“On the Jewish Question”:
Marx at the End of Reason

Reason has always existed, only not always in reasonable form.
Karl Marx, Letter to Arnold Ruge

In the first line of his 1844 *Introduction* to the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Marx famously declares, “For Germany, the critique of religion is essentially completed; and the critique of religion is the prerequisite of every critique.” Marx’s claim here is often taken to express two things. First, it demonstrates the significant influence of Ludwig Feuerbach and his transformative critique of Hegelianism on the young Marx. Second, it indicates the extent to which the critique of religion lies at the core of Marx’s method of *Kritik* more broadly considered. Whether in the case of Hegel’s philosophy of the state, political economy, or the theological criticism of young Hegelians such as Bruno Bauer, Marxist *Kritik* gathers steam first and most importantly as a method of demystification and disalienation, through which the contradictions that structure the contemporary world are illuminated and made vulnerable to revolutionary praxis.

In stating that the critique of religion is the condition of every critique, however, Marx does not only define his own method or that of his immediate contemporaries. He also summarizes a tradition of German philosophy dating to the mid-eighteenth century, for which the critique of religion is the condition of possibility of a truly human reason, as well as its most important whetstone. In figures such as Lessing, Kant, Hegel, and Feuerbach, reason only achieves maturity as the realization of religion’s esoteric truth and the negation of its exoteric form. Marx’s characterization of the critique of religion as “essentially completed,” however, conceals a major problem: specifically, that religion always survives its critique. Buried a thousand times, religion reanimates and claws its way back.

Though his announcement in 1843 of the completion of the critique of religion may suggest

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otherwise, Marx himself was fully aware of this tendency in the history of thought. In *The Holy Family*, co-written with Friedrich Engels in the autumn of 1844, Marx criticized the speculative tendencies of German critics such as Bruno Bauer on precisely this point. Critics such as Bauer, Marx argues, define their critical project in terms of an opposition between *spirit* and *matter*, and so reproduce the conditions of theology as the ostensibly secularized conditions of *Kritik*. “On the one side stands the Mass,” he elaborates, “that *material*, passive, dull and unhistorical element of history. On the other stand the *Spirit, Criticism*, Herr Bruno and Co. as the active element from which arises all *historical* action.” That such Criticism becomes actual only in opposition to what Marx, sarcastically following Bauer, calls the ‘Mass’ means however that Criticism only subsists insofar as it continually produces the set of oppositions Spirit/Mass, freedom/passivity, history/unhistory for itself. The very means of articulating the project of ostensibly secular philosophy in contrast to its religious other, therefore, require the preservation of the terms of that separation as philosophy’s ongoing condition of possibility.

The religious dimensions of such a dynamic should be evident. Indeed, the juxtaposition of an authentically free and universal *Spirit* with a *Matter* itself characterized by particularity and enslavement recall the terms of supersessionism integral to Christian self-understanding Paul. Marx himself notes as much, arguing that the antagonism of Spirit and Matter so crucial to Bauer is nothing more than a caricature of Hegel’s conception of history, which is itself “nothing but the speculative expression of the Christian-Germanic dogma of the opposition between *spirit* and *matter*, between *God* and the *world*.” As a result, the method of criticism characteristic of Bauer as much as of Hegel before him can only define itself in terms inherited from Christian theology.

The problem with this inheritance, for Marx, is that in defining itself against the Mass and the predicates with which it is associated, speculative or absolute criticism inevitably disregards the human conditions of historical truth and the empirical conditions of humanity itself in favor of an ethereal subject such as Truth, History, or Spirit, in relation to which real people can only ever be more or less conscious bearers. When this kind of criticism attempts to address itself to the abolition

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2 Ibid, 116-117.
3 Ibid, 114.
of material estrangement—as it does in Bauer, but also in Feuerbach—it then does so only at the level of consciousness, of abstraction. Theoretical consciousness, as much as Hegelian Spirit, “addresses itself not to the empirical man but to the ‘innermost of the soul’; in order to be ‘truly apprehended’ it does not act on his vulgar body, which may live in the bowels of an English basement or at the top of a French block of poky flats; it ‘drags’ on and on ‘through’ his idealistic intestines.” Such criticism is therefore wholly inadequate to the task of genuine human emancipation, and requires reformulation—not through another grand gesture of spiritual progress, but rather in a radical reformulation of Kritik in orientation and method. Kritik must become fully material and historical, reconstituting itself not as critique of consciousness but instead a “ruthless criticism of all that exists” (rücksichtlose Kritik alles Bestehenden).

