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From Orthodoxy to Atheism

The Apostasy of Bruno Bauer, 1835-1843

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Abstract

This article is an intellectual and social history of the apostasy of the German theologian Bruno Bauer (1809-1882). It locates Bauer's intellectual and spiritual development from orthodox Protestantism to militant atheism in his exposure to historical criticism of the Bible, exclusion from German academic culture, and association with a group of Berlin atheists and dissidents. This is the first study dedicated exclusively to Bauer's apostasy. It underscores the personal experience of secularization and offers new insight into the complex intellectual and social processes behind individual apostasy and conversion.

Introduction

[1] In 1828 a precocious student named Bruno Bauer matriculated into the University of Berlin. In anticipation of a pastoral career, Bauer studied philosophy and theology with such luminaries as G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). By all appearances Bruno had been raised in a traditional Protestant home and professed an orthodox Christian faith throughout his tenure at university. However, in a series of publications and public admissions from the late 1830s and early 1840s that earned him the epithet "Messiah of Atheism," Bauer would conclude that the New Testament Gospels were forgeries, that Jesus of Nazareth had never existed, and that religion was a form of self-delusion that fettered intellectual freedom. These ideas represented the culmination of a gradual intellectual and social process by which Bauer evolved from an orthodox Christian to militant atheist.

[2] Bauer's startling apostasy garnered the attention of both contemporaries and succeeding generations. In the first instance, Bauer's radical theology resulted in his termination from a teaching position at the University of Bonn. His cohort of left wing Hegelian philosophers and theologians identified him as the "Robespierre of Theology" and a "Messiah of Atheism" for his fierce criticism of religion. Friedrich Nietzsche, perhaps the most notorious atheist of the nineteenth century, considered Bruno Bauer his entire public (Löwith: 186). The biblical scholar Albert Schweitzer lauded Bauer's New Testament scholarship as brilliant (Schweitzer: 189) and the Soviets used Bauer's fierce attacks on Christianity as anti-religious agitprop (Rosen 1977: 16). Indeed, one modern biographer has recognized Bauer as "the world's first atheist theologian" (Hellman: 81). But despite his standing as one of the most infamous Christian apostates of the nineteenth century, there has been no study dedicated exclusively to the causes of Bauer's intellectual and spiritual development from orthodoxy to atheism.

[3] This paper seeks to reconstruct Bauer's personal experience of apostasy by examining the intellectual, social, and political pressures that contributed to his evolution from orthodoxy to atheism. These mutually reinforcing influences included Bauer's exposure to the theologies of David F. Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach, which convinced him of the subjective basis of religious experience and led to doubts about the veracity of revealed religious truth. Bauer's marginalization from German academe and inability to obtain a tenured position – a result of his growing iconoclasm and an excess of educated men in mid-nineteenth-century Germany – isolated him further from the old academic and religious order and left him increasingly hostile toward contemporary Christianity. Bauer's outspoken dissatisfaction with the reactionary political regime of Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia (r. 1840-1861) and provocative New Testament criticism led to his termination from the University of Bonn, after which time he fell in with a like-minded crowd of Berlin atheists and communists known as the Free Ones. No longer restrained by the strictures of official Prussian academic or ecclesiastical culture, and in concert with the Free Ones, Bauer vowed to destroy organized religion. These episodes from Bauer's intellectual biography are representative of his intellectual and spiritual development from orthodoxy to atheism. As such, this paper provides the anatomy of an apostasy and uses the case of Bruno Bauer to illustrate that religious apostasy is a complex intellectual and social process rather than the result of an isolated experience or epiphany in the mind of the apostate.

[4] Contemporary scholars that have commented on Bauer's intellectual and spiritual development have either neglected to account for his apostasy, or have offered unsatisfying accounts of this process. William J. Brazill, a historian of G. W. F. Hegel's radical epigones – a group known as the Young Hegelians – described Bauer's apostasy as "sudden and without warning" (Brazill: 179).¹ John E. Toews treated Bauer and other Young Hegelians' reception

¹ In another passage Brazill elaborates (all emphases mine): "During the months between his appointment to Bonn in 1839 and his dismissal in 1842, a gradual change of attitude began to possess him, a change *difficult to explain* that brought him to blatant atheism. *Who can account for the subtle shifts, the personal moods, the movements of mind and heart* that led him step by step farther left in the Hegelian spectrum? By a gradual process – *apparently without external influence* – Bauer had become a Young Hegelian" (193). *Pace* Brazill, but the external social and political influences on Bauer's career are precisely where to look to find evidence of those subtle shifts, personal moods, and movements of the mind and heart that contributed to his apostasy.

and radicalization of Hegelian philosophy as part of a wider dialectical process that reduced God to man and religion to humanism. And Harold Mah has argued that “Bauer’s atheism can be reconstructed as a wholly internal development” (74), suggesting that one’s intellectual pursuits and experience of the contemporary social and political milieu can be neatly disentangled. But apostates are not made overnight, and their “conversions” – unlike Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus – should not be reduced to a single moment. Indeed, Bauer’s evolution from orthodoxy to atheism resulted from individually mediated responses to shifting circumstances in German academia and Prussian politics. Thus losing one’s religion is both an intellectual and social process subject to mutually reinforcing internal and external influences.

