

THE LIVING GOD AND THE FULLNESS OF LIFE

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Jürgen Moltmann

**THE LIVING GOD
AND THE FULLNESS
OF LIFE**

Translated by Margaret Kohl

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Preface



EARLY CHRISTIANITY CONQUERED THE ANCIENT WORLD WITH ITS message about Christ: He is “the resurrection and the life.” This is the Christ who has come into this world, and it is *this* life, life before death, which is eternal because it is filled with God in joy. For with Christ the living God has come to this earth so that “they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

This book is meant to be a reminder of the living force that the message of Christ as “the resurrection and the life” set free among the early Christians, the force that enabled the new beginnings and the change that allowed men and women to create what had hitherto been unknown. I believe that this force can unfold in the modern world, too, and that it holds within itself the fullness of life for which many people today are yearning. The modern world takes its bearings from humanistic and materialistic concepts of life. And what men and women experience there is a diminished life. A life that has forgotten God is a life without transcendence, a life without any light shed from above. There is so much un-lived, unloved, even sick life that has failed and is lived without any point. Believers, lovers, and the hopeful take their bearings from the living God and, in their closeness to God, experience life in its fullness.

A short time ago my Italian publisher and friend P. Rosino Gibellini introduced me as a theologian “who loves life.” I believe that all Christians, and especially the theologians among them, love life, “this

one, eternal glowing life,” as Friedrich Hölderlin described it in his *Hyperion*. But at the same time I know what Gibellini meant.

From early on, my spirituality took its stamp from Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his perception of Christianity’s “profound this-worldliness,” in which “the awareness of death and resurrection is always present.”¹ Bonhoeffer’s letters from prison first appeared in 1951, and for years were for me something like a devotional handbook.

My personal life was also deeply marked by Christoph Blumhardt, his hope for the kingdom of God, and his love for the earth. Blumhardt’s addresses, sermons, speeches, and letters are for me something like a breviary for the soul and a treasury for the searching theological mind.

During the last 29 years, a “theology of life” has been sought by many people and from very different sides. Latin American liberation theology expanded into a kingdom-of-God theology (Gustavo Gutiérrez); in Geneva the World Council of Churches put forward a programme for the theology of life; in Korea, Presbyterian Christians founded an institute for the theology of life; in Rome, in his encyclical *Dominum et vivificantem* of 18 May 1986, Pope John Paul II called for a spirituality embracing body and soul. Today the oldest and the youngest churches, the Orthodox and the Pentecostal ones, are coming to meet each other in the passionate sanctification of earthly life. The theological approaches are as varied as life itself, but fundamentally they all come down to the same thing, the same impulse: Christ’s resurrection from the dead and the appearance of the divine life in him. If it were not for this experience on the part of the women and the disciples, we would know nothing about Jesus, and there would be no Christian faith. But with Christ’s resurrection, the horizon of the future, which is otherwise darkened today by terrorism, nuclear threat, or environmental catastrophe, becomes light. With that, a new light is cast on the past and the fields of the dead. With that, a life enters the present, which cannot be sufficiently loved and enjoyed. “This life was revealed and we have seen and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us” (1 John 1:2). What I wish to do is to present a transcendence that does not suppress and alienate our present life but that liberates and gives

life a transcendence from which we do not need to turn away, but that fills us with the joy of life.

With this contribution to a theology of life, I am continuing what I began in 1991 with *The Spirit of Life* (ET 1992) and supplemented in 1997 with *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (ET 1997). I have taken up ideas that I already expressed earlier and have developed them further. I have gathered together previous experiences and insights about the fullness of life, and am setting them in the new context of this book.

Part One is therefore concerned to understand what the Bible means by “the living God” and to free the God of Israel and Jesus Christ from the imprisonment of metaphysical definitions, which are due to Greek philosophy and the religious Enlightenment. Can God neither move nor be moved, and be therefore *immutable*? Is God unable to suffer, so is apathetic and *impassible*? Is God “the all-determining reality,” and hence “the Almighty”? Or does God have power over Godself, and thereby also can withdraw in order to concede freedom to those whom God has created? Is God “one” God, or is the application of numbers such as one or three in itself a desanctification of God’s name?

Part Two has to do with the unfolding of human life in the life of God. How does human life flourish in God’s wide spaces and future times? My aim is to show this flourishing from the development of human life in the joy of God, in the love of God, in the broad space of God’s freedom, in the spirituality of the senses, and in the productive imaginative power of thinking that crosses frontiers. The vista at the end is based on a saying of the great Athanasius that I first came across in the context of the Taizé community: “The risen Christ makes of life a never-ending festival.” That is also the place where, with the young Ernst Bloch, we can discover “truth as prayer,” and where we may end with the praise and adoration of the saints.

