

Ideology, Fetishism, Apophaticism: Marxist Criticism and Christianity

1. The Religious World as Reflex of the Real World

“The religious world is but the reflex of the real world. And for a society based upon the production of commodities, in which the producers in general enter into social relations with one another by treating their products as commodities and values . . . for such a society, Christianity with its *cultus* of abstract man, more especially in its bourgeois developments, Protestantism, Deism, &c., is the most fitting form of religion.”¹

From the Idol to the Fetish

On first appearance, the foregoing quote—coming at the end of the first chapter of *Capital*—is emblematic of Marx’s general view of religion, which he forged early on in formative encounters with Hegel and Feuerbach and which indeed became the basis of his entire critical project. For Marx, the criticism of religion is the “premise of all criticism,” and religion is the first subject which provided him the opportunity to articulate the nature of *ideology* as a form of consciousness shaped by social and material existence—in other words, by class.²

On the one hand, Marx’s notion of ideology provides a compelling account of how religion, the state, philosophy, law—in short, the structures of bourgeois society—operate as “a reflex of the real world,” imbuing the ideas of the ruling class with a power stemming from their basis in historical-material circumstances. Ideology is the dissonance between social life and social consciousness that arises out of class conflict. It names the “mechanism of illusion” which reflects the actually existing rift in the relations between persons that Marx (and earlier, Feuerbach and Hegel) termed *alienation*.³ This mechanism leads Marx to define religion as at once “the expression of

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, in the first English edition of 1887 as found online at <https://www.marxists.org>. The first sentence was uniquely added by Engels for this edition.

² Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), p. 53.

³ Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx* (London: Verso, 2017), pp. 46-47.

real suffering and a protest against real suffering.”⁴ It is because persons are alienated from one another in their material life that the need for religion arises; in this way religion recognizes a real need, but offers a false, inverted solution, one which neatly solves the problem of alienation not by addressing its roots in material reality but by transposing its solution to the realm of abstract ideas. Earth is given up for heaven. This ideological character of religion leads the believer to relate, in Denys Turner’s words, “not to a false world by means of an alternative to the real world but to the real world in and through the prism of belief in a false world. Religion misconstrues this particular world.”⁵ And so, for Marx, the critique of religion paves the way for the beginning of political criticism.

But if Marx was first concerned to lay bare the contradictions inherent in the discourses of civil society—how the ruling class *dominates* by means of an illusory, reflected reality—the later Marx, the author of *Capital*, has quite different theoretical problems in mind. These problems are more in line with an altered theoretical analysis, which Marx termed the “critique of political economy” and which he charted in later writings as found most notably in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. These works seek to demonstrate the exact nature of everyday life governed by the logic of capitalism and the total subjection commanded by the fetishism of commodities—above all, the quasi-religious power exercised by the universal commodity, money.

Thus, Marx’s passages on religion in *Capital* take on a different hue than his earlier writings, embodying a shift in focus from the “phenomena of alienation and the order of belief” to the “phenomena of alienation and the order of perception”—what Etienne Balibar names the shift “from the idol to the fetish.”⁶ Balibar provides the primary frame I take up here between the early Marx’s focus on the idol/ideology/dominance and the later Marx’s focus on the fetish/commodity fetishism/subjection. I submit that it is from the vantage of the latter, embedded within the theoretical context of *Capital*, that we are better prepared to understand how the later Marx conceives religion as socially conditioned by a commodity-producing society. Fetishism provides the key to understanding religion under capitalism. While the earlier theory of ideology (rightly) emphasizes Christianity in its instances of bourgeois domination alongside other “ideological state apparatuses,” as Althusser would later call

⁴ Marx, “Contribution to the Critique,” p. 54.

⁵ Denys Turner, “Religion: Illusions and Liberation,” in Terrell Carver, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 320-338.

⁶ Balibar, *Philosophy of Marx*, pp. 77-78.

them, the later theory reveals Christianity as a symbolic structure shaped by the inescapable laws of exchange value, money, and universal equivalents—the phenomenon Marx named the *fetishism of commodities*. With this analysis, alienation is of a different order, namely that “inherent in the mode of socialization produced by capitalism” itself—alienation based not primarily on epistemic/ideological grounds, but on perceptive/materialist grounds, or what some Marxists have called *reification*.⁷ The primary critical problem shifts from one describing “the real world [seen] in and through the prism of belief in a false world,” to one where real exploitative relations are *disguised* under real, objective, yet seemingly fantastic social forms.⁸ Here the focus is less on bourgeois structures than on the subjection experienced in day-to-day life, a subjection founded on the logic of exchange-value and the mechanisms of the market. The fetishism of commodities is not limited to objects for sale but is extended to encompass all human activities—as Balibar writes, fetishism “abstractly and equally subjects individuals to the form of a *circulation* (circulation of values, circulation of obligations).”⁹ Capitalism, which bends all things under the law of circulation, enacts a radical leveling, an elimination of social reality for a fetishized thing.

Here we can more fully see what Marx means by his cryptic designation of Christianity, “with its *cultus* of abstract man,” as the religious expression most fitting to capitalism. Why is this so? Max Weber later espoused the still influential view that Protestant Christianity’s asceticism and work ethic paved the way for capitalism’s secularized reign. But Marx’s point is rather that Christianity, in its practices and discourses, has become bound up with the all-encompassing *religious* logic of capitalism itself, and that logic’s irresistible extension into the realm of the symbolic. Thus, fetishized Christianity is shaped by and plays an active role in the process of reification, the “making-into-a-thing” of human beings, as a mundane extension of capitalism’s operation.

⁷ The word *Verdinglichung* here describes the “transformation of human beings into thing-like beings which do not behave in a human way but according to the laws of the thing-world.” See “Reification,” in Tom Bottomore, ed., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 463.