[5] Bauer’s intellectual development from orthodox Christian to militant atheist is significant precisely because in it one can discern the interplay of intellectual, social, and political factors that worked in concert to contribute to his loss of faith. And it suggests how scholars of religion might better understand atheists, apostates, and religious converts. Indeed, Bauer’s case underlines the idea that apostasy is a social process that cannot be understood outside of the social and political contexts of the apostate. Just as religious faith should not be reduced to a mere affirmation of dogma, apostasy should not be understood as a simple rejection of belief. The apostate absconds not just from a set of theological precepts or a religious creed. In addition to this, the apostate becomes disconnected from a community of faith and matriculates into another group that affirms that loss of belief, which in turn colors the apostate’s estimation of formerly-held professions of faith – a confirmation bias that once and for all renders the apostate’s former beliefs, in the words of William James, a “dead hypothesis.”

[6] Like those theories of religion that understand it as a set of relationships or membership in sacred communities, atheism and apostasy might also be understood in terms of a process of socialization and membership in publics that encourage and affirm that lack of faith (on religion as a form of sociability, see Berger; Orsi). Thinking of apostasy as an interaction of individual beliefs and socialization would complicate our understanding of the process by which one loses their religion, while avoiding those polemical and often sophomoric debates over whether atheism is itself a “religion.” Instead, it is an intellectual, social, and cultural signifier that announces the atheist or apostate’s relation to multiple communities of faith and of unbelief. The intellectual and spiritual evolution of Bruno Bauer illustrates just this notion of apostasy as a complex process of intellectualization and socialization.

[7] Indeed, this study of Bauer’s apostasy personalizes the standard narratives and structural accounts – industrialization, urbanization, anti-clericalism, positivism, and the experience of living in mass society – of how nineteenth-century Christians lost their faith. Except as an afterthought in the insurmountable body of literature on secularization, individual apostates have received comparatively little attention (cf. Bromley). But rather than being wholly swept up in a macro-social process of secularization, Bauer’s case underscores the individual mechanics of apostasy and reveals how personal experience and idiosyncrasy mediated the social experience of secularization. Studies of apostates like Bauer might elucidate these processes and suggest a general theory of modern atheism, apostasy, and religious conversion that can account for how an individual loses their religion, without appealing to

macro-sociological explanations to account for what is experienced as deeply personal. As such, we might then present secularization with a human face.

Student Days in Berlin (1828–1834)

[8] Bruno Bauer was born in Eisenberg, Thuringia in 1809. His father – a manufacturer of bathroom fixtures for the Prussian royal family – moved the family to Berlin in 1815 (Toews: 290). Here Bruno began studying theology at a Berlin gymnasium, and in 1828 matriculated into the University of Berlin, where he attended lectures by G. W. F. Hegel and Friedrich Schleiermacher. At Berlin Bauer studied directly under Philip Marheineke (1780–1846) – a leader of the conservative “Right Hegelians” and an orthodox Protestant – and fell in with the other conservative followers of Hegel on the faculty.

[9] Bauer had been raised in a traditional Christian home (Toews: 290), and throughout his tenure as a student espoused nothing but mainstream Protestant beliefs (Brazill: 179). Indeed, Bauer’s father had hoped that his son’s theological education would result in a pastoral appointment. But in 1834 at the completion of his studies – his doctoral dissertation sought to reconcile Hegel’s philosophy with Protestant Christianity – Bruno eschewed the ministry and instead obtained a license to teach at the University of Berlin.

[10] During the following year Bauer cut his polemical teeth by entering the debate over David Friedrich Strauss’ monumental *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, a work that defined modern biblical criticism. Bauer’s response to Strauss would establish his bona fides as one of the most gifted young theologians in Germany, but it also contained the germ of an idea that informed Bauer’s mature theology and lead him to finally reject his Hegelian and Christian background: an enduring concern with the subjective basis of religious experience.

The Publication of *The Life of Jesus* (1835)

[11] In 1835, David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874) set the world of theology on its ear with the publication of *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*. In it, Strauss argued that the New Testament Gospels were the expressions of collectively held myths espoused by messianic Jewish and early Christian communities rather than revealed truths. Strauss also identified Jesus as a figure who embodied an ideal synthesis of the divine and human spirit. But while Strauss maintained that the essential message of the Gospels was true, he denied their historical veracity. And while he conceded that Jesus possessed a perfect consciousness of God, at the same time Strauss rejected the divinity of Jesus.

[12] Strauss’ biographer Horton Harris called the publication of *The Life of Jesus* “the most important theological milestone of the century,” and noted that it provoked a religious furor comparable only to the Reformation (41). But detractors worried that the book had vitiated the historical bases for the Christian religion and as such called for it to be banned and Strauss to be removed from his teaching position (Harris: 67). In the ensuing controversy Strauss was in fact removed from his position as a seminary tutor at the University of Tübingen (see also Massey; Lawler). His reputation as a theological radical preceded him everywhere. As late as 1839, the offer of a chair of theology at the University of Zürich caused enough of an outcry within that city that the offer had to be withdrawn.

[13] Strauss's suggestion that the Christian religion was mythical in character scandalized traditional Christians, but not Christians exclusively. His arguments also troubled Hegel's followers. Mainstream Hegelians held that Christianity was a rational worldview, yet one that was less intellectually developed than philosophy. Hegelians regarded the revealed truths of the Christian religion as approximations of philosophical truths, and maintained that only philosophy could provide a pure explication of revelation. But in *The Life of Jesus* Strauss had implied that revealed truth as recounted in the Gospels was not rational at all, but rather mythological. This implied that neither philosophy nor theology could explicate the Christian religion, because Christianity lacked a rational form. As such, the only appropriate model of biblical criticism could be Strauss' historical-mythical model, invalidating Hegel's own philosophy of religion.