With regard to the style: this is not a technical book nor an article in an encyclopedia, but neither is it a handbook. I have tried to write comprehensibly for theologians and nontheologians and had in view both those who enjoy thinking theologically and those who have not yet tried to do so.

Introduction



The Diminished Life of the Modern World

THE MODERN WORLD TAKES ITS BEARINGS FROM HUMANISTIC AND naturalistic concepts of life, and in so doing, what it experiences is a diminished life. Christian life takes its bearings from “the living God,” and in doing so, it experiences the fullness of life. But:

What is life?

What is fulfilled life?

What is eternal life?

Modern life proceeded not from religion, but from the criticism of religion. In all criticism of religion not only is something won, but something is lost as well. In Western criticism of religion, what was gained was the new value given to life in this world; what were lost were the transcendent spaces in which this life moves. But in every criticism of religion, the religion criticized remains as the negative pole. We shall look at this fact as it emerges in the different modern worlds. We then shall first describe the religiously “self-sufficient” humanist (whom Gotthold Ephraim Lessing put forward as being the enlightened contemporary in the modern world), and, second, the atheistically “reduced” Ludwig Feuerbach, as well as the naturalistic and economic reductionism that followed, our aim being to bring out, in contrast, the riches of a life lived in God here and now.

The Many Modern Worlds

The modern world is not a single unified entity, because its origins are very varied—in France and Europe’s Catholic countries, in the English-speaking countries, in Germany, and in the Scandinavian countries. It is superficial and levels these differences down to talk about “the secular world” or about a general “secularization” in the modern world of what had earlier been religious. The word *secularization* originally meant the secularization of the church’s property. But this never took place at all in England, the United States, or Scandinavia. So, from the religious point of view I shall distinguish between “laicizing” modernity, “free-church” modernity, and “secularized” modernity.

Laicizing modernity

Laicizing modernity originated in the French Revolution.¹ Its negative image of religion was a reaction to the feudal and clerical dominance of the Roman Catholic Church in French politics and public life. Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin were the creators of French absolutism. After the 1685 abolition of the toleration granted under the 1598 Edict of Nantes, the Protestant Huguenots were banished and a unified Catholic state was established: *une foi—un loi—un roi* (“one faith, one law, one king”).

Consequently, the democratic principles of the bourgeois revolution—*liberté, égalité, fraternité*—could only be established by way of anticlerical laicism. The clergy belonging to the Roman Catholic Church had to be excluded from politics and public life. Theology had no place among the disciplines taught at the state universities. There was no longer any state religion. In this way religious liberty was achieved, though in a negative sense. But laicism also stabilized clericalism in the Roman Catholic Church and replaced the absolute centralism that had obtained in France.

“Free-church” modernity

“Free-church” modernity grew out of the revolutions in the English-speaking countries.² Its negative image was Henry VIII’s state church

in England. But there it was not the church that dominated the state; it was the state that laid down what the church had to believe. It was against this that the free-church resistance of the “dissenters” came into being, the resistance of the Quakers and Baptists. They were repressed, and emigrated to the New England colonies so that they could live out their faith without state tutelage.³ Here what was definitive was “soul liberty”—Roger Williams’s motto from 1638 onwards in the first Baptist church in America, in Providence, Rhode Island. The state has to keep out of the churches, because it understands nothing about religion. It has to dispense with a state religion so that, as a covenant of free citizens, it can regulate the common good in accordance with the U.S. Constitution and the human rights laid down in the Declaration of Independence of 1776. Here the reason given for the thesis that “there is no state church” was not laicism; it was based on the freedom of the churches themselves. The modern Protestant world was shaped by religious liberty in its positive, not its negative, sense. Theology was not excluded from the scholarly community. The divinity schools became, rather, the nuclei of private universities independent of the state. But the beginnings of a civil religion were, nevertheless, continually part of the political ideology of the United States, because the United States was linked from its beginnings with the messianic vision of a “new world order”: *novus ordo seclorum* are words that appear on every U.S. one-dollar note.