⁸ See “Fetishism,” in *ibid.*, p. 191: “Yet the mask itself is no illusion. The appearances that mystify and distort spontaneous perception of the capitalist order are real . . . This is how capitalism presents itself: in disguise.”

⁹ Balibar, *Philosophy of Marx*, p. 72.

Marxism, Christian Ambiguity, and the Apophatic

In thinking through Marx's shift "from the idol to the fetish," I hope to expand on a less-discussed aspect of Marxist-Christian dialogue, apart from that which has traditionally taken place on the plane of ideology.¹⁰ For the question Marx poses in *Capital* is whether the critique of political economy can tell us something explicit about the ambiguities of Christianity's role in the capitalist order, where all is seemingly subject to the logic of exchange-value and the power of money. My aim, then, is first to attempt a convincing Marxist account of Christianity in its relation to the fetishism of commodities, using the concept of fetish to understand how Christianity itself comes to be fetishized (section two). How is Christianity shaped by capitalism, and how does it in turn strengthen capitalism? In section three, I examine these questions using the case study of theology.

At the same time, however, I want to draw out the paradox of an "authentic Christianity"—a term used by liberation theologian José Porfirio Miranda—which actively resists and even overcomes the logic of capitalist fetishism in theology and practice (section four). As Marx, Engels, and the early socialist movements recognized, this radical, "authentic Christianity" is linked to the liberation of the oppressed and the cause of the poor, the widowed, the orphaned (James 1:27), of those, in Marx's words, "who have nothing to lose but their chains."¹¹ This central concern of the Gospel is manifested in the God who denounces the false god of money (Mammon) and in the recurring instantiations of liberative Christian movements in history. "Authentic Christianity" poses a challenge to any false, fetishistic religion which has come more to embody subjection to worldly gods than faithfulness to liberating hope. What is the basis of this Christian anti-fetishism, and can it be brought to bear against the capitalist order that Marx describes? My argument is that Christianity, in a capitalist era, can overcome its tendency to fetishization only through a union with the Marxist critique.

As a bridge linking Marxist criticism and Christian ambiguity, I take up the tradition of apophatic, "negative theology"—with some critical amendments—in

¹⁰ This is not to say that the theory of ideology is of less importance than the theory of commodity fetishism—far from it. As Balibar notes, the theories of ideology and fetishism, while similar, represent different starting points (the former centering on the state, the latter on the market) and lead to different conclusions. Nor is it to suggest that such a reframing has not been applied before, as much of the work of Latin American liberation theology centers around fetishism. What I am suggesting, however, is that the common themes of Christian-Marxist dialogue—"religion as opiate," the role of atheism, etc.—are ideological in nature.

¹¹ A compelling case for this position can be found in José Porfirio Miranda, *Marx Against the Marxists* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980).

section four. Founded in the anti-essentialist, iconoclastic writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, and others, and later taken up and reworked by various thinkers in continental philosophy, apophaticism provides a homologous framework to unite Christian and Marxist anti-fetishism.¹² Apophaticism denies any positive essence of the divine (and human) and thus moves beyond affirmation and negation into a “negation of negation,” a dialectical advancement to a new plane which both transcends and abolishes its previous dualism. In terms of fetishism, the apophatic stress on *absence* in relation to the thing which stands in place of a god challenges the fetish’s false divinity and restores the perception of reified human beings who exist behind the fetish. Apophatic absence—the radical denial of structural-symbolic divinity in capitalism—is thus the basis for transcending the *false presence* of the fetish and reconstituting the *real presence* of transparent social relations among people.¹³ In tandem with the Marxist critique, this is Christianity’s way of effecting the reversal of alienated social relations, the “de-thinging” of human beings.

2. Commodity Fetishism and Christianity

The Fetishism of Commodities and Its Secret

In the dense opening chapters of *Capital*, Marx lays out an analysis of commodities which stands as the interpretive key to understanding a capitalist society governed by the laws of exchange-value. The commodity is the basic metabolic unit of the capitalist mode of production. It is so prevalent and elementary that it seems “at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing.”¹⁴ After all, commodities in the first instance are “use-values,” things that are made for, and thus have value because of, certain uses: linen for spinning into clothing, a coat for protection against the weather. But what at first appears simple is in fact a mysterious thing, “abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”¹⁵ Particularly mysterious is the way in which, in a capitalist society, one

¹² As I will explain in section four, my use of the apophatic here draws heavily on Marika Rose’s critical treatment of the subject in *A Theology of Failure: Žižek against Christian Innocence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019). I am also indebted to Denys Turner’s work on apophaticism and Marxism, which I see as linked to the context of ideology and which I am expanding to the context of the fetish.

¹³ See Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), pp. 97-100.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume I* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 163.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

commodity can be exchanged for any other commodity through the medium of a “universal equivalent,” or money, giving commodities a seemingly inherent “exchange-value” apart from any externally visible use-value. The religious language here employed by Marx, mirroring the duality of soul and body, is an apt theological metaphor for how commodities obscure their material foundations (i.e. their arising out of a particular process of social labor, where capitalists exploit the labor of wage-earners), appearing instead as god-like objects imbued with both natural and supernatural properties. This process of *masking*, of objects appearing as “sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social,” is in fact the very “secret” of the fetishism of commodities:

“The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists . . . simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. . . . [With commodities,] it is nothing but a definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.”¹⁶

In other words, in a capitalist society, we perceive the objects always surrounding us as things bearing social relations and innate properties of exchangeability. But this is a false perception. Social properties do not in fact inhere in things, but appear “fantastically,” as a mask disguising the form that alienated social relations actually take among people in the system of capitalism.¹⁷

In contrast to its evident use-value, this “mystical character” of the commodity lends it an unreal “spectrality” that nonetheless exerts real power. This is the element of the commodity which Jacques Derrida examines in *Specters of Marx*; according to Derrida, the spectral lends a “supernatural and paradoxical phenomenality,” a bodiless body that partakes of the “paradoxical law of *incorporation*,” a body that is “neither perceptible or invisible, but remains flesh.”¹⁸ Although the fetish begins in a material,

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 164-165.

