theology or even the philosophy of religion as anthropology? I argue that Feuerbach's proposal is a highly dubious attempt to reframe theology. His claim to be offering a support for religion is, I argue, disingenuous.

Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* tries to argue for the claim that it is a mistake to think of God as something objective, transcendent and fundamentally different from human beings, as is traditionally done in theology.¹ Instead, according to his view, God is simply the essence of what is human, projected onto a fictional external entity. When we look closely, he claims, we realize that God has nothing but human qualities. Given this, Feuerbach argues that it is necessary to reframe theology from a field that is used to thinking of God as something separate and radically different to one that understands the divine

1 Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, Zweite vermehrte Auflage, Leipzig: Otto Wigand 1843. All subsequent references are to this second edition of *Das Wesen des Christenthums*. (English translation: *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. by Marian Evans, New York: Calvin Blanchard 1855.)

as human. For this reason he proposes to refer to his undertaking not as theology or philosophy of religion but as *anthropology*, that is, a study of the human. What is striking here is that he argues that his radical reinterpretation of Christianity will not undermine it or diminish it; on the contrary, he claims, his theory will help to preserve it. This point is noted by one of Feuerbach's most famous critics, Friedrich Engels in his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* from 1886. Engels reproaches Feuerbach for inadvertently being an idealist and for trading in abstractions. In this context he writes, "The real idealism of Feuerbach becomes evident as soon as we come to his philosophy of religion and ethics. He by no means wishes to abolish religion: he wants to perfect it."²

In this paper I wish critically to explore these claims by Feuerbach. Does it make sense to understand the field of theology or even the philosophy of religion as anthropology? Or is this simply a rhetorical fluster that is intended to provoke the reader, but which really carries no real weight for the argumentation? And secondly, can his theory really be conceived as a support of religious belief as Feuerbach claims in his defense? As we will see, these two claims are connected in his argumentation. This issue does not seem to have attracted much attention in the secondary literature despite the radicality of the view. Feuerbach specialists and non-specialists alike seem simply to have taken up this point uncritically and assumed it to be uncontroversial, routinely referring to his philosophy of religion as a kind of anthropology.³ Engels alone seems to have seen the problem with Feuerbach's view: "If Feuerbach wishes to establish a true religion upon the basis of an essentially materialist conception of nature, that is the same as regarding modern chemistry as true alchemy. If religion can exist without its god, alchemy can exist without its philosopher's stone."⁴ In this paper I will explore this issue and argue in support of Engels' critical assessment.

2 Friedrich Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie," *Die neue Zeit: Revue des geistigen und öffentlichen Lebens*, vol. 4, no. 5, 1886, p. 193. (English translation: *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by C.P. Dutt, New York: International Publishers 1941, p. 33.)

3 See, for example, Walter Jaeschke, "Speculative and Anthropological Criticism of Religion: A Theological Orientation to Hegel and Feuerbach," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 48, no. 3, 1980, pp. 345–64. Frederick Copleston, *Modern Philosophy*, Part Two, *Schopenhauer to Nietzsche*, Garden City, New York: Image Books 1965 (*A History of Philosophy*, vol. 7), pp. 60–8. William J. Brazill, *The Young Hegelians*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1970, pp. 147f.

4 Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie," p. 194. (*Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, p. 34.)

1 Theology as Anthropology

Perhaps the key text for our purposes is the Preface to the expanded second edition of *The Essence of Christianity* from 1843. Feuerbach uses this opportunity to clarify to his readers the outline and argumentative strategy of the work. He explains that the body of the text is divided into two large parts. The first half of the book, entitled “The True or Anthropological Essence of Religion,” represents the positive side of the analysis. He describes this as follows: “in the first part I show that the true sense of theology is *anthropology*, and there is no distinction between the predicates of the divine and human nature, and, consequently, no distinction between the divine and human subject.”⁵ Here Feuerbach goes through different traditional conceptions of the divine in the Christian tradition and tries to demonstrate that all of these can be traced back to a human element. By contrast, the second half of the book, entitled “The False or Theological Essence of Religion,” represents the critical or polemical part of the work. Here Feuerbach endeavors to expose what he takes to be the contradictions involved in the traditional Christian dogmas, beliefs and practices so long as one maintains a conception of the divine as radically separate or different from the human. Feuerbach sums up the organization of his work by saying, “Accordingly the first part is the direct, the second the indirect proof, that theology is *anthropology*.”⁶