Secularized modernity

In the German-speaking countries, the French Revolution and the new Napoleonic order led to a juridical “secularization,” that is, to the state’s appropriation of church property. Ever since, Germany has been characterized by a “secularized modernity.” This was also a humanistic response on the part of the Enlightenment to the horrors of the Thirty Years’ War, which was interpreted as a war between the religions. In 1648 the Peace of Westphalia ensured the peace of the German states on the basis of the principle *cuius regio, eius religio*—the religion of the people had to conform to the religion of the ruler. Only the right to emigrate was left open. The German states were

ruled as small units: one ruling prince, one state religion, one state university, one state law, and often one state currency as well. The Protestant churches were state churches but not church states, like the Roman Catholic ones. Consequently, they were not much affected by modern “secularization.” “Secularization” seems to be mainly a Roman Catholic problem. Secularization presupposes the distinction between church and state. Consequently, in the Scandinavian state churches it never existed at all. The state had already appropriated church property during the Reformation period. But when in 1815 the king of Württemberg acquired Catholic Upper Swabia in addition to Protestant Württemberg, he established a Catholic theological faculty at his own University of Tübingen, in order to meet adequately the religious needs of his subjects. Today the government in Baden-Württemberg has established an Islamic theological institute in Tübingen in addition to the two faculties for Christian theology, in order to meet adequately the new religious conditions of a religiously plural population. That is a modern form of the old state religion in the shape of institutional religious liberty as the freedom of religious communities. It is true that ever since the Weimar Constitution (Art. 137) there has no longer been any state church in Germany; but the privileges of the traditional Christian churches have still been retained and are laid down between the churches and the state in agreements and concordats. That is why in Germany there are theological faculties at state universities. A Catholic laicism has no more gained a footing in Germany than have the “free” churches of the English-speaking countries.

Secularized modernity is the German contribution to the modern world. The Basic Law (or constitution) of the German Federal Republic guarantees religious freedom—both individual and institutional—“in responsibility before God,” as it says in the preamble. That may sound paradoxical, but it is not in fact a paradox at all; it is the religious guarantee of religious liberty, whether positive or negative.

In the wake of European integration, Catholic laicizing modernism is becoming noticeable in Germany, too, and is pushing the churches and theology out of public awareness. This makes the situation in the European union contradictory. European cultural politics

are dominated by French laicism, whereas in Eastern Europe, after the disappearance of Soviet atheism, the theological faculties that had been pushed onto the fringe returned to the universities, and the German modernity model has come to prevail.

In the course of the discussion, the term *secularization* has come to be used not just for the legal transference of church into state property, but also increasingly to describe the general modern “secularization” of what was formerly religious.⁴ The result of this transformation of the church into the state, of the religious into the secular, of transcendence into immanence, is that the secular world, and not merely the secular state, as Wolfgang Bockenförde said, is living from presuppositions that it did not itself create. What is religious is still inherent in the secular world, as something transformed. That can easily be seen in the secular ideologies that were developed as substitutes for religion. The belief in progress and the striving for dominance over nature betray their religious origins. Yet the transformation process of secularization declares religion to be a thing of the past, and secularization to be the watchword of the future. With that, the process becomes irreversible and can hardly be held back by Christian programmes for “desecularization,” such as Pope Benedict XVI demanded. Nevertheless, neither the term *secularization* nor the term *desecularization* are adequate descriptions of the transformation processes of the religious in the modern world.

Lessing and the Religiously “Self-Sufficient” Humanist

In his dramatic poem *Nathan the Wise* (1779), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing⁵ presents the three world religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—the ones we today describe as the Abrahamic religions—and in his ring parable treats them by way of the figures of Nathan, the Templar, and Saladin, depicting each as being of equal value and contemporaneous. The mysterious ring that was the possession of “a man from the East” has the secret power to make someone pleasing to God and human beings. At his death, this man leaves his three sons three rings, with the condition:

*Let each of you compete
in proving now the virtue of the stone in his own ring,
aiding its power through courtesy and warm good will,
with inner resignation then to God.*⁶

The person who has inherited the true ring will prove himself as such through his humane morality, for the true ring can be ascertained in no other way—it is “almost as unprovable as it is for us to prove which of the faiths is true.” In this way the symbolic relation to the three modes of faith is established. The power to be well pleasing to God and human beings—that must decide. By this he means love for God and one’s neighbour. But if everyone loves only oneself most, then “you are all deceived deceivers”!

*For none of your three rings is now the true one.
We must suppose the true one has been lost.*⁷

This “as if” faith is supposed to motivate the wearer of the ring to the better life. Another Judge, before whom Jews, Christians, and Muslims will have to render an account, will one day decide. The standard against which Lessing tests these three forms of faith is the “universal ethic” of general humanity. He does not enter into the Jewish Torah, the Christian Sermon on the Mount, or the Muslim Sharia. With his lofty humanity ideal, Lessing relativizes the three modes of faith, and by doing so gives them equal validity—or, equally, none.