¹⁷ Haskell Lewin and Jacob Morris, “Marx’s Concept of Fetishism,” *Science & Society* 41.2 (1977), pp. 172-190. As the authors note (p. 173), commodities, money, and capital all “appear to possess inherent powers of self-motion,” and gradually people within capitalist societies “cannot help thinking of commodities, and especially of money, as things which are inherently full of social power and life.”

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 6, p. 158.

earthly substance (i.e. gold), it quickly ascends out of this substance to “supra-sensible sensuousness.” But above all, this paradoxical phenomenality means that the fetish is artificial, mechanical, autonomous, a non-human thing that “mimes the living.” The commodity exists in an in-between state, both real and not real. For this reason—because it is a *false presence*, a ghostly form—it “transform[s] human producers into ghosts” in a process of reification.¹⁹ The social character of their own productive labor, of their own material reality and embodied bonds, is thus hidden from laborers and is “redeemed” only in the economic world of social exchange value.

Unlike the theory of ideology, this formulation of commodity fetishism does not describe a “mechanism of illusion” akin to Feuerbach’s inversion of earth onto heaven. It is rather an argument for how life under capitalism *cannot but* appear, not as illusion as such, but as masked reality, as ghostly presence—as a world of markets, money-forms, and universally exchangeable commodities that present themselves as natural, and in so doing unavoidably disguise the real operation of society and elevate *exchangeability* as the primary logic of social relations.²⁰ This exchangeability is the basis for the concept of money as universal equivalent.

From Fetish to Universal Equivalent

Marx, argues philosopher Jean-Joseph Goux, was the first critic to lay down a “science of values” in his analysis of how, out of the infinite exchangeability of commodities, one commodity is severed from the rest to serve as equivalent for all. That commodity is money, not ultimately in all its forms, metals, weights, coins, and notes, but in its ethereal yet very apparent existence as the universal equivalent of all commodities. According to Goux, this analysis demonstrates “the accession to power of a *representative* and the institutionalization of its role” (i.e. the creation of a fetish), a process which obeys a logic inherent to the emergence of other universal equivalents and which has far-reaching consequences in the realm of the symbolic—the “nexus of metabolisms” that comprises human social life and discourse.²¹ The emergence of a universal equivalent in the day-to-day social activity of a society is a process whereby “value” is crystallized in an “abstract, idealized role, [erasing] its own material base.”²² “Individuals are now ruled by

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 195.

²⁰ See David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx’s Capital: The Complete Edition* (London: Verso, 2018), p. 43.

²¹ Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 11-12, emphasis added.

²² Ibid., p. 62.

abstractions,” Marx observed elsewhere, “whereas earlier they depended on one another.”²³

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx lays out the exact steps by which the universal equivalent arises out of the production and exchange of commodities:

“[When] the product becomes a commodity, and the commodity becomes an exchange value, it obtains, at first only in the head, a double existence. This doubling in the idea proceeds (and must proceed) to the point where the commodity appears double in real exchange: as a natural product on one side, as exchange value on the other. . . .

The definition of a product as exchange value thus necessarily implies that exchange value obtains a separate existence, in isolation from the product. The exchange value which is separated from commodities and exists alongside them as itself a commodity, this is—*money*.”²⁴

Money thus takes on an especially significant position in capitalist society, beyond its obvious functions as a means of payment, measure of value, capital, and so forth. It is in money that all of the force of commodity fetishism is focused, leading to the institution of a universal equivalent—a “third thing” mediating exchange, “value” as such set apart from other commodities. It is this all-encompassing symbolic power of the universal equivalent that lends a god-like aspect to the fetish, one which is artificial and limited but at the same time seemingly omnipotent. As Goux explains, the universal equivalent, arising out of any symbolic domain (religious, economic, sexual), establishes the fetish as “the overvalorization of a *thing*, as opposed to a relationship involving people . . . fetishism stops short of recognizing the other and one’s relation” to the other.²⁵ This is how money becomes a god.

The God Money

Despite its origins in the racist-colonialist appraisals of the religions of “uncivilized” peoples by Christian European authors (notably, Hegel), the term “fetishism” took on a

²³ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 164. “The abstraction, or idea, however, is nothing more than the theoretical expression of those material relations which are their lord and master.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²⁵ Goux, *Symbolic Economies*, p. 158.

highly technical philosophical meaning. The term is an attempt, as Alfonso Maurizio Iacono puts it, to articulate a “concept of objects that stand in the place of a god, things that stand in the place of men, parts that stand in the place of the whole”:

“That is to say, objects whose origin and sense of substitution have been lost or concealed. . . . Every trace of the object is lost the moment this substitution is concealed or forgotten. The gap becomes invisible.”²⁶

Marx’s critique of fetishism sheds further light on the god-like character of commodities and money, revealing how the religious analogy likening money to divinity in *Capital* is not just the only possible analogy, but an analogy that has its basis in the objective conditions of capitalist society. We can even say, quite truthfully, that Marx undertakes a religious critique of political economy.²⁷ As Iacono suggests, money is not merely like a god, it is a fetishized god in the realm of the symbolic, insofar as its “origin and sense of substitution” have been disguised—the gap between the god and its origin made invisible—and insofar as its mesmerizing power exerts complete control over its worshippers. As soon as commodities obscure their own material origins as physical stuff and use-values, stamped with the “peculiar social character” of the capitalist labor process, they begin to assert their “dazzling,” universal, and theological properties before human eyes. There arises out of commodity production and exchange a fetish, a “third thing”—value itself as a social relation. Value in this sense, as we saw above, is exactly the social form which alienation takes; money, as the value form of commodities, is precisely that which disguises the reification of human beings under capitalism. It is in this severed, separate form as universal equivalent and representation of value that money takes on an additional character as “the lord and god of the world of commodities,” a transcendent entity with far-reaching power.²⁸

There are several implications which follow from this analysis of money as a fetish-god. First, the world of capitalism is clearly not a “disenchanted” world as Weber thought, but is a world of inborn economic gods, theologies, and liturgies, all of which have their basis in material, social realities centered around the production of commodities for exchange-value. These form a “religion of daily life” under the

²⁶ Alfonso Maurizio Iacono, *The History and Theory of Fetishism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1-2.