Central to the critical project that Marx here attacks is its figuration of Judaism as the paradigmatic embodiment of all those predicates in opposition to which it defines itself. Jews become the first and most enduring target of German critique—they are unfree; they are particular; they are ahistorical; they are irrational. To the extent that religion more generally comes under philosophy’s critical lens, it does so in acquiring the characteristics previously associated only with Judaism. When reason constitutes itself in opposition to religion, then, it does so by adopting the position formerly occupied by Christianity, and consigning all religion, Christianity included, to Jewishness. Writing specifically concerning Bauer’s treatment of Jewish emancipation, Marx writes, “The massy material Jews are preached the Christian doctrine of freedom of the spirit, freedom in theory, that spiritualistic freedom which imagines itself to be free even in chains, whose soul is satisfied with ‘the idea’ and embarrassed by any kind of massy existence.” Yet in signaling the link between “massy existence” and Judaism, Marx also expresses the portability of the paradigm of Christianity supersessionism: just as Christianity preaches a Gospel of spiritualistic freedom to Jews, so too does German philosophy to people of all religions. Even in its atheism reason restages the antithesis of Jew and Christian.

In his massive 2013 book Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition, David Nirenberg writes the

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1 Ibid, 108.
2 Marx to Arnold Ruge, September 1843. MECW III:
history of how critical thought generates itself by “project[ing] figures of Judaism into the world” and then thinking itself in relation to such figures of Judaism. The most obvious case of this for Nirenberg is the centrality of the so-called Jewish Question (Judenfrage, an expression popularized by Bauer) to the self-styled critical philosophers of mid-nineteenth century Germany. But the Jewish Question was not only of crucial significance to them. For Marx too, it was impossible to outline his intellectual method of historical materialism and political project of human emancipation except on the basis of an engagement with the rhetorical figure of Judaism, or the Jew. Yet where others, including Nirenberg, have read Marx as doing so in relatively straightforward ways—for instance developing a critique of capitalist political economy by isolating and criticizing its ‘Jewish’ elements—he is on closer examination pursuing something entirely different. For Marx, the significance of the Jewish Question is not in the essential relation of Judaism to commercial capitalism or the ‘Jewishness’ of civil society. Rather, the Jewish Question must be taken on as a structuring figure of a form of philosophy that in every iteration—from Lessing to Bauer—reinscribes within itself the very alienation it claims to overcome.

Marx’s most extensive engagement with Judaism or Jews comes in his two-part essay “On the Jewish Question” (Zur Judenfrage), written in the summer of 1843 and then published in the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher in 1844 as a response to two essays by Bruno Bauer concerning Jewish emancipation in Germany. Read incorrectly by critics of Marx as one of the founding documents of modern anti-Semitism and evidence of a pervasive anti-Jewish animus in Marx’s life and thought, Zur Judenfrage in fact functions as a thoroughgoing critique of the supercessionist paradigm of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment German reason. In his response to Bauer’s argument against Jewish emancipation, Marx deploys a rhetorical figure of the Jew in order to dissolve the intelligibility of the Jewish Question in its classical formulation and critique both Enlightenment reason and its chimerical promise of emancipation. “On the Jewish Question” thus functions as an indictment of the centrality of philosophical anti-Judaism to canonical formulations of reason as well as the vehicle through which an alternative configuration of religion, reason, and emancipation can be imagined.

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I.

Every demystification of Christianity submits again and again to justifying a proto-Christianity to come.

Jacques Derrida, The Gift of Death

The adaptation of Christian supersessionism as the formal structure of the genesis of reason characterizes German philosophy well before Bruno Bauer and the ‘critical critics’ lampooned by Marx. Despite differences in philosophical method, this dynamic determines a trajectory of thought dating to Lessing, in which Kant, Hegel, and Feuerbach stand out as noteworthy touchstones. From Lessing onward, the relationship between religion and reason is formulated on the basis of a prior distinction between two forms of truth: the truths of reason and the truths of history. For Lessing, the difference between the two can be glossed in terms of the opposition between contingency and necessity, but in the work of subsequent thinkers history and reason acquire additional sets of rival predicates: particularity and universality, enslavement and freedom, matter and spirit. In every case, however, the opposition is unequal, and the privileged term—whether freedom, universality, necessity, or an amalgam of the three—is defined on the basis of a negation of the minor term in which the Christian negation and fulfillment of Judaism functions as model. Although it will not be possible here to exhaustively investigate the specific configurations of reason peculiar to each figure and their reliance on various rhetorical figures of Jews and Judaism, touching briefly on each allows us to better understand the philosophical context in which Marx takes up the Jewish Question and the consequences of that engagement.

In 1777, amid the intellectual fervor occasioned by his publication of Hermann Samuel Reimarus’s Apology or Defense of the Rational Worshippers of God as a set of anonymous fragments, G.E. Lessing published On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power, in which Lessing responded to an early refutation of Reimarus written by Johann Daniel Schumann. Schumann, an educator and clergyman in Hanover, took particular exception to Reimarus’s dismissal of Christianity’s universality and the correlate possibility that a particular revealed religion could elicit belief from all people, marshalling against Reimarus the evidence of Biblical miracles and the
fulfillment of prophecy as unimpeachable evidence for the truth of Christianity". In his response, Lessing concedes to Schumann the epistemic authority of miracles and fulfilled prophecy. No one can doubt the truth of Christianity if confronted with miraculous proofs of its validity. Such an encounter would bypass the faculty of doubt altogether, endowing the observer with an immediate and unshakeable cognitive certainty. The problem, however, is this: the era of miracles is over. If Origen had the good fortune to live in a period in which religious dispute could be settled by miraculous evidence, our only access to such proof is through the all too unmiraculous reports passed down in the historical record. In 18th century Europe, the proofs of spirit and power have given way to human testimonies of spirit and power, testimonies which are reliable only to the extent that any historical testimony is reliable. This is not intended as evidence against the authenticity of historical reports of miracles or fulfilled prophecies; indeed, we are justified in believing in them just as—but only just as—we are justified in believing that Alexander defeated Darius at Gaugamela, or that Titus destroyed the Second Temple.