In its application to the three world religions, the ring parable has a long, interesting pre-history. Lessing took it over from the third novelle of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, but it actually goes back to the medieval *De tribus impostoribus* (“The Treatise of the Three Impostors”), which was printed in 1598⁸ and was condemned and suppressed equally by all three religious groups. Whereas Lessing leaves the question about the true religion open and judges the religious groups according to the standards of humanistic tolerance, the early cynical story denounces all three religious founders—Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed—as being “deceivers of humanity.” Some historians suppose that an earlier version made the rounds at the table of the emperor Frederick II

(1194–1250) in Sicily. Pope Gregory IX brought an accusation against him on the grounds of this writing, but it was not taken any further. Others have supposed that the tale originated in the Islamic world. In the Baghdad schools the comparison of the three religions was already linked with a ring parable as early as the 10th century.⁹ A saying of the Qarmatian general Abu Tahir, who conquered Mecca in 912–924, has been passed down, which reads:

*In this world there are three who have deceived men:
a shepherd, a physician, and a camel-driver,
and the camel-driver is surely the worst of the three.*¹⁰

The ambivalence of the three religious founders or deceivers of men and women has also found its way into the ring parable. Lessing also mentions the “deceived deceivers.”

Ever since the Enlightenment, the intention of a comparison between the religions, and the aim of today’s interreligious discussion in institutions and at conferences, is overtly the positive tolerance by way of which the three world religions are supposed to be enabled to live peaceably with one another. But although this is undoubtedly honestly meant, in the background this stance—unintentionally—ministers to the negative religious indifference that conduces to make the religions dispensable. Especially if these religions are treated as “monotheism” or as “monotheistic modes of belief,” their unique characters and differences are ironed out and their irrelevance for modern life is documented. Modern, secularized Europeans feel themselves to be “religiously unmusical,” to cite a much-quoted saying of the sociologist of religion Max Weber. They assume that a feeling for the religious dimension of life is an aptitude which some people have but which many are without and do not miss, and they thereby fail to be aware of life’s transcendent realms. It is certainly possible to live without music, but life is richer with it. It is certainly possible to live without religion, but with religion life is broader and more festive.

Lessing uses the ring parable in a postreligious sense. Universal humanity has to take the place of particularist religious identities, and the human family must replace the families of the different religious

confessions. Lessing puts the key statement for his “dramatic poem” into the mouth of the Nathan he reveres, the Nathan he calls “the Wise”:

*Are Jews and Christians rather such than men?
Oh, if in you I could have found another yet
For whom it was enough to be a man!*¹¹

For the person “for whom it is enough to be a man,” these three world religions will be a matter of indifference. They should live in peace with one another and leave the other in peace, for even without the religions he or she is content with him- or herself and with the world. For that person, the universal standards of humanity suffice. He or she has become, religiously speaking, “a sufficient” person.

In his reflections on “The Education of the Human Race” (*Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, 1770), Lessing lent support to his postreligious view of humanity by way of his “messianic doctrine of the three ages.” He took this over from Joachim of Fiore and secularized it:

*It will most surely come,
the time of the eternal gospel
...
promised to us even in the primal books of the New Covenant.
(§86)*

*It will come, it will most surely come,
the time of fulfillment when he [i.e., the human being]
will do the good just because it is the good,
and not for the sake of some promised arbitrary reward. (§85)*

Lessing turned Joachim’s “Third Age of the Spirit” into the Age of the Truths of Reason, which are comprehensible to everyone. He makes of Joachim’s ages of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, which interlace in a trinitarian sense, an “Education of the Human Race through the Providence of God” in three separate and succeeding ages. The eschatological era of “the eternal gospel” becomes in him

“the age of perfecting,” and for Lessing this age is already dawning in his own time. He therefore interprets himself and his Enlightenment era messianically. The time has come *now* to make the transition from Christianity to the universal experience of the spirit: the time has come *now* to advance from the particularist faith of the church to the universal faith in reason: “The development of revealed truths into the general truths of reason is simply necessary if the human race is thereby to be helped. When they were revealed they were indeed not yet truths of reason; but they were revealed in order that they might become them” (§76). It was this transference of the trinitarian separation of God’s history with the world into the three ages of world history that gave rise to the German division into the ancient world, the Middle Ages, and modern times. “Modern times” means the final era of the world, since after this there can be no other new time. It is pointless to declare “the end of the modern world,” as Romano Guardini tried to do after the Second World War.¹² What has to be called in question is the division as such. What German calls the *Neuzeit* (literally: “the new time”) cannot be translated into English or French. It is not identical with “modern times” or with “*le monde moderne*.” But it is typical for the messianic, millenarian spirit of the German Enlightenment. Because nothing at all can follow it, the *Neuzeit* is simultaneously the “end time.” The *Neuzeit* is typical of the 19th-century’s faith in progress. The *Endzeit* (“the end-time”) is typical of the contemporaneous spirit of German Romanticism. The time of completion is always simultaneously the time of the end. There *telos* and *finis* coincide. In English, “the end of history” is equally ambivalent: it can be history’s goal and also history’s end. In the Christian expectation of the end, apocalyptic is always the reverse side of millenarianism.