²⁷ See Enrique Dussel, *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx* (Estella, Navarra: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1993), p. 127; see also Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 208.

²⁸ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 221.

capitalist mode of production.²⁹ No longer do we perceive other people as linked to us directly through social bonds; rather, the true social life of human beings (with its emancipatory potential) is veiled, and the social is instead perceived in the world of commodities, in the exchange of things. Exchange, overseen by the omnipresent and omnipotent hand of the market, becomes the only possible means of relating to others, and the mysterious nature of the commodity pervades day-to-day life.

Second, money's role as a universal equivalent, as the necessary gateway to all other commodities, means that it commands complete subjection over all people. Money seems to have *inherent* value, granting access to anything and everything. By "possessing the property of buying everything," Marx writes, money becomes "the object of eminent possession."³⁰ Because of this quality, money demands worship, it exacts subordination, it "has its asceticism, its self-denial, its self-sacrifice."³¹ All human desires become crystallized in the fetishized money form—above all, the desire for wealth and accumulation that is *sacra auri fames*, the "accursed hunger for gold."³² Moreover, once it appears as capital, money devolves into *madness*, a "determinant of the practical life of peoples," something which by its very nature must "constantly drive beyond its own [quantitative] barrier . . . and endless process," or what Marx elsewhere termed (following Hegel) a "bad infinity."³³

Third, as discussed above, money is a thing, a *Machwerk*—an artificial work of human hands (the original meaning of *fetish*) which takes the place of something exterior whose origins have been obscured and which becomes a masked symbol of human alienation.³⁴ Like the golden calf and other false gods appearing in the biblical narrative, money is a spectral phenomenality elevated to a place of transcendence. Its falseness

²⁹ See Eugene McCarragher, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

³⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 222; see also Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 102-103.

³¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 232.

³² A line from the *Aeneid* as quoted by Marx in *ibid.*, p. 163. See also McCarragher's portrait of Marx's early study of fetishism in *The Enchantments of Mammon*, p. 80: "Fetishism is 'a religion of sensuous desire,' . . . in which the worshipper fantasizes that an 'inanimate object will give up its natural character in order to comply with his desires.'"

³³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 269-270. See also David Harvey, "Bad Infinity and the Madness of Economic Reason," video lecture (<https://youtu.be/cehxlTrzDiA>, accessed on Jan. 30, 2021).

³⁴ Marx uses this word from the German Bible to describe the fetishistic commodity produced under capitalism: "Just as man is governed, in religion, by the products of his own brain, so in capitalist production, he is governed by the products of his own hand." *Capital*, p. 772, as discussed in Miranda, *Marx against the Marxists*, p. 197.

stems from its *created*, puppet-like materiality—which, as we have seen, is abstracted to the point of supra-sensibility. Moreover, once fabricated, the fetish requires worshippers to play an active part in maintaining its power.³⁵ Money is accepted as transcendent despite its material origins, and to see it as transcendent is to blur the perception of social alienation which it disguises. Ultimately, this points to the reifying aspect of money, the “making-into-a-thing” of the human being by *a thing*, money. Marx summarizes it thus:

“Money is the universal and self-sufficient *value* of all things. It has, therefore, deprived the whole world, both the human world and nature, of their own proper value. Money is the alienated essence of man’s work and existence; this essence dominates him and he worships it.”³⁶

3. *Capitalist Society and the Universal Equivalent: Theology as Case Study*

Marx’s explanation of the institution of a universal equivalent out of the fetishism of commodities shows how the fetish is raised to the level of a false god and subsequently orients the symbolic world around quasi-religious formulations, which display social alienation in other guises. Out of the hegemonic structure of money, then, comes a *mode of symbolizing* that is both economic and cultural and that extends to all facets of life under capitalism.³⁷ Social relations are no longer transparently evident to those who labor to create value. Rather, these relations are hidden by their absorption into the only possible relations of commodity exchange, framed by the logic of the market. At the heart of this logic is a radical leveling, a foundation of circulation, reciprocity, and value which have their basis in the form of money itself. The implications of this theoretical shift are far-reaching. Marx reveals how the hallmarks of bourgeois liberalism—the “rights of man,” equality, freedom—are characterized by what Balibar calls a “strict reciprocity,” which can be traced to the fact that “in the market, each individual presents himself to the other as the bearer of the universal—i.e. of purchasing power as

³⁵ Miranda, *Marx Against the Marxists*, p. 216.

³⁶ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 50.

³⁷ Hence, *Capital* extends the hegemonic power of capitalism further than had the earlier theory of ideology. With commodity fetishism, even bourgeois institutions and its class representatives are subjected to capital’s laws of motion.

such.”³⁸ Thus, the *market*, with its logic of universal circulation and exchange, is the source of the abstract, universal rights which bourgeois society champions—a fetishism which masks the reality of alienated productive society.³⁹