Where Christianity runs into trouble here is in what it asks these historical testimonies to shoulder. No one, Lessing suggests, argues that historical truths can be demonstrated as logically necessary. Even if we can substantiate our claims concerning historical truth with archaeological or archival evidence, universal agreement, or by recourse to the authority of the figure or institution who transmits it, none of this evidence amounts to necessity. And “if no historical truth can be demonstrated, then nothing can be demonstrated by means of historical truths.” That is, Lessing elaborates, “contingent truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.”

In stepping from historical truths to truths of reason—for instance, in stepping from belief in the historical event of the resurrection to the assertion that Christ was God incarnate—one vaults from one order of truth into another, only one of which deserves the appellation in the proper sense.

In making this distinction between the truths of history and the truths of reason—the famous “broad and ugly ditch”—Lessing articulated a problem that would govern the course of philosophy and Christian theology in Germany for at least the next seventy-five years. If Christianity (or any

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religion) can no longer authenticate itself on the basis of Scripture, tradition, or miracle, what then determines religious truth? What kind of religion is in fact possible? In what does it consist? And how does it stand in relation to revealed religions and their claims to historical legitimacy?

Lessing’s solution to the problem is of equal significance, though one has to look elsewhere to find it. For Lessing, the standard against which the teachings of any revealed religion are measured is that of natural religion, defined by Lessing over a decade earlier as the effort “to recognise God, to try to form the worthiest ideas of him, to take account of these worthiest ideas in all our actions and thoughts.” The truths of reason thus obtain an independence of historical truth and the traditions of revealed religion founded thereon. What’s more, in every instance what pertains to the essence of true religion can be isolated and separated from the historical vehicle in which it is delivered, such that determinate religions can be ordered and evaluated in terms of their proximity to this universal kernel.

The process of succession of particular revealed religions is narrated in historical form in *The Education of the Human Race*, where Lessing describes the world-historical movement through which both religion and the rational capacities of humanity jointly develop. In this history, religions succeed one another as educational devices appropriate to successive stages of human development, such that at each moment of the history of revelation humanity encounters in religion truths adequate to its level of maturity. There is an ambiguity as to whether religion is in fact necessary or only expedient, but Lessing is quite clear that what the history of religion progressively unveils are truths always already discernible by reason, in such a way that such truths are increasingly inwardized and universalized. The paradigm case for Lessing is that of Christian supersessionism. In his representation of Judaism, Lessing emphasizes the childlike quality of Jewish religion: here divinity is first posited as a unity, yet in a rudimentary sense, such that the One stands over and against the

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12 On the Proof of Spirit and Power does offer one possible answer here: that the fruits of Christianity, and specifically its unqualified instruction to love one another, authenticate the truth of Christianity as a revealed religion. Such an answer still punts on the question of what exactly decides the legitimacy of these authorizing fruits.

13 Lessing, “On the Origin of Revealed Religion.” *Philosophy and Theological Writings*: 35-36, 35. Although the content of this natural religion takes different forms over the course of Lessing’s career, from the rigid theological rationalism of *The Christianity of Reason* (1753) to the more dynamic historical version of *The Education of the Human Race* (1780), Lessing remains consistent in his confidence in human reason to discern the truths of religion independent of religious authority.
Jews and dictates proper conduct by fiat. In the ‘progression’ from Judaism to Christianity—a progression from childhood to boyhood—the teachings of Judaism are refined and supplemented such that they more perfectly instruct—if still in historical and representational form—what will ultimately be known according only to reason.

That the truths of religion will at some point in the future be fully illuminated in an ultimate stage of human enlightenment [Aufklärung] is crucial. For Lessing the history of religion does not end with Christianity as its consummation and fulfilment. Christianity is relegated to an adolescent stage in the history of humanity’s maturation. Despite its considerable advances, Christianity remains a historical religion, where historicality indexes partiality, contingency, and externality. These terms should seem familiar, for they are the same epithets that Christianity applies to Judaism in its self-representation as Judaism’s realization, negation, or consummation. Human reason adopts the place that Christianity had claimed with respect to the traditions it claimed to surpass, relegating Christianity—along with Judaism, polytheism, and the rest—to an age of adolescence. Lessing even strips Christianity of its own idiom. Referring to the advent of a future in which reason will fully govern the moral behavior of humanity, he writes: “It will certainly come, the time of a new, eternal gospel, which is promised to us even in the primers of the New Covenant.”