[14] The implications of the *Life of Jesus* set Hegelians of every stripe on their heels. But they found a representative voice to articulate their defense in Bruno Bauer. During his student days at Berlin, Bauer had enjoyed a reputation as a precocious defender of both Hegel and of Christianity. Impressed by his intellectual prowess and fluency in Hegelian philosophy, the editorial board of *Yearbook for Scientific Criticism* – the organ of traditional Hegelianism – invited Bauer to refute Strauss in a series of articles that appeared from December 1835 through May 1836.

[15] Whereas Strauss had argued that the Gospels were expressions of communally held myths and messianic expectations of early Christian communities, Bauer retorted that the Gospels were expressions of the Absolute – Hegelian parlance for God – revealed to the individual consciousnesses of their respective authors. Moreover, argued Bauer, the Gospels must be more than a record of messianic expectations of ancient Jewish and Christian communities. This was because for Bauer and other Hegelians, the existence of Christ was a necessary stage in the dialectical development of Spirit. The union of the divine and the human that Jesus embodied was a philosophical requirement in the course of Spirit's development.

[16] Bauer's critique of *The Life of Jesus* won him acclaim and increased his status among the academic Hegelians in Berlin. But in his refutation of Strauss on behalf of conservative Hegelianism and orthodox Protestantism, the kernel of Bauer's mature thought – as well as his militant atheism – can be discerned. To be sure, simply reading Strauss did not render Bauer an atheist. But by suggesting that the Gospels were products of their authors' self-consciousnesses, Bauer hinted at the relationship between subjectivity, religious experience, and the origins of Christianity. He would not realize the full implications of these ideas for some time, but his rejoinder to Strauss – he would later quip that all of contemporary theology was just a response to questions that Strauss had raised (Brazill: 186) – set Bauer in pursuit of his own critical study of the Gospels and the historical Jesus. This pursuit led Bauer further from the conservative Hegelianism and Protestantism of his youth, and eventually toward a culmination in a militant atheism.

[17] In the meantime Bauer composed two works that underscored his growing concern with the relationship between religious experience and subjectivity, and indicated a nascent split from his Hegelian and Christian student days. In the two-volume *Religion of the Old Testament* (1838) Bauer questioned the historical veracity of early Jewish biblical history and

argued that Christianity represented a higher level of religious consciousness than Judaism, which Bauer claimed stressed the “otherness” of God to man. This work was also a phenomenology of religious consciousness that underscored the subjective basis of religious experience.

[18] During the following year Bauer began to drift even further from the conservative Hegelianism and orthodox Protestantism of his student days. In 1839 he started to attend meetings of a bohemian group of iconoclastic lecturers and irreverent students known as the *Doktorclub*, which discussed contemporary philosophical and theological ideas critically (Hertz-Eichenrode: 30-31). This detachment from his philosophical and theological roots also came in the form of an 1839 pamphlet entitled *Herr Dr. Hengstenberg*. This work was an attack on E. W. Hengstenberg (1802-1869), an established professor at Berlin, orthodox Lutheran theologian, and defender of the literal truth of revealed religion. In this pamphlet, Bauer attacked Hengstenberg’s literalism, but also confessed that he could no longer reconcile his own evolving beliefs with Christian revelation.

[19] Retrospectively, Bauer claimed that this was the first refined expression of his critical perspective and the earliest instance of his apostasy (1842a: 23). But this polemic against a senior professor of theology was not only significant for its theological precepts or as an episode of Bauer’s nascent apostasy. Its circulation and the embarrassment it caused to Hengstenberg precipitated Bauer’s removal from Berlin and ultimately resulted in a transfer to the University of Bonn (Brazill: 182-83).

Exit from Berlin (1839)

[20] If Bauer became unmoored from the conservative Hegelianism and traditional Protestantism of his youth as a result of his engagement with Strauss and attendance of meetings of the *Doktorclub*, his experiences in German academe during the late 1830s and early 1840s only served to reinforce this process and resulted in increasing isolation. After the publication of *Herr Dr. Hengstenberg* the Berlin faculty began to snub Bauer for his bitter critique of the accomplished professor. Dissatisfied with the conservative Hegelian academic culture of Berlin, and with no further prospects for permanent tenure, Bauer sought other positions.

[21] In September 1839, Bauer accepted an appointment to the theology faculty at the University of Bonn. The Prussian Minister of Culture Karl von Altenstein (1770-1840) – a high-ranking friend within the Prussian bureaucracy – was instrumental in securing the position for Bauer. Although his appointment emancipated Bauer from the intellectual tutelage of the Right Hegelians, at Bonn he remained a lecturer (*Privatdozent*) rather than a tenured professor. Altenstein had hinted that Bauer might be in line for a permanent position, but this promise was never realized. As a lecturer at Bonn, Bauer was forced to survive on student fees and a small fellowship. Indeed, throughout his tenure Bauer complained about his financial situation and was once even compelled to ask Hegel’s widow for a loan to support himself (Toews: 309). The lack of financial wellbeing proved troublesome for Bauer and contributed to his feelings of detachment from Prussian academic culture.

[22] Although free of the conservative Hegelianism that permeated the University of Berlin, Bauer still had a reputation as an epigone – albeit an unorthodox one – of Hegel. With this reputation he was never able to win the favor of the Bonn faculty, which was dominated by followers of Hegel’s archrival, the Romantic theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. Indeed, faculty who were displeased with Bauer’s appointment to Bonn conspired to withhold pay for lectures and moving expenses that had been promised to him by Altenstein (Brazill: 183). In spite of these hardships it was at Bonn that Bauer was able to develop his ideas most fully and here his literary output reached its zenith.