Right from the start the tone of the text gave critics the impression that Feuerbach's ultimate goal was to undermine Christianity and religion as a whole. In the Preface to the second edition of the work, he is keen to refute reproaches of this kind. In his defense he explicitly makes an appeal to his understanding of theology as anthropology. He explains,

If my work contained only the second part, it would be perfectly just to accuse it of a negative tendency, to represent the proposition “Religion is nothing, is an absurdity,” as its essential purport. But I by no means say God is nothing, the Trinity is nothing, the Word of God is nothing, etc. I only show that they are not that which the illusions of theology make them—not foreign but native mysteries, the mysteries of human nature.⁷

5 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. XIII. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 7.) My italics.

6 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, pp. XIII f. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 8.) My italics.

7 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, pp. XIV f. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 9.)

Feuerbach points out that the first half of the book is dedicated to demonstrating the true nature of Christianity. His goal, like that of Hegel, is to put Christianity on a solid footing. For this reason, in the second half of the work, he is keen to criticize what he takes to be mistaken and misleading pictures of Christianity that are presented in the mainstream theology of his day. According to Feuerbach, these views present illusions and thus make Christianity appear contradictory and vulnerable to criticism. By contrast, his own position can be seen as rescuing it. The key here is his attempt to see God in terms of anthropology. He writes,

The reproach that, according to my book, religion is an absurdity, a nullity, a pure illusion, would be well-founded only if, according to it, that into which I resolve religion, which I prove to be its true object and substance, namely *man—anthropology*, were an absurdity, a nullity, a pure illusion. But so far from giving a trivial or even a subordinate significance to anthropology—a significance which is assigned to it only just as long as a theology stands above it and in opposition to it—I, on the contrary, while reducing theology to anthropology exalt anthropology into theology.⁸

Feuerbach thus believes that by reconceiving theology as anthropology, he is doing it the service of protecting it against critics. From this it is clear that the two claims are closely connected, namely, that theology is properly understood as anthropology and that Feuerbach is actually defending Christianity, despite all appearances to the contrary.

Although he has been routinely placed under the rubric of left Hegelianism, Feuerbach himself understands his work to be a radical denial of Hegel. He explicitly distinguishes his view from that of Hegel on the issue of anthropology. He writes, “Hence it is obvious that I do not take the word ‘anthropology’ in the sense of the Hegelian or of any other philosophy, but in an infinitely higher and more general sense.”⁹ What he means by this becomes clear in what follows. He continues by positioning himself vis-à-vis Hegel and other forms of idealism: “I unconditionally repudiate absolute, immaterial, self-sufficing speculation.”¹⁰ By contrast, he portrays his own philosophy as one of materialism, claiming that he is dealing with concrete material things in the real world and not just ideas. He argues that ideas must be based on empirical observation

8 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. xv. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 9.)

9 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. xv. (*The Essence of Christianity*, pp. 9f.)

10 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. ix. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 4.)

and should not produce their own content from themselves alone. Feuerbach declares his allegiance as follows: "in the sphere of strictly theoretical philosophy, I attach myself, in direct opposition to the Hegelian philosophy, only to realism, to materialism."¹¹ Given this explicit rejection of Hegelian idealism, it might seem surprising that historians of ideas have placed Feuerbach in one of the Hegelian schools instead of regarding him as a Hegel critic.

2 The Question of the Nature of Human Beings

Feuerbach begins *The Essence of Christianity* by raising the question of "The Essential Nature of Man."¹² This question can be reformulated by asking what is the difference between humans and animals. Hegel regularly noted that only humans have religion and not animals; all of the elements of spirit are unique to *human* culture. So what is it about human beings that makes it possible for them to have religion, whereas animals do not? According to Feuerbach, the answer to this lies in the nature of self-consciousness. Animals are immediately aware of themselves as individuals, but they cannot abstract from this to think of themselves more generally as a species.¹³ Humans, by contrast, have the ability to think of themselves not just as an immediate individual but also more generally as a member of a wider species—human beings. This means that they can think human nature or essence in the abstract. It is this ability to abstract, claims Feuerbach, which makes all science and religion possible. To think in terms of scientific laws requires that we abstract from the individual cases in order to see the underlying general pattern.