Lessing thus leaves us with a division between the truths of reason and the truths of history, the latter of which are associated with the claims of revealed religion. He also leaves us with a paradigm through which to understand their relation—specifically, that of Christian supersessionism. Though he attributes to reason an atemporal and universal independence with respect to history, the full development of reason in the life of the species unfolds only through religious history, in which the principles of human reason—universality and necessity chief among them—are refined until the point at which reason breaks from its process of development in a sudden flash of Aufklärung. In retaining both the formal structure of Christian supersessionism and the content of Christian self-

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12 Several paragraphs of Lessing’s Education consist in a reinterpretation of various Christian doctrines in terms of their rational content. For instance, the doctrine of original sin is reinterpreted as simply the doctrine that humanity at its first and lowest stage is not sufficiently capable of controlling its actions to follow moral laws. The Trinity, substitutionary atonement, and the immortality of the soul all get this rationalizing treatment.
representation, however, Lessing runs a considerable risk. That is, in theorizing the character and historical realization of reason in this way, Lessing may also end up reconstituting Christianity in hyperbolic form, as a privileged historical entity masquerading under the ahistorical and absolute imprimatur of Reason.

Lessing’s model of human reason and its relation to historical religion does not disappear after 1780. Just one year later, Kant would take steps down the same road in the first two Critiques where he severs religion from theoretical knowledge altogether before reconstituting select religious doctrines as practical conditions of a will determined by the moral. When Kant later gives full attention to the question of what kind of religion is admissible on this basis, his continuity with Lessing is evident: “on its own behalf morality in no way needs religion (whether objectively, as regards willing, or subjectively, as regards capability) but is rather self-sufficient by virtue of pure practical reason.” The moral law discernible through the use of pure practical reason is self-sufficient without recourse to religion. To the extent that religion has a truth at all, it is, much like for Lessing, as a pedagogical tool. Religion may be expedient, even exemplary—as in the case of Christianity—but never necessary in an a priori sense.

For Kant as for Lessing, particular religions may be evaluated according to the extent to which they approximate the content of the moral law—a moral law that is itself characterized by universality, purity, inwardness, freedom, and immutability. To the extent that religion is capable of incarnating such an ethical community in history, it does so in Christianity. For Kant’ Christianity’s privileged position in the history of religion can be clarified in comparison with its antitype, Judaism. Where Christianity is religious, Judaism is political; where Christianity connotes freedom, Judaism connotes enslavement; where Christianity is universal, Judaism is not only partial, but hostile and nationalistic. The gap between them is so great, in fact, that Kant feels licensed to deny Judaism the status of religion altogether. That Christianity and Judaism seem proximate is only a historical accident—in

19 Ibid, 130. “For this purpose, therefore, we can deal only with the story of the church which from the beginning bore within it the germ and the principles of the objective unity of the true and universal religious faith to which it is gradually being brought nearer. — And it is apparent, first of all, that the Jewish faith stands in absolutely no essential connection, i.e. in no unity of concepts with the ecclesiastical faith whose history we want to consider, even though it immediately preceded it and provided the physical occasion for the
a religious sense, Christianity is a “total abandonment of the Judaism in which it originated, grounded on an entirely new principle.”

Kant here abandons traditional formulations of Christian supersessionism dating to Paul, denying any intrinsic connection between Judaism and Christianity. He does so, however, only to immediately rehabilitate that paradigm as a model for understanding the relation between Christianity and reason. If Kant dismisses the kind of grand historical narrative of religious development that we find in Lessing, he retrieves the principle of transition that is its engine. With respect to reason, Christianity becomes the germ, the seed of pure religious faith, but in the course of its development it is relegated to a preliminary status. To the extent that Christianity remains, incorrigibly, a historical faith, it is ultimately irreconcilable with reason, even if it is in and through Christianity that pure religious faith comes to fruition. The language that Kant uses here is instructive—in throwing off the historical doctrines of Christianity and the source of authority that guarantee them, the pure religious faith discards the corporeal and inaugurates a form of religion that is fully rational. As should be evident, that Kant denies Judaism the status of a religion and effaces the supersessionist relation between Christianity and Judaism does not indicate an abandonment of the supersessionist paradigm of reason. What it does do, however, is avoid the equation of Christianity and Judaism as twin cases of historical faith. As in the case of Lessing, reason occupies a supersessionist model of self-overcoming, realization, and negation with respect to Christianity. It does so, however, while preserving the historical preeminence of Christianity, a founding of this church (the Christian).”

Ibid, 132.