Equipped with this theoretical understanding of the nature of the universal equivalent, and its symbolic role in a world of commodity exchange, I want now to return to Marx’s comment given at the outset of this paper, that “Christianity, with its *cultus* of abstract man,” is the most fitting form of religion for a capitalist society. As the foregoing discussion shows, Christianity takes on this privileged role in capitalism because of its fetishization of a universal equivalent—namely, that of an abstract, reified *human essence*, and, by Feuerbachian inversion, an equally abstract *divine essence*. This essentialized human nature is likened to, but also informed by, the universal equivalent of *value*, which seems to inhere in commodities. Hence, fetishized Christianity does not just enable the dominance of ruling classes, it in fact replicates capitalism’s logic of exchange and laws of motion in its symbolic forms. In what follows, I want to offer a briefly sketched case study of theology as an extension of market logic, centering on the universal equivalent of human essence. Balibar highlights an analogous case in the modern field of law: legal contracts present citizen-subjects as inherent bearers of a universal subjective will, just as commodities are inherent bearers of value. This “juridical fetishism of persons” establishes a leveling equality before the market which is itself conditioned by the equality of commodities on the market.⁴⁰ In the same manner, modern theology manifests a theological fetishism of human essence. The operation of commodity circulation—mediated and reciprocated in the universal equivalent of money—extends to create a “human essence” capable of meeting capitalism’s requirements for the production of exchange-value based on alienated social relations. A Christianity based in this reified human essence is one that seeks “to absorb the whole world into itself,”⁴¹ propping up capitalism’s overarching desire for the accumulation and expansion of value. This is a Christianity in which “God is only idealized capital, and

³⁸ Balibar, *Philosophy of Marx*, p. 73.

³⁹ Goux also cites numerous examples of this replication of market logic, particularly, the “monetary metaphor” that haunts early modern philosophy in the work of philosophers like Hegel, Kant, and Berkeley. Philosophical idealism and monetary economy are both, for Goux, symbolic structures that share a common formulation of fetishized general equivalents (abstract concepts in the one example, money in the other), and relative forms (tangible realities and commodities). Goux, *Symbolic Economies*, pp. 92-95.

⁴⁰ Balibar, *Philosophy of Marx*, p. 71.

⁴¹ See Rose, *Theology of Failure*, p. 173.

heaven only the theorized commercial world,” as Marx’s contemporary Moses Hess wrote.⁴²

As a foundation for this mode of theology, we might begin with Descartes’ rationalist philosophy of the self, a philosophy which speaks in a starkly theological register and which appears at the early stages of capitalist society.⁴³ For despite its similarities to previous Platonic doctrines of the soul in Western thought, the soul in Descartes’ philosophy is new—a subject curiously disembodied, rational, universal, European, male, what philosopher Enrique Dussel calls the foundation “for the political domination of colonial, colored, female bodies.”⁴⁴ The abstract, leveling quality of the Cartesian soul is conditioned by the abstract, leveling quality of capitalist exchange-value, elevated in money.⁴⁵ Thus, as Goux writes, in Descartes we find that “the idea of God is implied and contained in the very nature of the soul in the same way that the idea of gold is implied and contained in the very form of value.”⁴⁶ Moreover, the Cartesian soul provides a foundation for the further expansion of exchange-value, allowing Christian subjectivity to embrace a colonizing mode of theology based on a fetishized human essence which blankets particular social relations under a pervasive, universal subjection to equivalence and value. Reification conditions the symbolic, which then in turn forms the basis for further reification.

Contemporary decolonial thought provides a critical lens with which to further outline the fetishized “*cultus* of abstract man” beyond Descartes. Joseph Drexler-Dreis and Kristien Justaert, drawing on the work of novelist and philosopher Sylvia Wynter, elucidate how this “doctrine of Man” (in fact aptly named, for the fetishization implies the normativity of European, male, heterosexual subjectivity) is inseparable from the hegemonic power of racist-colonial Christianity:

“The shift from a theocentric to a Man-centric anthropology began with Christopher Columbus’s assertion that ‘creation had indeed been made by God on

⁴² Quoted in Goux, *Symbolic Economies*, p. 154.

⁴³ Enrique Dussel draws attention to Descartes’ Jesuit education and the influence of the Ignatian exercises upon the development of the *cogito ergo sum*. See Enrique Dussel, “Anti-Cartesian Meditations: On the Origin of the Philosophical Anti-Discourse of Modernity,” *Journal for Culture and Religious Theory* 13.1 (2014), pp. 11-52.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

⁴⁵ Hence, as Dussel argues, Descartes stands as the representative of capitalist modernity’s second moment, when “‘colonial being’ had already occurred,” not as modernity’s instigator. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

⁴⁶ Goux, *Symbolic Economies*, p. 20.

behalf of and for the sake of human kind (*propter nos homines*)' . . . based on the humanistic principle that the whole earth needed Christian redemption in the particular form in which he conceptualized redemption. Wynter sees theology to have canonized a doctrine of Man that liberation movements in the 1960s have begun to undo."⁴⁷

Columbus' Christian "humanism," like the Cartesian soul, replicates the expansionist, universalizing tendency central to colonialist capitalism and the abstract, leveling quality of money. Social difference is leveled in the face of an abstract human essence which subjects the whole world to the expansion of Eurocentric, Christianized value. Colonialism is thus a site where theology acutely manifests the logic of market exchangeability, both as a mode of discourse (Columbus' *propter nos homines*) and as a practical extension of exploitative relations structured for the production of exchange-value. In this mode, Christianity purveys the equality of individualized human souls based on an abstract, leveling essence—not primarily in the interests of true equality or justice, but as a reflection of *and* a necessary requirement for the circulation of commodities and the furthering of market dominance. Indeed, salvation itself is marketized and conceived as the full realization of private, individual essence, rather than as the transformation of social relations in history.⁴⁸ Salvation is defined in *quantitative*, rather than *qualitative* terms, as the church seeks the limitless absorption of all into its ever-expanding hierarchical fold.⁴⁹ This structure parallels the quantitative interchangeability of commodities headed by money and is indicative of a fetish raised to the level of a reifying, universal equivalent.