Animals are in a sense one-dimensional since they just have an immediate awareness of themselves as individuals. But humans are complex since they have a double nature.¹⁴ Here Feuerbach echoes Hegel's analysis of the Original Sin, according to which humans were initially at one with themselves and with nature like the animals. Then came the Fall, and human nature became divided and alienated. This means that there is always a distance between our immediate self-relation or our inward selves and our abstract relation to ourselves as a species or our outward selves.

11 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 1x. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 4.) See also *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. xi. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 6.)

12 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, pp. 1–17. (*The Essence of Christianity*, pp. 19–31.)

13 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, pp. 1f. (*The Essence of Christianity*, pp. 19f.)

14 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 2. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 20.)

The human ability to think and to abstract means that we have the ability to see ourselves from the perspective of the other, even when the other is not there at the moment. For animals the relation to the other is always immediate; the other animal must be there physically for them to have this relation. But this is not the case for humans. Since we can think human nature as an abstract concept, we can think of another human being looking at us even when we are alone. We can feel shame at the mere thought of someone observing us doing something embarrassing even if no one is actually there. Thus, humans have the ability to put themselves in the role of another person at any time. We often talk to ourselves, thus assuming the role of another person. It is not uncommon for children to pretend to have an imaginary friend whom they invest with a personality. Grieving people sometimes imagine the presence of their deceased loved ones. These phenomena are all the consequences of the nature of human self-consciousness.

Feuerbach argues that this ability is the origin of religious thinking since it means that we can see ourselves from the perspective of another self-consciousness—God—even where none exists. In religion we think of God, an absolute, infinite being. According to Feuerbach, this is simply the awareness of ourselves in that part of our nature that is infinite, that is, our consciousness.¹⁵

He goes on to define this more specifically by claiming that human nature consists of three main faculties: reason, will and affectation.¹⁶ With the faculty of reason we are able to think; with the faculty of will we are able to make choices and act freely; and with the faculty of affectation we are able to feel and love. Feuerbach points out that all three of these can be seen as ends in themselves, and as such they are all infinite. For example, when we want to know something, we use our faculty of reason and thought. We can in principle continue to use this faculty infinitely on any number of different topics. Similarly, we are constantly willing different things and thus exercising our freedom. This can also continue indefinitely. So also there are an infinite number of objects of our feeling and love. Thus, Feuerbach concludes, these faculties represent the infinity in human nature. We can understand this infinity in terms of the concrete cases of the specific objects of our thought, will and affectation, or we can understand it generally. When we think of infinity in the abstract as a part of our human nature or species, then we think of the divine. The ability to think in terms of abstract concepts is what constitutes infinity

¹⁵ Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, pp. 2f. (*The Essence of Christianity*, pp. 20f.)

¹⁶ Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, pp. 3f. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 21.)

since concepts can be interpreted and applied in an infinite number of concrete cases. To think in terms of concepts, such as truth, beauty and justice, is thus to engage in infinity. Feuerbach concludes then, "The *absolute* to man is his own nature."¹⁷

One of the points of Hegel's theory of recognition that Feuerbach is drawing on is that we are who we are in relation to other people, or, put differently, our nature as individuals is determined by what relation we stand in *vis-à-vis* others. So in this sense when I see another person in a specific role, I am also implicitly seeing myself in a corresponding role: in the given concrete situation, when I see a teacher, in that teacher I see myself as a student; when I see a doctor, in that doctor I see myself as a patient, etc. Feuerbach builds on this and claims that all our perceptions of the world are in fact inverse reflections of our own nature. So, for Feuerbach, "In the object the human being becomes conscious of *himself*: the consciousness of the object is the *self-consciousness* of the human being."¹⁸ He uses as an analogy the different relations of the planets to the sun.¹⁹ Since each of the planets in the solar system has a different distance to the sun, they each in effect have a different sun in the sense that the light and heat of the sun is not absolute but relative with respect to distance. So in this sense each planet has its own particular nature, which is reflected in its relation to the sun. If the sun were closer or further away, the nature of the planet in question would be different. So just as with self-conscious subjects, a thing is what it is only as a function of its relation to other things.