Ludwig Feuerbach and the Atheistically “Reduced” Life

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) counts as a “left-wing” (or revolutionary) Hegelian materialist and philosopher belonging to the prelude leading to the bourgeois revolution of 1848. His theory about religion as an illusion brought to an end what Kant had criticized about

Anselm's ontological proof of God, namely that it takes "mere self-creations of thought as being the immediately true essence of reality": "All the paths which one may strike out with this intention begin either from that one particular experience, advancing from that according to the laws of causality to the supreme cause external to the world, or they abstract in finite terms from all experience and deduce, entirely a priori from mere concepts, the existence of a supreme cause."¹³ Feuerbach also turned the logic of his teacher Hegel on its head. Hegel had written that "The human being only knows about God insofar as God in the human being knows himself," because for him the infinite is only infinite when it absorbs the finite into itself and becomes a differentiated unit both of itself and the finite. Feuerbach simplifies this when he maintains that when "God thinks Godself in the human being" this "is nothing other" than that "the human being is thinking oneself in God." This reversal, as such, is indistinguishable. Hegel preserves the difference between the infinite and the finite, which is crossed from the side of the infinite. Feuerbach abolishes this differentiation: God and the human being are a single being. Consequently, he could no longer differentiate between the two.

Feuerbach began as a theologian and ended up as a naturalist: "God was my first thought, reason my second, the human being my third and final thought"—that was the way he described the path he had taken.¹⁴ He "discovered," as he proudly put it, that anthropology is "the secret" of theology: in actual fact the human being is the criterion for God, and is him- or herself the absolute being—the being of God.¹⁵

- That means for Feuerbach, first, that religion is the expression of a divided and alienated humanity. In their misery, human beings project into God what they themselves have to dispense with, yet wish for. They project into heaven what they are missing on earth. If life here is "a vale of tears," then human beings know that they are only "guests on earth," heaven being their home. It is only in human misery that God is born. Yet religion also projects into the world beyond what it takes from this one. It is not merely the expression of the human being's self-alienation; religion is itself this alienation.

- It means, second, that the new anthropology explains the religious alienation of human beings by exposing their pictures of God as being merely “the self-creations of human reason.” That is the anthropological criticism of religion.
- It means, third, that the enlightened human being takes religion back into him- or herself and becomes a “whole human being.” The illusory heaven returns to earth, and the world becomes an undivided universe. The consequence of denying a life beyond this one is the affirmation of life in the present. Feuerbach’s criticism of religion was not a-religious. What he wanted, in contrast to the atheists of his time, was “a new religion”—the religion of life:

Life is God.

The enjoyment of life is the enjoyment of God.

*A true love of life is the true religion.*¹⁶

All the positive attributes of God are retained; it is only the subject of these predicates that changes: the human being takes the place of God. All the predicates of a transcendent heaven are retained; only their subject alters, their place being taken by the earth and by this life here and now. That means that the human and the divine are indistinguishable, the heavenly and the earthly become one. Life itself is divine and the earth is heavenly. *By turning theology into anthropology, Feuerbach turns anthropology into theology:* “The new philosophy is essentially speaking philosophy for human beings. . . . It takes the place of religion, it holds within itself the essence of religion, it is, in very truth, itself religion.”¹⁷

What does this look like in detail? Feuerbach condemns Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s “I” philosophy and the subjectivity theories of German Idealism:

Loneliness is finitude and limitation.

Sociality is freedom and infinity.

*Man with man—the unity of I and Thou is God.*¹⁸

And: “The true dialectic is not a monologue between the solitary thinker and himself; it is a dialogue between I and Thou.”¹⁹ With this, Feuerbach anticipates Martin Buber’s “dialogical principle” and 20th-century personalism.

Furthermore, he succeeds in arriving at another important recognition: the significance of pain for thinking. “Thinking is preceded by suffering.”²⁰ “Pain is the source of poetry.” Feuerbach is talking about pure pain without any religious, otherworldly consolation—inconsolable pain. “Faith in a world beyond makes of every pain a figment, an untruth.”²¹ And yet: “Only what can suffer deserves to exist. Only the being who knows pain to the full is a divine being. A being without suffering is a being without a being, but a being that does not suffer is nothing other than a being without feeling, without substance.”²² With this he has reached a limit where the divine, or what theology ascribes to God, cannot be transferred to the person who is enlightened in the sense of being critical of religion: God’s inability to suffer. He writes, “The religious feeling, the heart, says, for example, that ‘God suffers.’ Theology, on the other hand, says that God does not suffer. That is to say, the heart denies the difference between God and human being while theology maintains it.”²³ Feuerbach considers that every human being who is able to suffer is greater than a God incapable of suffering. But in this way he is unable to transfer into anthropology the divine attributes that rest on the negation of human ones, such as the inability to suffer and unalterability—and that also benefits his “new philosophy for human beings.”