11 On p. 114, Kant writes: “And even assuming divine statutory laws (laws which let us recognize the mas obligatory, not of themselves, but only as they are the revealed will of God), even the pure moral legislation, through which God’s will is originally engraved in our hearts, is not only the unavoidable condition of all true religion in general but also that which actually constitutes such religion, and for which statutory religion can contain only the means to its promotion and protection.” (114)

12 The supersessionist resonances of reason are evident throughout Kant’s critical project, where the development of reason is constantly cast in an idiom of maturation and self-overcoming. Beyond the idiom of its expression, the very activity of reason itself is determined in the Prolegomena in terms of abstraction from the particulars of experience. Pure reason is driven always to the completion of general knowledge in such a way that particulars are suspended and subsumed in a reason abstracted from all sensory determination. I do not mean to argue here that Kant’s definition of reason is somehow straightforwardly Christian, and therefore illegitimate. To do so would be to ignore not only the entirety of the first critique’s argumentation, but also the substance of Kant’s critique of Christianity. What I want to indicate—and what will become clear as this paper continues—is that the critique of Christianity has a tendency to recapitulate
maneuver possible only on the basis of an absolute disregard of Judaism.

We find this pattern playing out again in the respective cases of Hegel and Feuerbach, though in the context of radically different philosophical superstructures and idioms. In the work of Hegel, for instance, though he collapses the distinction between the truths of reason and the truths of history altogether, and so abandons the problematic through which Lessing and Kant develop their own conceptions of reason, he nevertheless maintains the heavily Christian structure of reason’s self-definition characteristic of his Enlightenment predecessors. Feuerbach, in turn, though he reverses the order of subject and predicate in Hegel’s philosophy, installing human consciousness in the place occupied by Hegel’s Geist, nevertheless retains a broadly Hegelian logic of alienation and reconciliation. In Feuerbach’s version of this logic, the philosophical extraction of the atheist or anthropological kernel of Christian religion is undertaken is performed not in opposition to religion, but rather as the realization of a truth that is always already implicit therein. Feuerbach thus recapitulates a dynamic proper to Christian religious development as the form through which his anthropocentric philosophy is articulated. What’s more, he does so in what remains a thoroughly Christian idiom: even as he purports to restore the alienated qualities of human essence to the actually existing human being, these qualities are of an aggressively non-particular—and explicitly non-Jewish—sort.

the very problems on the basis of which Christianity is subjected to critique in the first place, and that consequently it is necessary to subject the form of critique itself to closer examination.

23 Karl Barth wrote of Hegel on this point, “Is it not in Hegel that the man who is free from all the ties of tradition and from all conflict from tradition, who rejoices equally in reason and in history, as Lessing, still groping and uncertain, had set him upon the stage—is it not in Hegel that this man has for the first time achieved complete, clear and certain self-awareness?” Barth, Karl. Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century. Eerdmans. Grand Rapids: 2002, 371.

24 As with everything else, Hegel turns the dial up. Rather than evaporate, the Christian determination of reason instead reaches a delirious apotheosis—not only in Trinitarian structure of Hegelian Geist, but also in the way in which Hegel follows the example of Lessing and Kant in theorizing Christianity as the immediate prelude to the full emergence of reason. Christianity, the consummation of the concept of religion in its rational-historical development, becomes the seed out of whose contradiction philosophy flowers. Although Judaism loses its significance as the immediate predecessor to Christianity (Hegel, like Kant, discards the relation by interposing Roman religion between the two), Hegel’s determination of speculative reason in relation to Christianity nevertheless adopts a supercessionist idiom and logic that permeates his philosophical encyclopedia at every step. See: Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827. Ed. Peter Crafts Hodgson and Robert F. Brown. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006.

The ubiquity of this philosophical maneuver—through which philosophical reason, in all its universality, necessity, and freedom, became articulate in opposition to a specifically Jewish mode of religious one-sidedness—even in the most disparate and explicitly antagonistic philosophical program, thoroughly determined the intellectual circumstances in which Young Hegelians such as David Friedrich Strauss and Bruno Bauer published their critiques of religion. In turn, that same maneuver became central to the logic through which they attempted to construct novel forms of criticism. As we will see in the case of Bauer, an engagement with Judaism in the form of the Jewish Question was unavoidable for such criticism. The terms in which Bauer conducts that engagement reveals the anti-Judaic dimensions of his critical project, and sets the table for Marx’s critique of the philosophical tradition of which Bauer is in certain respects the most extreme expression.

II.

And therefore Criticism has so loved the mass that it sent its only begotten son, that all who believe in him may not be lost, but that they may have Critical life.

Marx and Engels, The Holy Family

Marx’s “On the Jewish Question” was written in the summer of 1843 as a set of responses to two recently published essays by Bruno Bauer: “The Jewish Question,” published in late 1842, and “The Capacity of Present-Day Jews and Christians to Become Free,” published early in 1843 in Georg Herwegh’s Einundzwanzig Bogen aus der Schweiz. Although Bauer had become a major figure in the intellectual circles of the Young Hegelians following his critique of Christian theology and reinterpretation of the Gospels within a Hegelian historical framework, his argument in both essays on Jewish emancipation stands out for its disagreement with what had become the orthodox position of German liberals in the period. Against those who petitioned for the civic and economic rights of Jews on the basis of a shared humanity, Bauer argued that the conditions of citizenship in a non-

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26 This is equally true of Ludwig Feuerbach’s Principles of the Philosophy of the Future, a text that is absolutely saturated in a Christian theological idiom and logic even as it proclaims a mode of philosophical materialism absolutely discontinuous with the speculative philosophy of Hegel and his students.