[23] One of Bauer’s most promising works, the 1840 *Critique of the Gospel of John*, appeared during his tenure at Bonn. This critique built upon his response to Strauss and underscored Bauer’s interest in the role of individual self-consciousness in the production of religious experience and its relationship to the origins of Christianity. In it, Bauer argued that John the Evangelist – whom he later derided as the “greatest fake the world had ever seen” (Barnikol 1972: 61) – had in fact distorted the life and teachings of Jesus. Rather than an historically reliable depiction of Jesus’ ministry, Bauer argued that the fourth Gospel amounted to a late first-century Christian apologetic that only expressed the author’s own theological beliefs. As such, Bauer found the Gospel of John to be unrelated to the synoptic Gospels, and thus an unreliable source of information for the historical Jesus and the origins of the Christian religion. Instead, Bauer posited that the only reliable sources for the life of Jesus must be the synoptic Gospels, for which he planned a similar critique.

[24] But before he could embark on a critique of the synoptic Gospels, Bauer was compelled to negotiate a series of events that would have a profound influence on his academic status, his scholarship, and his faith. These included the ascendance of a reactionary new Prussian king, the death of several academic and political allies, and the unexpected fallout of his critique of John. In this new context the *Critique of the Gospel of John* was received as a dangerous attack on the Christian religion and marked Bauer as a theological radical. In turn, Bauer responded with a belligerent criticism of religion and increasing professions of unbelief, hastening his further marginalization from German academic life, which in turn emboldened him even more in his unorthodox ideas.

Accession of Friedrich Wilhelm IV (1840)

[25] In June 1840, a new king of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, ascended the throne. The new king was a Romantic and a Pietist, a sincere Christian suspicious of rationalist philosophers and whose religious concerns took precedence over politics. As monarch, Friedrich was also leader of the Prussian Evangelical Church, and he committed himself to the church’s renewal and reform (Barclay: vii). In this new political context theological dissidents like Strauss and Bauer were scrutinized by the king and his ministers to ensure that their subversive ideas – theological criticism was seen as an implicit attack on the state – were not widely circulated.

[26] Compounding the heavy handedness of the new regime, Bauer’s supporter Karl von Altenstein had died in May 1840. In his place Friedrich Wilhelm IV appointed J. A. F. Eichhorn as Minister of Culture. Eichhorn was a lifetime Prussian civil servant, a redoubtable anti-Hegelian, and reactionary who would make Bauer’s academic life unbearable (Sass 1978: 95). Indeed, Karl Marx’s biographer Otto Rühle recognized this new

regime and the appointment of Eichhorn as “the end of Bauer’s hopes of an academic career” (30). In addition to the appointment of Eichhorn, the king invited Friedrich Julius Stahl (1802-1861), a literal theocrat, to the University of Berlin and appointed Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling (1775-1854) to Hegel’s old chair of philosophy at Berlin. This move antagonized Bauer and other Young Hegelians who had come to distrust Schelling as a dangerous reactionary (see Sass 1962).

[27] In spite of his Romanticism and Pietism, liberal intellectuals hoped that Friedrich Wilhelm IV might make good on promises to introduce some moderate reforms. It was, after all, the one-hundredth anniversary of the reign of Friedrich the Great (r. 1740-1786), that enlightened Prussian ruler who had befriended Voltaire and extended religious toleration to all Prussian citizens. Bauer’s brother Edgar had even expressed the “highest expectations” of the new king and his regime (Hellman: 32). And indeed the king made good on a handful of promised reforms. Friedrich relaxed censorship laws and reappointed three Göttingen academics to positions in Prussian universities who had originally been dismissed for refusing to take oaths to the king of Hanover (Berdahl: 313-14). He gave amnesty to several political prisoners, appointed the writer Ernst Moritz Arndt to rector of the University of Bonn – he had been removed from his post in 1819 for demanding reforms from the Prussian government – and lauded the liberal nationalist and exercise guru Friedrich Ludwig Jahn for his service to Prussia during the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon (Berdahl: 313-14; Hellman: 32).

[28] But these gestures of goodwill were never extended to contemporary dissidents or to Young Hegelians such as David F. Strauss or Bruno Bauer. Instead, the king had Eichhorn crack down on rationalists and Hegelians in the Prussian universities. In their place, conservative theologians were offered faculty positions and encouraged to root out dissidents (Sheehan: 561, 567). Indeed, in late 1840 a Bonn colleague had secretly passed along to Eichhorn concerns about Bauer’s theology and politics (Barnikol 1972: 141-46). From this point, all of Bauer’s literary output was under scrutiny from the censors.

[29] In this new political climate of resurgent Christian orthodoxy the *Critique of Jobn* was enough to mark Bauer as a subversive theological radical. When a copy of the *Critique* arrived at the ministry of culture – Bauer seems to have innocently submitted the monograph for approval and hopes of a promotion rather than opprobrium from the ministry – Eichhorn identified the text and its author as a threat to Christian beliefs (Brazill: 184).

[30] The death of Altenstein, the ascent of Friedrich Wilhelm IV, and Bauer’s continuing marginalization from the Bonn faculty made him desperate. Indeed, in a March 1840 letter to his brother Edgar, an increasingly fraught Bauer seemed to anticipate his total exclusion from academic life:

The day will come, when I will stand resolutely against the entire theological world. Only then, so I believe, will I be in my right place, to which I have been persistently impelled by pressures and struggles during the past six years (1844: 59-60).