Feuerbach argues that every creature is determined by its own natural capacities, and these constitute what it takes to be the highest and the grandest. This is understandable since if one does not have any knowledge or experience of something higher, then it is impossible to conceive of anything higher. There are therefore fixed natural limitations on what can be conceived at any given level of existence. Feuerbach writes, "A being's understanding is its sphere of vision. As far as you see, so far extends your nature; and conversely."²⁰ The idea of limitations is only perceived from a higher perspective. So we might think that the idea of the highest and the grandest in the eyes of a dog or a caterpillar is very limited, but this is only possible since we have a higher perspective. But

17 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 7. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 24.)

18 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 6. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 23.) Translation modified.

19 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 6. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 23.)

20 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 12. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 27.) Translation modified.

for the dog and the caterpillar, their conceptions of the highest and the grandest are absolute. So also we take our own conceptions to be absolute, but Feuerbach's decisive critical point is that these are entirely determined by our human nature. So what we call "God" as the highest and the grandest is simply a reflection of our own place in the broad scheme of things. Our conception of God is determined by our own highest capacities. One might argue that despite Feuerbach's explicit rejection of Hegel and his affirmation of realism and materialism, this position is in fact idealist. It is the ideas of the human mind that constitute the divine.

Feuerbach takes up the view of Schleiermacher that feeling is the organ by which we become aware of and know God.²¹ In the Enlightenment, critical reason had eroded the traditional doctrines of Christianity, which seemed implausible in the face of modern scientific criticism. In response to this, Schleiermacher argued that this criticism was based on a misunderstanding, namely, religion is not about reason and discursive proof as science is. Rather, religion is about feeling, specifically what Schleiermacher referred to as the feeling of absolute dependence. In this way Schleiermacher hoped to rescue religion from science. Feuerbach takes up this view and points out that by saying that our relation to God is one of feeling, we in effect reduce God to feeling. In other words, we are saying that there is nothing higher and grander than feeling (a widespread view in the Romantic movement). Feeling is the faculty of the divine. Feuerbach's objection is that, for Schleiermacher and his followers, there is a transcendent being that corresponds to this feeling, but in fact this conclusion is not warranted by the claim. Instead, all that is said is that *feeling* is the highest, the grandest and the absolute, and this is *per definitionem* what we call the divine. But it does not follow that there is anything objective that answers to this. So Feuerbach argues that the conclusion of this view is a form of atheism, but that its advocates are too frightened by this result to admit it.²²

Finally, he observes that this analysis holds true not just of the faculty of feeling but of any other faculty as well. The point is simply that for whatever faculty one decides is that by which we know the divine, this faculty is a natural result of human nature, and our conception of the divine is naturally shaped by it. The conclusion is that these faculties do not allow us to gain access to some different, transcendent, *other* being but rather are simply a reflection of us as human beings. So what we are accustomed to calling God is merely a reflection of ourselves and our highest capacities.

21 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 14. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 29.)

22 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, pp. 15f. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 30.)

3 The Theory of Objectification

Feuerbach continues with the presentation of his thesis and method in a section entitled "The Essence of Religion Considered Generally."²³ He begins by noting that we observe objects outside us in nature by means of perception. But in contrast to this, God is not an object of perception. Instead, God is a thought and in this sense is not something external but something internal to the thinking subject. Given that God is a thought of the human mind, this thought is limited and determined by the usual determinations of that mind. This means that the thought of God is identical to the thought of the person himself and not something different or foreign. The idea of God is therefore just an extension of the thoughts of the individual conceiving of him. So God is not something external, in the world, but rather a reflection of the inward life of the thinking and conceiving individual.

But this is not something that the person is aware of or understands. On the contrary, the individual believes that he has before himself something given in the external world. Hegel's theory of self-consciousness stated that the individual sees himself in another person, and this plays a fundamental role in who we are. Feuerbach continues this line of thinking and claims, "Man first of all sees his nature as if *out of* himself, before he finds it in himself. His own nature is in the first instance contemplated by him as that of another being."²⁴ Children first become aware that there is something external to themselves, and then only later do they develop a sense of their own being or self. Feuerbach believes that this fundamental feature of childhood development is also characteristic of religion. In our contemplation of God, we see ourselves objectified in him. But we do not recognize this: "Man has given objectivity to himself, but has not recognized the object as his own nature."²⁵ We take God to be something different and other, but in fact he is a reflection of our self-consciousness. This corresponds to Hegel's view that only in the long course of the history of religions do human beings come to recognize that God is spirit.