27 Bauer published his Critique of the Gospel of John 1840 and the Critique of the Synoptic Gospels in 1842. In 1842, only three years after being forced out of his lectureship at the University of Berlin, Bauer was directly dismissed from the University of Bonn by Friedrich Wilhelm IV following an investigation into the unorthodoxy of his biblical studies by the Prussian ministry of education.
religious political state are antithetical to corporate religious identity. France is the exemplar here—the extension of rights of citizenship to religious minorities in the Constitution of 1791 and again in the July Revolution of 1830 purge citizenship—and therefore the state—of its religious qualities. The abandonment of the religious quality of the state is only one half of the problem, however. Religion doesn’t only need to be rooted out of state institutions, but out of civil society as well. That is, if equal citizenship requires the abolition of religious privilege as a principle of that state, then religious privilege must be abolished everywhere, including in the private lives of its citizens.

What it means to abandon religion in order to suit oneself for citizenship in a non-religious state is different for different religious groups, however. To give up one’s Judaism for citizenship, for instance, is not the same as giving up one’s Christianity. Such differences can only be clarified by situating Bauer’s conception of the true, i.e. non-religious state within his understanding of history. Like his contemporary Feuerbach, Bauer was committed to a broadly Hegelian philosophy of history according to which human reason developed through a necessary series of historical stages, in which particular religions give expression to particular forms of human self-consciousness. The succession of religious forms, in which principles of humanity, universality, and freedom are progressively realized, develop the germ of a fully developed and self-conscious humanity, which in the period of the modern Enlightenment finally separates itself from religious particularity and unfreedom altogether.

In the context of this grand historical evolution, particular religions are classified and hierarchized both according to the content of their contribution to reason’s maturation and the historical period in which that contribution is active. In the contemporary Enlightenment as Bauer understands it, humanity finds itself at the point of Christianity’s closure and self-overcoming. Drawing largely from Feuerbach, he argues that the contradictions internal to Christianity—most importantly that between its professed universality and its actual exclusivity—give way in

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*Bauer draws here from Feuerbach, specifically in the last chapter of* The Essence of Christianity, *where Feuerbach describes the contradiction internal to Christianity as consisting in the incoherence of its doctrine of universal love, on the one hand, and the necessary exclusion through a faith community identifies itself as such. One must love everyone, that is, but at the same time there is an exclusive set of believers who bear the task of such love and constitute the audience of its particular revelation. Although in Feuerbach’s there a number of contradictions characteristic of Christianity, which shift in importance at various moments in his work, this one seems to be of primary importance for Bauer, even as others remain in the background.*
contemporary Europe to a fully developed state of human consciousness, in which the universality of the species and its faculties are brought to fulfillment both in intellectual life and in politics. This gives Christianity a priority with respect to the non-religious state: although Christianity as much as any other particular religion must be given up, it must be given up in such a way that is at the same time the fulfillment of its own principle of development. To give up Christianity for citizenship is therefore in some sense the most Christian thing that one can do.

Judaism gets a very different treatment. If Christianity stands at the precipice of the modern Enlightenment, Judaism has already been surpassed and therefore stripped of its historical vitality. Adopting a supercessionist interpretation of the historical and logical relationship between Christianity and Judaism, Bauer assumes that Christianity achieved the negation and fulfillment of Judaism, and that the history of Judaism effectively ended with the ministry of Jesus\(^9\). There is an obvious problem with this formulation. If Judaism ended 1800 years earlier, Jews did not. In fact, there they were in 1842, petitioning the Prussian state and even making claims to participation in the (very much Christian) Enlightenment. For Bauer, however, that Jews continued to exist in a literal historical sense did not mean that they were genuinely historical. Indeed, that Jews remained Jews in spite of their historical obsolescence indicated nothing more than their tenacious resistance to the principle of historical change. “If a nation does not progress with History,” Bauer writes of the Jews, “if it is never caught up in the enthusiasm which is necessary for the fight for new historical ideas, if it keeps aloof from political passions, then it lacks one of the most important incentives to exalted and pure morality.”\(^{30}\) In short, that Jews remain Jews at all demonstrates their unfitness for

\(^9\) Importantly, Judaism also contains its own principle of Enlightenment. Indeed, for Bauer every successive form of religion stands in relation to enlightenment bot has the obstacle that must be overcome and the germ from which enlightenment develops. Generally, religion obstructs enlightenment in its partiality, its enslavement to external authority, and its misidentification of the proper object of human veneration. Bauer interprets the (truncated) history of Judaism accordingly. In Judaism, Bauer argues, monotheism is posited for the first time over and against the pantheon of national or local deities, each of which govern a distinct people or geographical area. In dissolving the legitimacy of such deities, Judaism simultaneously dissolves the intelligibility of distinct peoples as well: “All states and people are unauthorized before the One, before Jehovah, and have no right to continue.” (“On the Capacity of Present-Day Jews and Christians,” 145) The concentration of divinity into a single One and concomitant positing of a single humanity are significant contributions to the historical progress of enlightenment, but Judaism realizes this principle only partially, and so prepares the ground for its own supersession. That is, insofar as Judaism preserves distinctiveness for Jew as a people, it generates a contradiction between its principle of enlightenment and its actuality.

emancipation.