This realization provoked Bauer to greater desperation; his public and private demeanor become more affected as he began to regard his total removal from German academic

culture as an inexorable process that had already been set in motion.² This letter might also be read as a *terminus ad quem* of Bauer's intellectual and spiritual development, after which his scholarship and publications became unequivocally hostile to German academic culture and to Christianity. Nevertheless, Bauer continued to seek official approval and a permanent academic position.

[31] Still a *privatdozent* despite a significant literary output and intellectual and critical acclaim, Bauer appealed to Minister Eichhorn in October 1840 for a promotion to associate professor, a position that would have provided a steady income and financial security. In exchange for this promotion, Bauer promised to restrain his most provocative theological ideas (Mah: 65). But Eichhorn refused Bauer's request. Compounding this disappointment was the 1841 death of the theologian Johann Augusti, Bauer's only friend on the Bonn theology faculty.

[32] In spite of everything, Bauer continued to research and publish. And in the following year a monograph appeared that would have a profound impact on Bauer's intellectual development and inform his "mature" atheism: Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*. Bauer's reception of Feuerbach, coupled with his dissatisfaction with the new regime and position on the extreme margins of German academe, all informed Bauer's magnum opus – one that announced his unmistakable status as an apostate from the Christian religion. This work was a critique of the Christian religion that would reject the synoptic Gospels as historically unreliable, deny the existence of Jesus, and earn Bauer the epithets "Robespierre of Theology" and "Messiah of Atheism."

The Publication of *The Essence of Christianity* (1841)

[33] In 1841 the Young Hegelian philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach published *The Essence of Christianity* to great acclaim. Its publication profoundly influenced Bauer in two ways. First, it convinced him of the atheistic implications of Hegel's philosophy. Second, it led Bauer, already sensitive to the role of subjectivity in the experience of religion, to recognize that religious consciousness alienated man from himself and that human liberation could come only with a rejection of all forms of religion. Both of these insights set Bauer further along his path of apostasy.

[34] In the first instance, *The Essence of Christianity* was an inversion of Hegel's philosophy of religion. Hegel had maintained that God realizes Himself in man's self-consciousness of Him. But in *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach argued that the essence of religion consisted of the projection of man's highest attributes onto the objective world and the recognition of those attributes as qualities of God (12). As such, God was merely the reification of the noblest of human ideals rather than an objectively existing being who came to consciousness through individuals (17).

² Hans-Martin Sass supports this reading of Bauer's psychology prior to his official removal from Bonn: "From 1841 onward, Bauer's behavior was divided. Outwardly he remained a Privatdozent of theology. Inwardly he prepared for and then initiated the 'critical critique's battle' against the traditional academic world, against religion, and against the Prussian state. All his actions in 1841/1842 have this double-edged aspect" (1978: 96).

[35] However, Feuerbach claimed, humans do not recognize the objectification of their own subjectivity, and consequently recognize themselves as objects of God rather than subjects who have objectified their values in the figure of God (30). Thus for Feuerbach, there could be no distinction between God and man – the two were identical. Feuerbach concluded that traditional religion entailed the alienation of man from himself (33) and suggested that man might overcome this alienation by replacing traditional religion with humanism.

[36] The Young Hegelians received *The Essence of Christianity* with great enthusiasm. Friedrich Engels claimed that upon its publication “we all at once became Feuerbachians” (Brazill: 145). Bauer himself recognized Feuerbach as an “apostle” and “brother” in the campaign against the alienating effects of religion (Toews: 359). Although an admirer, Bauer rejected Feuerbach’s argument that God was a projection of man’s highest values onto the transcendent. Instead, Bauer argued that the idea of God was an act of complete invention rather than an objectification of one’s own subjectivity. Presaging Nietzsche’s critique of religion, Bauer insisted that the idea of God in general and Christian values in particular were rejections of the inherently free nature of humankind and a denial of this world for the transcendental:

Religion . . . is a loathing for the world itself, a despair over history, a denial of the world itself and nothing other than that (2002: 79).

In this negative reaction to Feuerbach, Bauer articulated the theme of his mature criticism and a prescription for human liberation. Whereas Feuerbach had proposed that God be replaced with a religion of humanity, Bauer rejoined that the religious mind could only liberate itself from the fetters of its own belief by coming to consciousness of the fact that God was nothing more than a product of itself, and a self-delusion at that. Moreover, one could not replace one “God” – the objectified transcendent – with another, such as Feuerbach’s religion of humanity.

[37] In response to his reading of Feuerbach, Bauer composed a short text that reflected these sentiments, the October 1841 monograph *The Trumpet of the Last Judgment on Hegel the Atheist and Anti-Christ: An Ultimatum*. Published pseudonymously, Bauer assumed the guise of a conservative and Pietist and argued that Hegelian philosophy held revolutionary and atheistic implications. This work referred to Hegelianism as “a system of atheism” (1989: 202) and claimed that Hegelian philosophers and critics were the “most consistent and unrestrained revolutionaries” (1989: 126). Indeed, the author warned that the epigones of Hegel, who attacked Christianity with a “hellish rage,” would:

Once having destroyed religion, deliver a deathblow to the state, then most certainly overthrow the throne (1989: 60).