My purpose in offering this brief and limited sketch is to highlight the connections between the symbolic orders of Christianity and capitalism as founded in overlapping universal equivalents, which have their basis in alienated social relations. This alienation owes less to the domination of structures or ideas characteristic of the theory of ideology than to the subjection to the market conditioned by the organization

⁴⁷ Joseph Drexler-Dreis and Kristien Justaert, "Introduction: The Projects of Unsettling Man," in Joseph Drexler-Dreis and Kristien Justaert, ed., *Beyond the Doctrine of Man: Decolonial Visions of the Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

⁴⁸ Here it is possible to tie in the bourgeois individualism characteristic of Northern European Protestantism, which, contra Weber, does not so much prepare the way for capitalism as it arrives already conditioned by the rise of capitalism.

⁴⁹ On the distinction between quantitative and qualitative salvation, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1985), pp. 150-152.

of productive relations toward the creation of exchange-value. In the case of the latter, Christianity itself takes on a capitalist form.

4. *Apophaticism: Uniting Christian and Marxist Anti-Fetishism*

The paradox of Christianity, as Marx knew well, is that although it has become the most fitting religion for a capitalist society of disguised, alienated relations of production, its original proclamation contains a potent critique of the power of money. The harsh and unambiguous condemnation of money formulated by Jesus himself—“You cannot serve God and Mammon” (Matthew 6:24)—rests precisely on a material-theological understanding of money as a fetish-god, akin to the Marxist critique. Money is an insatiable infinity, “not only the object but also the fountainhead of greed,” as Marx wrote.⁵⁰ Money is an artificial thing elevated to the place of a god, and subservience to its “thingly” demands makes people into things, a process which defers or makes impossible the just relationships between others. Both Marx and “authentic Christianity” deride as fetishistic this feature of money—which precedes capitalism but which capitalist society extends indefinitely, such that, for José Porfirio Miranda, “the capitalist system is essentially the institutionalization of the idolatrous worship of Mammon.”⁵¹

If, for Marx and the socialist tradition, the communistic earthly ministry of Jesus is set against the abstracted, institutionalized fetish of capitalist Christianity, this is not to conceive Christianity as existing on a moralistic spectrum, with “ideal” and “corrupt” versions occupying opposite poles. But it is to recognize that, despite its ambiguities, Christianity retains the impetus to anti-fetishism—provided it unites with the Marxist science of critical perception. This perception, an apocalyptic unveiling in the true sense, makes visible the worship and enslavement to money against which Jesus admonished. Under capitalism, the worship of money has become invisible by being subsumed into the everyday subjection to the fetishism of commodities. Marxist criticism uncovers what has been disguised by fetishism. But more crucially, because it is an active perception, Marxism aims to revolutionize social relations, to transform the world into

⁵⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 222.

⁵¹ Miranda, *Marx Against the Marxists*, p. 222. Marx found this anti-fetishism expressed in the radical preacher, Thomas Müntzer: “It is in this sense that Thomas Müntzer declares it intolerable ‘that all creatures have been turned into property, the fishes in the water, the birds in the air, the plants on the earth; the creatures, too, must become free.’” “On the Jewish Question,” pp. 50-51.

one marked by social *transparence*.⁵² For Marx, only a completely transparent society of human relations can undo the power of the fetish, one where the day-to-day relations touching on the interconnections between people, their labor, nature, and all social-economic life (conceived as broadly as possible) are no longer alienated:

“The religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature, generally present themselves to him in a transparent and rational form. The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e. the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control.”⁵³

As is evident from this passage, a transparent society guided by a conscious understanding of its needs is inseparable from the means and ends of communism. This is a society characterized not by the false presence of the fetish but by the *real presence* of nonalienated relations. What the Eucharist symbolizes, as real presence, is the inverse of money, an exteriority which disrupts the fetishized symbolic structure (the religious reflex of the real world) and signals the hopeful fulfillment of practical human liberation.

As I briefly mentioned in section one, the apophatic tradition can be usefully conceived as a bridge linking Christian and Marxist responses to the false presence of fetishism and the reconstitution of real presence. Apophaticism thus conceived is not a framework of perception as such, but a *precondition* for perception on the order of Marxist criticism. Here the apophatic is not so much concerned with the epistemological, the ideological, or even the ontological, but with the *political*—with the practical ends of human liberation, the emancipation of human beings from the world of things. Apophatic absence—the denial of fetishized divinity—is reconstituted as an affirmation which transcends its original negation and leads to real presence, or the restoration of authentic human social relations which fetishism disguises. In Christian terms, this can be analogously conceived as responsibility to the poor, which, as the Gospels tell us, is true, authentic religion. Enrique Dussel forcibly describes this dialectical apophaticism:

⁵² This is the difference between Marx’s historical materialism and Feuerbach’s *contemplative* materialism.

⁵³ Marx, *Capital*, p. 173.

“Atheism vis-à-vis the fetish is the negative precondition for revolution; affirmation of absolute Exteriority is the affirmative and definitive precondition for liberation. Both preconditions are practical. It is in action that the fetish is denied and Exteriority affirmed—when one assumes responsibility for the oppressed.”⁵⁴

The affirmation of practical liberation of the oppressed is both the critical perception of the fetish and liberation *from* the fetish. This is what moves analysis first from the order of belief to the order of perception and finally to a world beyond the fetish.

The Apophatic Tradition

To further clarify what is at stake in adopting the apophatic tradition in this discussion of anti-fetishism, it is useful to understand the internal tensions and possibilities that have marked both its original exposition and its reformulation by later thinkers in continental philosophy. In *A Theology of Failure*, Marika Rose provides such an assessment, tracing the conflictual apophatic heritage from Pseudo-Dionysius’ effort to reconcile *desire* and *ontology* at the level of God and the world to continental philosophy’s transposition of the problem to the level of the individual and the world. (Significantly for this paper, the questions arising out of these relationships have traditionally been formulated as problems of *economy*, of exchange, gift, and rupture. More will be said about this below.) In both the classic and postmodern iterations of apophaticism, however, the central “Dionysian problematics” remain—the tensions found in the spheres of freedom, materiality, hierarchy, and universalism. These four areas highlight the contradictions inherent to apophaticism, how the Dionysian legacy holds aspects of both theological negativity—the movement from darkness, unknowability, contingency, matter—and positivity—the movement from wholeness, unity, absolute hierarchy, divinity. The latter, as I have argued above, has been particularly bound up, as a “universal equivalent,” with a fetishistic Christianity that “seeks to incorporate the whole world into itself” and props up the essentializing structures of colonialism, racism, and capitalism.⁵⁵ How then, can apophatic theology reconcile the two aspects of the Dionysian heritage, which seem to form a circular exchange economy, reminiscent of market logic? In other words, is it possible for

⁵⁴ Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, p. 99.