At the end of his lectures on “The Essence of Religion” (*Das Wesen der Religion*, 1845), he describes his intention as follows: “To turn them from being friends of God into friends of human beings, from believers into thinkers, from those who pray into those who work, from candidates for the world beyond into students of this one, from Christians who according to their own belief and admission are ‘half beast and half angel’ into human beings, *whole* human beings.”²⁴

Theological criticism has for the most part fallen on Feuerbach’s optimism about life, accusing him of overlooking evil, suffering, and death. What he says about pain shows that this is not correct. But what is true is that what comes into being is a “God complex” on the

part of the modern human being, once he or she no longer distinguishes between what is human and what is divine, and exalts him- or herself into a “God-human being.” Then the human being becomes an unhappy God because he or she is a mortal one.

What is also true is that by explaining the human origins of the ideas of God and the images of God, what those ideas and images are aiming at do not cease to exist. If religious ideas are “projections,” what then is the “white wall” that they reflect? asked Paul Tillich. At that point Ernst Bloch assumed that this was “an ante-room of the future” for human projects, because he believed the messianic to be the true religion.

Anthropological criticism will cling fast to the human being’s reflexive, eccentric position. As life is lived, reflexivity and spontaneity are in tension with one another. Anyone who, going along with Feuerbach, becomes a “whole”—that is to say, an undivided—person, may suffice for him- or herself, but he or she will also be totally unknown, because he or she is no longer capable of knowing him- or herself. Feuerbach compensates for this in the relationship between I and Thou, but this is not just a “unity,” as he maintains; it is also a difference that cannot be set aside. The reversal of his thesis about the divine life can be considered true:

- Where God is, there is life, for God is the living God.
- The enjoyment of God (*fruitio Dei*) is the enjoyment of life, and God is experienced through the affirmation of life, not through its denial.
- Religion, in Christianity especially, is true joy in life, because Christ makes of life “a festival without end.”

Not least, Feuerbach’s reduction of “the world in heaven beyond our grave” to “the world beyond our grave on earth”²⁵—that is to say, the reduction of the heaven of eternity to the historical future of humanity—is a substitute for a qualitative transcendence by way of a quantitative transcending. This reduction is certainly typical for the capitalist and Marxist belief in progress, but it leads in the wrong

direction, because belief in a future, better life loses its momentum as time goes on unless it is nourished from the source of a qualitative transcendence, that is to say, from the eternity of heaven. Human self-transcendence in God is the origin and power for the historical overstepping of every present in the direction of a better future. In other words, the restlessness of the heart that only finds its rest in God makes the human being restless in every present time, urging on the future, “seeking a future city” in a “classless society” as well—and even in capitalist society.²⁶ Feuerbach’s reduction is not an enrichment of this world at the expense of the next; it is an impoverishment of this world through the loss of the world to come.

Basically speaking, Feuerbach surrenders God’s qualitatively different world beyond this one because he follows the epistemological principle that “like is only known by like.” God is known only by God, and the human being is known only by the human being. With this, the surmounting of the qualitative frontier between God and human being disappears. God and human being must be a single entity. As a result, anything that crosses the frontier, such as God’s incarnation into human life, and the self-transcendence of human life in God, can no longer be understood, for the principle that governs this surmounting of frontiers is that “only the unlike know each other. For what is the same, whatever is no different is a matter of indifference.”²⁷ To transcend means to cross frontiers. Feuerbach’s merely immanent human beings who have been robbed of transcendence remain confined within their limitations. They have surrendered the religious adventure and prefer to remain at home.