According to Bauer, the revolutionary implications of Hegelian philosophy had been concealed by Hegel’s conservative epigones. Thus Bauer hoped to clearly define the lines of contention between Old and Young Hegelians and to appropriate Hegel for the philosophical and theological radicals with whom he now identified. Whereas Feuerbach had opened his eyes to the true implications of Hegel’s philosophy, Bruno Bauer would become its prophet.

[38] Bauer was immediately discovered as the author of *The Trumpet* (Bauer 1989: 36). And while the text succeeded in drawing bright lines between Young and Old Hegelians, it was significant for quite another reason. *The Trumpet* all but vindicated Friedrich Wilhelm IV and Eichhorn's campaigns against Hegelian theologians and philosophers – Right, Left, or Center – whom they now considered dangerous threats to church and state. After all, a Young Hegelian himself had affirmed their darkest fears of the threat of critique. The Prussian bureaucracy wasted no time in pursuing Bauer's removal. And in response to their effort, Bauer's literary output and professions of unbelief grew even more provocative.

Dismissal from Bonn (1842)

[39] Already ostracized by the Bonn faculty and under pressure from the Prussian censors, Bauer's next work represented a step closer to his mature atheism and ensured his dismissal from the university. The three-volume *Critique of the Synoptic Gospels*, published between February 1841 and January 1842, was an attack on the historical veracity of the synoptic Gospels that ultimately denied the existence of Jesus. In this multi-volume work, Bauer fiercely argued that all of the Gospels were literary artifices and purely human creations rather than revealed truths.

[40] Reviving David F. Strauss only to refute him, Bauer argued in the *Critique* that the Jewish and Gentile Christian communities of the first centuries had no messianic expectations at all. Instead, he argued that these alleged expectations were retrospective, projected onto Jewish and early Christian communities by the later church. As the Gospels were reflective works and products of their individual authors' self-consciousnesses written after Jesus' death, they naturally reflected the interests and objectives of the early Christian sects to which the authors belonged (1841: xvi). Contemporaries immediately recognized the implications of Bauer's critique: the evangelists had invented the Christ legend and the historical existence of Jesus was unsustainable.

[41] In the summer of 1841 – at the same time that the first two *Critiques* were being circulated and discussed – Bauer began to contribute to the liberal jurist Arnold Ruge's *Halle Yearbook*. The *Yearbook* was the main organ of Young Hegelian thought and helped to shape a shared identity among the left-wing epigones of Hegel. Bauer's tenure with the *Halle Yearbook* coincided with its most radical phase, and this phase also witnessed the exit of Right and Center Hegelians such as David F. Strauss and the philosopher Karl Rosenkranz from the journal, and an influx of radical contributors (Spies: 331-32). This cohort constituted Bauer's new public – a group of atheists, anti-clerics, dissidents, and subversives for whom he was now writing and with whom he identified.

[42] The third volume of Bauer's *Critique*, published in January 1842, reaffirmed the conclusions of the previous volumes. Frustrated with his isolation on the Bonn theology faculty and increasingly aware that his career was in peril – between the publication of the second and third volumes Bauer's teaching appointment for the upcoming academic year was arbitrarily rescinded (Mah: 70) – Bauer took a more polemical tone toward Christianity. In the third volume, Bauer compared the evangelists to Homer and Hesiod whom he claimed had invented the pantheon of Greek gods (1842b: 36, 89). Likewise, Bauer claimed that the evangelists had invented the Jesus narrative and the Christian religion itself. In this volume Bauer finally proclaimed that:

Everything that constitutes the historical Christ, what is said of him, what we know of him, belongs to the world of representation, more particularly of Christian representation. But this information has absolutely nothing to do with a person who belongs to the real world (1842b: 308).

Bauer's public conclusions stood in marked contrast to his contemporary Strauss. Strauss was a political conservative despite his theologically subversive ideas, and he did not believe that his historical criticism of the Gospels threatened the essentials of the Christian faith. But in the third volume of his *Critique*, Bauer sought precisely this: to destroy the historical basis of Christianity and the whole of the Christian religion with it. It is this work that led Arnold Ruge (1802-1880) to identify Bauer's critique of religion with that of Voltaire and to recognize Bauer as 'The Robespierre of Theology' (281). Living up to that moniker, Bauer now pursued a campaign to dechristianize Germany.

[43] Bauer's *Critique of the Synoptic Gospels* enraged the Bonn theological faculty and convinced Minister Eichhorn that action must be taken to censor this kind of theological radicalism. Indeed, Bauer had personally sent a manuscript to Minister Eichhorn, in this case to defiantly show his awareness of the implications of the work and to provoke the ministry to take a final stand on his academic position. Bauer's apparent fetish for an atheist's martyrdom would symbolically affirm his status as an apostate. And he did not have to wait long for a resolution.

[44] The submission of the *Critique* to Eichhorn and letters to brother Edgar and to Arnold Ruge between December 1840 and December 1842 reveal Bauer's desire to force the Prussian government into making a final decision as to his academic career: to appoint him to a chair or dismiss him outright (Hellman: 81). He wrote to Ruge in December 1841, requesting:

Since the government does not seem to dare do anything against me, it would be very good if you could find ways and means to publicly accuse me in the Leipzig general newspaper and in the *Augsburger* (2002: xii).

Ruge did not have to publicly accuse Bauer of subversion. Already in August 1841 and after the publication of the first two volumes of Bauer's *Critique*, Minister Eichhorn had appealed to the theology faculties at six Prussian universities to help him to decide whether Bauer was a Christian and whether he should be allowed to teach (Evangelical Theology Faculty: iii). The responses from the faculties were not uniform, but the whole of the Bonn faculty had voted in favor of Bauer's removal (Brazill: 192). The Bonn professors noted that Bauer's ideas were "thoroughly incompatible with the position of a teacher of theology on an evangelical theology faculty" (Hellman: 82). Eichhorn now had all he needed to remove Bauer from the university. But his final removal from Bonn was precipitated by the intervention of King Friedrich Wilhelm IV.