⁵⁵ Rose, *Theology of Failure*, p. 6.

Christianity to “speak positively,” to recover anti-fetishism, without falling into the fetishistic mode?

To formulate an answer to this question, Rose first looks at the shift from Pseudo-Dionysius to deconstruction. The former, drawing heavily on the resources of Neoplatonism, takes up the key themes of “language, desire, and ontology,” while continental philosophy, in refocusing the economic problem from God to the individual, centers on the key themes of “language, otherness, and contingency.” For philosophers in the tradition of Heidegger and Derrida, the overarching problem thus shifts from ontotheology to epistemology, to what the framework of this paper might designate the level of the problem of ideology. Within this act of “de-centering,” the tensions of apophaticism are seemingly resolved by conceiving “incompleteness as limit,” by stressing the contingent and negative over the dominating universals that comprise Eurocentric discourse. But, Rose argues, this solution is but a reconfiguration of the Dionysian problematics of desire in a different sphere.⁵⁶ Thus, rather than overcoming the contradictions and antagonisms of the Dionysian heritage, the heirs of deconstruction would seem to remain caught within the ambiguities of the apophatic. To the question of: is it possible for Christianity to “speak positively”? the deconstructionist tradition would answer: no, insofar as it is impossible to escape the symbolic, linguistic order. This version of the apophatic, based in the problems of ideology, does not get us closer to a Christian-Marxist anti-fetishism.

As an intervention in this discourse, Rose sources a critical reading of Slavoj Žižek, whose materialist turn “shifts back from epistemology to ontology and from the negative acknowledgment of incompleteness as limit to a strong affirmation of incompleteness as the positive condition of both being and language.”⁵⁷ Žižek’s engagement with the apophatic tradition, rather than trying to resolve the contradictions inherent to the Dionysian heritage, instead “repeats” in a materialist

⁵⁶ For example, on the Dionysian problematic of universalism, Rose writes: “Although Derrida’s different perspective on the economy of immanence and transcendence gives rise to a much less confident affirmation of that which constitutes and makes possible human existence, he, as much as Dionysius, affirms a desire—albeit an impossible one—to escape the particular and material for that which is universal, ahistorical, and immaterial.” *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7. Central to Rose’s argument is the Lacanian distinction, taken up by Žižek, between the psychoanalytic terms *desire* and *drive*, which marks a profound shift for the Dionysian heritage: “The shift from desire to drive is the shift from the perpetually failed attempt to obtain the object that will provide satisfaction for the individual or social order to a satisfaction that consists precisely in this repeated failure to attain completeness.” *Ibid.*, pp 56-57.

register the four problematics of freedom, materiality, hierarchy, and universalism. In this case, however, it is the *failure* to resolve the contradictions embedded within—a failure that is predicated on an ontology that is itself characterized by failure and incompleteness—that is the foundation of economy. What this suggests for the problems of economy and apophaticism is that, rather than starting from a perfect whole and seeking an always unrealizable reunion with that whole, the starting point itself is always an already ruptured and failed site of being. This starting point does not seek to undo the paradox of the relative and universal, or of the antagonism between negativity and positivity, but focuses instead on the transformation of the particular *from within*. Transcendence and immanence are not opposed as antagonists but are transposed to a material realm where they play dialectically against a ground which is by nature in flux and always coming into being. It is with this kind of materialist critique that apophaticism moves from the level of ideology to the level of the fetish.

Beyond the Universal Equivalent: Failure

Extending the logic of Žižek's turn beyond Žižek's own limitations, Rose finds here a clarifying corrective to the ambiguous legacy of apophaticism. For theology and the church, this means that the tensions of apophaticism are not to be resolved in an uncritical defense of hierarchy and universalism (a straightforward justification of racist-colonialist fetishized Christianity), nor are they to be resolved by deferring resolution and elevating contingency and multiplicity to the level of transcendence. Rather, the problem becomes one of how to be "faithful to Christ"—a universal responsibility that is worked out in particular ways. Christ in this sense is not a frozen mediator or a universal equivalent at the level of the fetish but is a person whose *real presence* is transformed into attempts by particular communities to be faithful to the liberating message of the Gospel. It is this "authentic Christianity" which decries, with Marx, the commanding power of false gods and reifying fetishes, and returns to the liberating relations between people.

As Rose argues, this transformation does not erase theology's ability to speak positively but transposes it to the realm of material ontology, to the relations that constitute particular social orders:

"This is not simply to condemn theology to uncertainty, to hesitation, or to silence. Žižek claims that the key feature of 'the great works of materialist thought' is that they are 'unfinished.' They seem, he says, to 'tackle the same

nodal problem again and again...although they ultimately fail, their very failure is theoretically extremely productive.' There are parallels here with the way that the Christian apophatic insistence on the ultimate failure of all systematic theology coexists with the cataphatic delight, nonetheless, in its fruitfulness, its proliferation."⁵⁸

Conceiving theology as failure, then, means to accept it as never finished, as something which always resists being frozen as an essentializing universal equivalent, assimilating all things, and which always responds to the situations of the oppressed. In terms of the fetishism of commodities and the seemingly inescapable, day-to-day religious power exerted by the capitalist order, it also means to reorient Christianity as a force which "[ruptures] the economy of ontology," an exteriority which breaks the logic of economic circulation with the "logic of antagonism . . . the excess of grace that breaks economy open not despite but as failure."⁵⁹ Through this act of rupturing, apophatic theology itself may unite with that religious critique founded by Marx—one that sees the social stakes of the Kingdom of God clearly and that mounts a decisive struggle against those fetishes which disguise its liberating, revolutionary roots. On this account, apophaticism is the theological-material precondition for perceiving and reclaiming a world of transparent social relations.