Ideological reductionism

Feuerbach’s reductionist rhetoric can be seen in the revealing phrase “. . . is nothing other than . . .” It is like the transformation brought about by a conjuring trick. It can be extended at will: theology is “nothing other” than anthropology; anthropology is “nothing other” than economy; economy is “nothing other” than biology; biology is “nothing other” than neurology; neurology is “nothing other” than system theory; and so forth. The consequences can be briefly described:

- In the logic of ideological reductionism a further “exposure” follows. What is the “secret” of anthropology? Being determines consciousness, says materialism. And what determines the being of the human being? The economy! That is the world of capitalism, in which everything human becomes merely a commodity for sale. The human being is what he or she produces and what he or she consumes. Life is the ability to work and the capacity for enjoyment. The material life is the only true life. Everything else, such as culture and religion, are epiphenomena—they are secondary and can be explained by material conditions. That is reduced life.
- In the logic of reductionism a further “exposure” follows: the “secret” of the human being is “nothing other” than biology; life is a “struggle for existence” and what is at stake is “survival.” The meaning of the struggle is “the survival of the fittest,” and that means not just the strongest but also the most adaptable. But it is the law of life’s evolution, say the naturalists, who were earlier called “social Darwinists.” If the biological “struggle for existence” is the true life, then everything else has a point only inasmuch as it can be utilized in this struggle. The politics that have adopted this ideology of the struggle for existence have hence made all its purposes conform to it in a totalitarian sense. That is reduced life.
- Today economic materialism and the naturalism of evolution-biology are being replaced by the mechanistic world of “*l’homme machine*.” That means the adaptation of human beings to the computer world they themselves have created, the world of the mainframes, the drones, and the robots. The drones pursue their wars, the robots produce their commodities, the mainframes in the banks regulate their finances, and the computers simulate their thinking with artificial intelligence. Modern human beings are then modern when they “function well.” It is true that they no longer fully grasp their virtual world, and that it is also presented to them as being without an alternative. They are imprisoned in the electronic shell of their own products and are monitored by them. These products have long

since become “trans-human.” This can be a life of luxury and a perpetual party, but it is a reduced life without liberty, without transcendence, without future.

- The naturalistic interpretation of modern research into the brain declares that modern human beings are without guilt, and are not responsible for their wrongdoing, which thus turns them into machinery that is part of the modern world. This, to put it bluntly, means the final abolition of human beings as we have hitherto known them. They are then “antiquated”²⁸ figures in their own, modern world. That is a paradoxical situation.

If atheism is victorious and theism disappears, what then happens to atheism? What becomes of the negation when the positive is no longer there? Then atheism disappears, too, and what comes into being is the post-atheistic type of human being—what Jürgen Habermas calls “the post-secular human being,” who has left behind these ancient antitheses and conflicts. The denial of a world beyond by no means has as its consequence an affirmation of this present one. If there is no longer any world beyond, then there is no longer “this world here,” either. Suffering is divested of its complaint, and pain of its protest against God. Why am I suffering? This question is unanswerable in an atheistic sense. If there is a God, why is there suffering and evil in the world? These questions then become meaningless: if there is no God, then things are simply as they are. Suffering is then no longer a question, and evil is “so-called evil” and is quite natural. In one of Ingmar Bergman’s films, two characters are walking along the beach. One of them says: “Without God, everything would be O.K.,” which provokes the other to the indignant contradiction: “But with God, nothing is O.K.” With God, suffering is called in question and there is a protest against evil, for God is the inexhaustible protest against injustice and violence. A much-quoted saying by Theodor Adorno maintains that “there is no true life in a life that is false.” That is not convincing because it is illogical. How can a “false life” be recognized except in contrast to a “true life”? If there is no true life, there is no false life either. It is only over against true life that the false life proves itself to be false.

Are We Living in the Era of the Enlightenment?

(a) Yes, one might think so, for it was in the era of the Enlightenment (which has also been called the scientific age) that the “secular world” came into being. In 1899, at the turn of the century, the famous German naturalist Ernst Haeckel published his book *Die Welträtsel* (“The Riddles of the World”) and in 1904, as its complement, *Die Lebenswunder* (“The Wonders of Life”).²⁹ Both books were published in popular editions at a very modest price. They were sold all over the world in many editions, and disseminated the popular interpretation of the German Enlightenment. The riddles of the world were solved by way of empirical research into nature; the wonders of life were cleared up through experience and human thought. By about 1900 many people were looking back proudly to the glorious progress that had been made in the natural and life sciences, and promised to the world the completion of the scientific and technological age. And it came about just as they had promised: nuclear physics has elucidated the components of the atomic nucleus to such a degree that today not much more is left to discover. Genetic research has deciphered the human genome to such a degree that the genetic code of human beings can be read. Brain research, in its investigations into the central human organ, has left very little mystery about the human being to be taken into account.

The method of explaining the riddles of the world and the wonders of life is always the same reductionism: the unknown is reduced to the known, the complex is reduced to the simple, the new to the old, the spiritual to the material, the transcendent to the immanent, the religious to the human, and so forth. What does the result look like? What comes into being is a world without mystery, a world devoid of surprises, a calculable world, a controlled world, and a world without any surprises, as in Hermann Hesse’s novel *The Glass Bead Game*.