[45] In September 1841 Bauer participated in a tribute to the radical jurist Karl Welcker (1790-1869). The king became aware of this tribute and it vexed him enough to take a personal interest in each of the participants. Aware of Bauer's reputation as a theological radical and outraged that an academic employed in one of his own universities would participate in a tribute to Welcker, the king moved to have Bauer dismissed from his post

(Moggach: 138). In October 1841, Friedrich Wilhelm instructed Eichhorn to see to it that “Doctor Bauer never again return to Bonn in his role as *privatdozent*” (Barnikol 1972: 154).

[46] The king’s instructions were executed during the Spring semester of 1842 as Bauer was formally discharged from Bonn. His dismissal coincided with a simultaneous crackdown and removal of nearly all Hegelians from Prussian universities. Just prior to his dismissal, Bauer had written to Arnold Ruge, anticipating his termination and suggesting how he would respond:

I will not be satisfied until I have blown all the theological faculties sky high
(Toews: 318).

While Bauer never made good on this threat – his terrorism was of the theoretical rather than practical kind – his removal did become something of a cause célèbre. The writer Ludwig Pietsch noted that Bauer’s dismissal “had the whole of cultivated Germany in the most violent excitement” (Hellman: 83). Orthodox opponents of Bauer’s anti-religious tomes claimed vindication for their campaigns and attacked Bauer “as though he were the prophesied anti-Christ or the devil in person” (Hellman: 85). Bauer’s sympathizers found further evidence of the reactionary character of the new regime in the episode.

[47] Dissident academics such as Bauer knew the consequences of theological and political subversion. Removal from their positions was near permanent. The 1819 Karlsbad Decrees forbade any professor who was dismissed from his position from ever teaching again in a Prussian university. Their outspoken criticism of the Christian religion or the Prussian regime negatively affected their hopes for academic advancement, and in turn, these frustrated ambitions further radicalized them (Spies: 337). Indeed, the foremost historian of modern German universities has noted that the careers of dissident academics before 1848 were marked by constant frustration and frequent persecution (McClelland: 221). These factors, coupled with an overwhelming surplus of professional students and graduates, especially in theology and law, and a paucity of positions in mid nineteenth-century Germany (O’Boyle: 473-78), meant that Bruno Bauer’s academic career was finished. But ironically, his dismissal from German academe afforded him greater freedom, for while still at Bonn, Bauer restrained himself and concealed his sincere beliefs as he held out hope for a permanent academic position.

[48] Although disappointed over his removal, Bauer now had no academic limitations on what he could write or publish. His only adversaries were now the censors and police. From this position outside German academe Bauer wasted no time in exploiting this new license and professing his sincere beliefs. In immediate response to his dismissal from Bonn, Bauer composed *The Good Cause of Freedom and My Own Affair*, in which he publicly admitted to being an atheist and identified religion as the last enemy of humankind, of thought, and of human freedom (1842a: 213). Published in Zürich outside of the reach of the Prussian censors, *The Good Cause* was smuggled into Germany and circulated throughout dissident intellectual circles.

[49] In *The Good Cause*, Bauer defended himself and his work, claiming that he had been pushed out of the Bonn faculty because he had taken an illusory academic freedom for an actual freedom, daring to undertake authentic critical research into the Gospels and the

origins of Christianity (1842a: 19-20). He proclaimed that his removal exposed the hypocrisy of a faculty that claimed to prize academic freedom, but dismissed one of its own who had exercised that freedom (1842a: 24). Vowing to continue his research, Bauer promised that religion would be completely destroyed by his criticism (1842a: 201).

[50] Once he recognized his situation as impossible Bauer had little reason to remain reticent. His exclusion from academic life at Bonn and the campaigns of the king and Eichhorn against him impelled him not only toward his dismissal from Bonn but to a position from which he could honestly profess his atheism. The institutional location of Bauer's career, German academe, is important for understanding his intellectual development and a critical element in his turn to theological radicalism. There was no private sphere or academic freedom for intellectuals; the university constituted the whole of the public sphere and it was funded and monitored by the state. Ironically, Bauer's experience of academic freedom would only be realized when he finally accepted the inexorability of his expulsion from the academy. But this was not the end point of Bauer's apostasy. His association with a radical group of Berlin intellectuals briefly renewed Bauer's career, provided him with a forum for his critique, and represented the culmination of his evolution from orthodoxy to atheism.

Return to Berlin and Association with "The Free Ones" (1842-1843)

[51] Bauer left for Berlin shortly after his dismissal from Bonn. Here he began attending informal meetings of a group of dissident intellectuals at a bar called Hippel's Wine Cellar. The Hippel's literati – described by a contemporary as a cabal of "communists and atheists" (Barnikol 1927: 33) – were popularly known as The Free Ones (*Die Freien*). The group announced its formal existence in 1842 as an act of radical solidarity in response to Bauer's removal from Bonn (Hellman: 83). Fellow member Friedrich Engels even composed a satirical poem mocking the conservatism and Christianity of German academic culture as a means of welcoming Bauer back to the Prussian capital.³

[52] The roster of The Free Ones was not fixed, but regular attendees included Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Bauer and his brothers, the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, the liberal jurist Arnold Ruge, the individualist philosopher Max Stirner, and the Leipzig editor Otto Wigand, who published the group's subversive journals and radical books. At the height of their infamy, from late 1842 through 1843, The Free Ones possessed a reputation for being the wildest atheists and iconoclasts in all of Germany (Hellman: 69).