Feuerbach states his thesis as follows: "The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather human nature purified, freedom from the limits of the individual man, made—objective—i.e., contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being."²⁶ This is, of course, what is often referred to as

23 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, pp. 17–47. (*The Essence of Christianity*, pp. 32–55.)

24 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 19. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 33.)

25 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 19. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 33.)

26 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 20. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 34.)

Feuerbach's theory of objectification or projection in the sense that the human mind projects itself onto something in the external world and then imagines that this is a real thing.²⁷ So according to his view, God is not a real being, something external in the world, but rather a collection of human thoughts that have been turned into the idea of something external.

After the Enlightenment's criticisms of religion, it was difficult for scholars to defend the belief in God in traditional ways. Instead, many educated people retreated to the position of Deism, the idea that God created the universe, but otherwise nothing can be known about him. The idea is that humans are finite and limited and cannot gain knowledge of the infinite, transcendent God. Hegel had criticized this view, and his philosophy of religion aims to show that the claimed ignorance of God is both contradictory and harmful to religion. Feuerbach joins Hegel and takes up for critical examination this view, which was popular in his own day as it is in our own. He points out that the advocates of this position feign a kind of piety since by saying that we cannot know anything about God, they seem to display a degree of humility in the face of the divine. But Feuerbach argues that by denying that one can ascribe any attribute to God, one in effect denies the very existence of God since any given thing is simply the set of its attributes. A thing with no attributes does not exist. So this view, according to Feuerbach, reduces to "a subtle, disguised atheism."²⁸ Again, he believes his view can help to save religion from errors of this kind. By saying that God is simply a set of human attributes, this is not a denial of God or a statement of atheism. Feuerbach believes his position sees God for what he truly is, so religion can have a firm basis.

One might argue that Feuerbach's thesis here still sounds rather abstract. There are many different religions with many different conceptions of the divine. Would we not expect more uniformity in these conceptions if God were always just a reflection of human nature? Feuerbach answers this objection by arguing that human self-consciousness is always closely and necessarily connected with a specific historical context. How humans think of themselves is thus not something eternal and fixed. The ancient Greeks thought of themselves in ways very different from our self-conception. Given Feuerbach's thesis that this self-conception is the same as the conception of the divine, it follows that the different views of the gods in history are a function of the

27 See also Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 44. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 52f.) The word that Feuerbach uses is "vergegenständlichen," which means not "to project" but literally "to objectify" or to "reify." The German verb is related to the noun "Gegenstand," which means object or thing, and so the verbal form just means "to make something into an object or a thing."

28 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 22. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 36.)

historical development of the peoples who worship them. So the ancient Greek had an immediate and natural relation to the Greek gods since they were an expression of who he was.²⁹ So also with other cultures and their religions. Here Feuerbach follows Hegel, who explicitly organized the world religions in a historical manner with each specific religion being the reflection of one specific people.

Feuerbach argues that what a given people takes to be the highest and the best qualities or predicates is then automatically ascribed to the divine since it lies in the nature of the gods to have the highest and the best properties. He gives the following examples: "Physical strength is an attribute of the Homeric gods: Zeus is the strongest of the gods. Why? Because physical strength, in and by itself, was regarded as something glorious, divine. To the ancient Germans the highest virtues were those of the warrior; therefore, their supreme god was the god of war, Odin."³⁰ These gods have the qualities they do since these were regarded as the highest qualities in a martial culture. The gods are simply personifications of valued qualities or attributes. It is, according to Feuerbach, an illusion of theology to focus first and foremost on these personifications, that is, on God. The truth of the matter is that it is the predicates themselves which make the divine what it is. God is only God if he has specific qualities.³¹

According to Feuerbach, the highest properties or attributes were revered by a given people and were then combined into specific entities, who became the gods. When these properties became personified, the origin of religion was forgotten, and the focus was placed on the personified deities.³² There are many different kinds of properties, and for this reason, there are many different conceptions of the gods.