Every five years the quantity of knowledge in the natural and life sciences and in sociology is said to be doubled, and is made accessible on the Internet. The result is a transhuman world of knowledge that no one is now able to grasp. Computers think more quickly than the human brain. Once programmed, they regulate the financial markets.

Major technical plants, such as nuclear power plants, seem technologically reliable. But because human beings are not reliable, but are fallible and represent a technological risk, nuclear power plants are unreliable, too, as the Chernobyl and Fukushima catastrophes have proved. They are “error-intolerant.”³⁰ It may be that at some time or other it will be possible to breed infallible human beings by way of genetic engineering—human beings who react just as they have been programmed to do. Then the technology functions, but the development of humanity stops at the same time. Human beings make mistakes, and learn from their mistakes if they are wise. Once bitten, twice shy, as the saying goes—always provided that one survives the first bite. If mistakes are no longer permissible, learning stops and, technologically speaking, “the end of history” has been reached.

Modern high-power technology produces major experiments that are unable to contribute to human wisdom, because we cannot retrieve the radiation issuing from the nuclear power plants that have been destroyed any more than we can retrieve the genes we have modified or the viruses we have bred once they have ceased to be under our control. No wisdom can be acquired through a worldwide war fought with weapons of mass destruction, because it is improbable that anyone would be able to survive. No one will become wise through the major-project “modern world,” which goes hand in hand with the population explosion and the urbanization of men and women, and in which the climate balance of the earth is changed, because we cannot retrieve things once they become dangerous. In the Enlightenment age, humanity became involved in a major project with an uncertain outcome. What began naïvely as the elucidation of the riddles of the world and as the stripping away of life’s wonders has become a danger for the world with a universal risk to life. The world without mysteries has itself become the mystery.

(*b*) Yet: “What is Enlightenment?” In 1783 Immanuel Kant provided an answer to this question of questions: “Enlightenment is the human being’s departure from his self-imposed infancy. Infancy is the

incapacity to use one's understanding without drawing on the guidance of someone else. *Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own understanding.”

In the world of that time, with its absolute rulers and obedient subjects, this was just as revolutionary as the French Revolution, which Kant admired. It is revolutionary in the world of today as well, for we do not exist in the age of Enlightenment or in a “world that has come of age,”³¹ but—if we accept Kant's definition of enlightenment—in times of self-imposed infancy.

- It was self-imposed infancy when the German people chose the Nazi dictatorship of the “Führer” Hitler, and people stopped using their own understanding.
- It was self-imposed infancy when the socialist peoples submitted to Stalin's dictatorship, and people only used their own understanding under the guidance of the party.³²
- It is self-imposed infancy when today people all over the world allow themselves to be reduced to their economic utility for the market and, as market-conforming “egoists,” lose the courage to use their own understanding,³³ but surrender to the secret seducers of the total market.

To think independently, or to think at all, was extremely dangerous in the German army, and was punished, for “orders are orders” was the mindless motto of a total intellectual infancy. The Führer's commands had to be obeyed without reflection. In the Nazi dictatorship, the “Eichmanns” were happy to surrender their own thinking, and not to be compelled to have a conscience.³⁴ Their infancy was self-imposed, which was Kant's reproach to the submissive subjects of his time. In doing so they surrendered their humanity and on command were prepared for every inhuman act. The victims of the dictatorships were degraded into a subhuman race so that they could be eliminated, like weeds or pests, while the mass murderers willingly allowed themselves to be made inhuman.

The 20th century saw in Germany the deadly consequences of a “self-imposed infancy.” Russian Stalinism was the model for totalitarian

rule, not only for East Germany (the GDR) but for Mao's China and Pol Pot's Cambodia, too. The courage to use one's own understanding found as little place in Nazi atheism as it did in Stalin's. There is no room for reason in any authoritarian faith.

In place of "enlightened" reductionism, Kant maintained that the *departure* from infancy in the direction of independent freedom was the Enlightenment's anthropological method. With this he picks up the old biblical motif of the exodus from slavery into the land of freedom and, applying it to humanity's human era, invokes the courage for self-esteem: *sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own understanding without any guidance or assumption of responsibility by authoritarian "powers that be." This is the demand not just for autonomy but for responsibility, too. To be aware of one's own understanding is also an expression for the conscience that human beings make out of what they do. The refusal to surrender oneself and one's own thinking, and willingly to accept tutelage as a relief—that costs courage, and in dictatorships often one's own life. For that reason the courage to be oneself and not to be turned aside finds a better place in the religion of the exodus and the resurrection than in atheism.

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