[53] Although precluded from teaching in the Prussian universities, Bauer found a receptive audience among The Free Ones and within the radical clubs and rowdy saloons of pre-revolutionary Berlin. As the historian Robert J. Hellman noted, these Bohemian cafes served as "a kind of compensatory political forum" (Hellman: 15), perhaps more aptly described as an atheist public sphere, trafficking in gossip, news, and subversive periodicals unavailable

³ The full title, which gives the reader a taste of its satirical-polemical tone is: *The Insolently Threatened Yet Miraculously Rescued Bible. Or, The Triumph of Faith: To Wit, the Terrible, Yet True and Salutary History of the Erstwhile Licentiate Bruno Bauer; How the Same, Seduced by the Devil, Fallen from the True Faith, Became Chief Devil, and Was Well and Truly Ousted in the End.*

from mainstream sources. The theological and political dissent that The Free Ones were notorious for would have been impossible outside of this Berlin *Grubstraße*.

[54] Indeed, Bauer's most militant expression of atheism and anti-Christian sentiment, a polemic entitled *Christianity Exposed*, was published in 1843 during his association with The Free Ones. Although not widely circulated – the censors had confiscated and destroyed nearly every manuscript – several copies escaped confiscation and were distributed among The Free Ones (see Barnikol 1927). A letter to the book's publisher outlined Bauer's own estimation of the contents of *Christianity Exposed*:

I demonstrate that religion is a hell composed of hatred for humanity and that God is the bailiff of this hell (Barnikol 1927: 5).

No longer regarding religious experience as a product of individual self-consciousness, an unrestrained Bauer confessed his hatred of religion and argued that religion was instead a form of self-delusion that alienated man from himself and his humanity. Moreover, this delusion, which he identified as the “misfortune of the world” (2002: 13), could only be overcome with a total rejection of all forms of religion and the adoption of atheism.

[55] The publication of *Christianity Exposed* represented the denouement of Bauer's apostasy from orthodox Christian to militant atheist. It entailed both a rejection of the Christian religion as well as the conclusion of his thinking about self-consciousness and its relationship to religious experience – a line of thinking that began with his refutation of Strauss and can be traced through his critiques of the Gospels, reaching its logical conclusion in this polemic. Apart from its content, the vitriolic tone of *Christianity Exposed* was such that Arnold Ruge noted that Bauer pursued criticism of Christianity with the fanaticism of a believer, an apostate that severed ties with his former faith but remained wholly consumed with all forms of religion (Löwith: 349).

[56] After the publication of *Christianity Exposed*, Bauer's critical output dwindled. Journals that The Free Ones had relied on for the publication of their subversive ideas, such as Ruge's *Halle Yearbook* and *German Yearbook*, were shuttered by the Prussian state and censorship became nearly impossible to overcome (Stepelevich: 43). And as the revolutions of 1848 approached, there was an increasing concern with political rather than religious critique.⁴ By 1844 the meetings at Hippel's Wine Cellar had subsided and The Free Ones ultimately disbanded.

[57] After the group's dissolution and the failure of the Revolutions of 1848, Bauer turned to writing secular history and an increasingly outrageous biblical criticism. In his later works Bauer claimed that the letters of Paul were forgeries and that the Jewish thinker Philo and the Roman philosopher Seneca had been the true authors of the Gospels (1851, 1852, 1877). From 1855 to 1856 Bauer visited London, where he was received by Marx and the two repaired their relationship (see Hook; McLellan; Rosen 1977; Mah). During his later career, Bauer was reduced to doing editorial work for the reactionary politician and editor Hermann

⁴ Even the name for this era of German history, the Vormärz or “pre-March” period, as the revolutions in Germany began in March and are referred to as the “March Revolutions,” anticipates the increasingly practical and political concerns of the late 1840s.

Wagener (1815-1889). In 1866 Bauer ceased his work for Wagener and took up farming in a Berlin suburb to provide for his orphaned nieces. He continued on in this way until April 1882 when he died alone, impoverished, and reportedly insane.

Conclusion

[58] There is much that can be learned from a figure who began his career committed to the proposition that Hegelian philosophy and orthodox Christianity could be reconciled and whose academic position was terminated upon the publication of works that proudly identified Hegel as a closet atheist and posited religion as the paramount obstacle to human freedom. Bauer's marginalization from German academic life emboldened him to produce ever more belligerent critiques of religion that in turn reaffirmed his doubts, and his association with a cadre of bohemian atheists and dissidents finalized this transformation from orthodox Christian to militant atheist. Indeed, Bauer's apostasy demonstrates that one's intellectual and spiritual development cannot be isolated or bracketed from contemporary social and political affairs. Although a deeply personal experience, the apostate loses their religion as a result of a highly socialized process.

[59] Bauer's admirer Friedrich Nietzsche quipped that some are born posthumously, that the truth of their ideas are only recognized long after their death. One might wonder if Nietzsche had Bauer in mind with that comment. Although his biblical criticism and critique of the Christian religion cost Bauer the academic appointment he so desperately sought, his liberation from a stifling German academic culture afforded him the freedom to compose even more proactive works, ones that we might arguably recognize as the intellectual and spiritual beneficence of the New Atheism.

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