Beyond the Universal Equivalent: Utopia

As a point on which to center these overlapping themes of real presence, failure, apophaticism, and Christian-Marxist anti-fetishism, let us look briefly at the horizon of *utopia*. Marx was famously critical of utopian socialists, reserving some of his harshest attacks for such thinkers like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. But Marx's ire for the utopian socialists was aimed not at their zeal for a transformed world, but rather at their inability to see the true nature of material relations and fetishized values in a capitalist world. Marx's sustained argument against Proudhon's program of monetary reform was based on Proudhon's blindness to the true nature of alienated labor.⁶⁰ Marx adamantly

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 172-173.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Proudhon argued that money could be abolished by fiat and replaced with labor-tracking time-chits as an improved, worker-friendly measure of value. But, Marx replied, this solution fatally misunderstood social relations which were "exploited by capital in production [and] secured by private property and commodity exchange in price-fixing markets," thus ensuring money as an

maintained that money could not simply be abolished in a utopian future without first abolishing the alienated social relations among workers, for which money is a fetishized representation. Nonetheless, Marx provided some of his own sparing examples of a utopian communist future, mostly by way of negation of others' examples, as in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Marxism thus fortifies utopian discourse, shifting its focus from a far off, abstract, scarcely attainable future to the critical perception of a fetishized world of commodities which must be dismantled by the restoration of transparent social relations. This represents, for Ernst Bloch, the shift to a "concrete utopia," one which captures "the objective-real possibility which surrounds existing actuality with tremendous latency, and affords the potency of *human* hope its link with the potentiality *within the world*."⁶¹ Concrete utopia is the latent world the fetish masks, the world both Christians and Marxists can bring forth through an apophatic anti-fetishism.

For an example of this anti-fetishistic utopian vision of transparent relations, we need look no further than the founder of the modern conception—Thomas More himself. At first glance, More may seem an odd prophet of concrete utopia, both for his committed Catholicism and for the fantastic, possibly satirical nature of his musings. But More's *Utopia* seeks, as Jean-Joseph Goux explains, "to overthrow the tyranny of the symbolic," to provide a "critique of the symbolizing third entity, such as money, the concept, the state, God. . . . More's *Utopia* is none other than a world from which symbolizing third entities have been banished."⁶² This society is one devoid of "frozen mediation" and all universal equivalents, where no alienation exists between the purely *unmediated* relations between human persons. Here there are no exchange-values and no money, only commodities as use-values; no concepts of the "human in general," only human persons; no images of God, only the "utopian form of religion itself," which is the very fullness of that which it seeks to represent.⁶³ In short, this is a society where representation has been dissolved for the presence of the thing itself. Value, as fetishized

inevitable universal equivalent of value. See David Harvey, *Marx, Capital, and the Madness of Economic Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 55.

⁶¹ Ernst Bloch, *On Karl Marx* (London: Verso, 2018), p. 172.

⁶² Goux, *Symbolic Economies*, p. 163. There are of course problems that arise in the account of *Utopia*—not least that it is founded on an act of colonization. There is also the question of what sustains the *Utopians* in their unmediated economic-productive existence. Goux maintains that it is deference to absolute law which forms an organizational principle from exteriority, a feature which lends the authoritarian aspect to *Utopia*. Despite these difficulties, the striking feature of More's work is its recognition that universal equivalents form the basis for alienated relations in present society.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164.

appearance, does not exist anymore. Utopia is transparence, a “total reappropriation” of the human from the fetish.⁶⁴

Conclusion

As I have argued, the Marxist critique of religion is complex and offers Christianity in particular a fruitful opportunity for thinking through the problems of fetishism within a capitalist order. Of course, it would be possible, on a very narrow Marxist reading, to doom Christianity as such to a ghostly existence as institutionalized fetish, a symbolic structure which repeats and extends the subjection of money which runs rampant within capitalism. Caught in this inescapable bind of capitalist logic and beholden to a universal equivalent which erases the gap between material relations and structural perception, Christianity in this view is a dead letter, a frozen mediator, a ghostly specter. And yet this has not been the experience, nor the spirit of commitment, of countless Christians who have struggled under various banners of liberation through history, who have taken to heart Jesus’ denunciation of the god Mammon and who have practiced solidarity with the poor and oppressed. It is not the experience of those who have sought to bring the Kingdom of God on earth. Nor is it the faith in which Marx and Engels recognized a revolutionary spirit equal to that of communism.

A deeper Marxist engagement with the paradoxes of Christianity, then, must uncover the homologous critique of the fetish from both, a critique borne out of a strident denunciation of human relations becoming subject to a thing. And yet, this critique is also the source of a profound hope for a better world. It has been my argument that, for Christianity, this anti-fetishism can be usefully conceived as a kind of apophaticism, a negation of structural-symbolic divinity which is followed by an affirmative reconstitution, beyond even the traditionally utopian. This “authentic Christianity” seeks, with Marxism, for a world of transparent interpersonal justice, a world of liberated relations between human beings themselves and between humans and the mysterious, transcendent realm of nature and beyond.

⁶⁴ Goux oddly does not comment on any Christian character of More’s text, presumably seeing it as an instance of a “radical humanism” and characterizing it as “atheological.” But it would perhaps be better conceived as a Christian anti-fetishism in line with what I am suggesting here.