4 Critical Evaluation

The point of Feuerbach's attempt to rename theology as anthropology is clear enough. If God is simply a projection of the human mind and thus merely a collection of human qualities, then any study of God is *ipso facto* a study of the human. While this point is straightforward, it does not follow that it is helpful to understand the study of God as an anthropology. "Theology" and "anthropology" are of course traditional terms that designate specific fields of study

29 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 29. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 41.)

30 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 31. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 42.)

31 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 31. (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 43.)

32 Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 32. (*The Essence of Christianity*, pp. 43f.)

each with their specific objects. To state the obvious: theology is the *logos* or study of God, while anthropology is the *logos* of human beings. Even if one grants Feuerbach's claim about God being simply a projection of human characteristics, it is not clear that it is helpful to understand this as anthropology. When we study this *as a conception of God*, we are still studying God, regardless of whether one believes that this is true or real or corresponds to anything in the external world.

Anthropomorphism is a well-known concept among scholars of religion. Indeed, it is hard not to think of this concept when studying, for example, the divinities that populate the Greek and Roman pantheons. There can be no doubt to anyone that these gods and goddesses have human forms and characteristics. Their humanlike emotions have often been emphasized. In Christianity as well, the human element of the divine constitutes a part of the dogmas of, among others, the Incarnation and the Trinity. Thus both religious thinkers and scholars of religion have long recognized this aspect in the concept of the gods. But there has never been any suggestion that due to this we should give up talking about theology and speak only of anthropology. It is still perfectly meaningful to talk about a study of God even if the concept itself has human elements. To dismiss this and insist on talking only about this as anthropology would be misleading, regardless of one's religious convictions or intuitions.

Perhaps we can understand this issue best by means of an analogy. We can say that human beings consist of physical bodies, which in turn consist of organs, which are made up of tissues, etc. until we finally get down to the most basic structures, atoms and subatomic particles. Thus in the end humans can be reduced to atoms and subatomic particles; we are simply atoms put together in a special way. Does it then follow from this that the study of the human, that is, anthropology, can be reduced to a study of atoms and subatomic particles, that is, particle physics? Clearly this doesn't follow. It is still perfectly meaningful to talk about human beings as a specific structure different from others. Note that we can make the same argument about any given field of study: Can't galaxies, stars, planets, comets, etc. all in the end be reduced to atoms and subatomic particles? Does this mean that we should stop talking about astronomy and confine ourselves to talking about atoms and subatomic particles? Clearly, even if we grant the premise, this does not follow. The larger structures need to be studied in their own right since they behave differently from their smaller constituent parts. It is thus still perfectly meaningful to talk about anthropology or astronomy or any other field on its own terms without reducing them in this way. If this were not the case, then there would be only one field of science, particle physics.

Given this, Feuerbach's claim about understanding theology as anthropology simply confuses the issue. It is still meaningful to talk of theology as the study of the divine, regardless of what theory or concept of God one wishes to ascribe to. Even if one is an agnostic or an atheist, the idea of a field that talks about the concept of God is still meaningful. Indeed, this is even required for the agnostic or the atheist to know what exactly it is that they are denying. The point is that this idea is still a concept, regardless of what one thinks of it.

Second, with regard to Feuerbach's claim that understanding theology as anthropology will not undermine religion but rather will serve to support it, it is not hard to imagine why his critics raised this issue. While it is true that by reducing God to a collection of human attributes, Feuerbach is not reducing him to nothing, nonetheless this is an obvious deflation of the traditional concept of God, which can only be shocking and offensive to the religious believer. Feuerbach believes that his theory will convince even religious people since it points out and resolves the contradictions involved in the traditional conception of God as presented by priests and theologians. But here the question in the eyes of his critics is whether the cure is worse than the disease since in order to save Christianity, Feuerbach must interpret it so radically that it seems to have lost most all of its most important features. One can really wonder if Feuerbach is speaking in good faith when he claims that his theory will serve as a support for religion. The idea of God as a projection is hardly the idea of God that a pious Christian would pray to, seek solace with or extend love to. If this is Feuerbach's attempt to save Christianity from the contradictions of the theologians, it is not clear after his account what is still left to be saved.

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