Bauer thus ties the Enlightenment’s revolution in thought closely to the revolution in politics achieved first in the French Revolution and the July Monarchy, both of which become possible only on the basis on an immanent critique of Christianity carried out on the presupposition of Christian foundations and through a Christian logic of self-overcoming. Bauer inherits this principle of religious critique from Feuerbach, and like Feuerbach he too concludes that in the advent of reason all religions are necessarily relegated to a purely historical interest. Yet not all relativization is equal, as we have seen. If enlightenment in the case of Judaism is partial—an implicit, but incomplete realization of universalist monotheism—Enlightenment in the case of Christianity is absolute. To be sure, Christianity must be overcome just as much—and in much the same way—as Judaism, but its overcoming stands in relation to the overcoming of Judaism not as Christianity with respect to Judaism but as reason with respect to religion. Thus Bauer can write in 1843, “The Enlightenment has therefore its true place in Christianity.”

Bauer’s restatement of Christian priority in terms of the consequences of its self-overcoming and its privileged historical relation to genuine Enlightenment determines his treatment of Judaism and the possibility of Jewish emancipation in the contemporary European state in *Die Judenfrage*. There, taking exception with the implicit proposition that Jews are an oppressed class for which emancipation is even technically possible, Bauer argues that proponents of Jewish emancipation hypocritically seek to preserve the rights of Jewish privilege even as they subject Christianity and the Christian state to critique. For Bauer, such a position fails to apprehend the conditions of political rights, but more importantly it lets Judaism off the hook. If it is only through the critique of religion *qua* Christianity that human liberty becomes a real possibility, then Judaism too must pass “through the flames of criticism” in order to partake of “the new world which will soon come.” Bauer’s critical question to Judaism, however, is not what contradiction it contains, or what enlightenment its critique can generate. For him, such questions have long been settled. Instead, Bauer’s question is simply: why does Judaism continue to exist at all?

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As we have seen in Bauer’s narration of the development of consciousness, the implicit truth of Judaism is realized in Christianity—which in the act of that realization negates and supersedes its historical predecessor. The fact of that supersession empties Judaism of its positive historical content. If Judaism continues to exist, it does so only as a tenacious refusal of history itself: “The will of history is evolution, new forms, progress change; the Jews want to stay forever what they are, therefore they fought against the first law of history—does this not prove that by pressing against hits might spring they provoked counter-pressure?” If Jews are in fact oppressed, Bauer suggests, it’s their own fault: “They were oppressed because they first pressed by placing themselves against the wheel of history.” Bauer thus restates the question of Jewish emancipation as the question of whether Jews as Jews possess the capacity to be historical in an active sense. The answer, as one might expect, is an emphatic no.

To the extent that Jews retain their identity as Jews, they do so through adherence to a Law that is particular to a particular historical people, and therefore in implicit opposition to the universal law determined by reason. The content of this law consists entirely in its exclusivity. “The Jews are right if they talk of a fence around the Law,” Bauer writes. “The Law has fenced them off from the influences of history, the more so, as their Law commanded from the start seclusion from the other nations.” Turning Moses Mendelssohn against himself, Bauer argues that Judaism’s insistence on positive commandments rather than universal truths is not its strength, but its most grievous shortcoming. As a result, so long as Jews retain any commitment to Law—i.e. so long as they are Jews—they cannot be citizens. Being Jewish will always make claims of the Jewish person irreconcilable with the movement of history and the conditions of authentic political participation.

The inability of Jews to be citizens is therefore placed squarely on the shoulders of Jews themselves, who—much in the same way that they refuse to be Christians—refuse the prerequisites of citizenship. Reason, historicity, freedom, and universality all interpenetrate and imply one another here as predicates of an Enlightenment whose proper object of critique can only be Christianity.

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33 Ibid, 195.
34 Making exceptions to Jewish law in favor of the law of the state only makes matters worse. In suspending the ‘political’ dimensions of the Mosaic law in favor of the Prussian, Jews both acknowledge the political content of Jewish law and assert their authority to suspend and enact the law at their leisure. That they do so indicates the extent to which law remains external to them, rather than freely adopted in the manner described by figures such as Hegel.
One sees then, in spite of his apparent commitment to a general critique of religion as the premise of a fully developed human reason, Bauer limits the efficacy of that critique to Christianity. Judaism cannot even be an object of critique. Enlightenment is so thoroughly determined on the basis of its historical germ in Christianity that Judaism appears only as an anomaly.

Such is the thesis of Bauer’s second essay—“The Capacity of Present-Day Jews and Christians to Become Free.” The argument of “The Jewish Question” concerning the antithetical relation between Judaism and emancipation is here even more strongly stated. As in the case of his first essay, Bauer interprets religious history and the nature of Enlightenment such that Enlightenment understood as the particular case of the self-overcoming of Christianity assumes a universal significance in relation to which all prior forms of religion or Enlightenment are relativized and diminished. If enlightenment is something that happens in the life of every religious tradition, this Enlightenment, i.e. this Christian Enlightenment, is nevertheless decisive for every preceding tradition and every preceding enlightenment. It is the consummate Enlightenment, which abolishes not only this restrictiveness and this unfreedom, but restrictiveness and unfreedom in general.35

There are indications in Bauer’s first essay that the thoroughly Christian character of the European Enlightenment restricts the ability of Jews to participate in its world-historical transformation.36 In “The Capacity of Present-Day Jews and Christians to Become Free,” Bauer is much more explicit. Not only do Jews have nothing to contribute to this Enlightenment (their historical function now completed), but furthermore they have nothing—can have nothing—at stake in it. So long as Jews remain Jews, as we have already seen, they cannot become citizens. But neither can they gain the rights of citizenship on the basis of conversion to Christianity. That is, for Bauer we have passed the point at which even the abandonment of Judaism can be meaningful: “If Enlightenment has discovered that Judaism like Christianity is the bondage of the spirit, then it is too late. The fantasy and the self-deception, that the Jew could become through baptism a free man

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36 One striking instance of this character comes early in “The Capacity of Present-Day Jews and Christians to Become Free,” where Bauer writes that “the work of emancipation as such, of emancipation above all, is only possible, if it is universally acknowledged that the essence of Mankind is not circumcision, not baptism, but rather Freedom,” an interesting Pauline repetition that in its repetition collapses Christianity and Judaism into the position of Judaism while reserving the privileged term for Reason (135).
and a state citizen, is then no longer possible, at the very least it can no longer be sincere."37 One page later Bauer repeats himself—“It is too late.” Jewish emancipation—for Bauer an oxymoron—is only conceivable on the basis of a radical conversion, not to Christianity, but to Christianity in its dissolution. This duty falls more lightly on Christian, for whom the abandonment of Christianity is also its sincere development. “The Jew on the other hand has to break not only with his Jewish essence, but also with development of the completion of his religion, with a development which has remained for him foreign and towards which he has not acceded.”38 For the Christian, emancipation takes the form of self-fulfillment; for the Jew, radical self-abnegation. There is no other choice.39 As Bauer cryptically notes, “history does not allow itself to be mocked.”40

We find in Bauer’s two essays on the Jewish Question a two-sided argument against the possibility of Jewish emancipation. On the one hand, the commitment to an un-historical particularity that defines Jewishness as such precludes participation in a universalistic, non-religious state. Jews will always be Jews, for Bauer, which is to say that they will always have commitments as Jews that supplant and override the kinds of commitments necessary to citizenship in contemporary Europe.41 This first argument is grounded in a larger, encompassing second argument concerning history and the essential nature of the European Enlightenment. For Bauer, the impossibility of Jewish emancipation consists not only in a generalizable contradiction between religious particularism and political universalism, but also in the character of political emancipation itself, which proceeds historically and logically through Christianity as its necessary precursor. Enlightenment, and the political state in which it is epitomized, are consummately Christian, not only in terms of their ground, but also and perhaps more significantly in the logical operation through

38 Ibid, 149.
39 There is some question for me as to whether Bauer actually thinks that Jews can be anything but Jews. Early in the essay, in a striking anticipation of the racialized anti-Semitism that he himself would later embrace, Bauer writes that Jewish desires for freedom amounted to nothing more than “the longing of the Moor to become white, or still less meaning: it is the longing to remain unfree” (136). This radicalization of his earlier argument concerning the chimerical citizenry of Jews, suggests an even more ambivalent attitude toward Jewish participation in history than he explicitly articulates.
40 Ibid, 149.
41 As David Leopold argues, it is possible in spite of Bauer’s significant intellectual inconsistency to identify a single, unifying claim to which he is committed throughout his middle years: “namely that meaningful liberty for Jews is not possible.” Leopold, David, “The Hegelian Antisemitism of Bruno Bauer.” History of European Ideas 25, no. 4 (1999): 179-206, 189.
which they separate themselves from religion. The realization of Enlightenment repeats the logical structure of Christian supersessionism step for step, articulating itself through the historically Christian predicates of universality and freedom while saddling Christianity with those of particularity, partiality, and enslavement. When Bauer writes that “the work of emancipation as such, of emancipation above all, is only possible, if it is the universally acknowledged that the essence of Mankind is not circumcision, not baptism, but rather Freedom,” he enacts a Pauline repetition that in the very act of overcoming Christianity preserves its mode of self-articulation as the paradigm of human reason and political freedom.

III.

In 1843, less than a hundred years before the attempt to rid the world of capitalism unleashed a mass murder so enormous that its victims are still being counted, Marx wrote in “On the Jewish Question”: “In the final analysis, the emancipation of the Jews is the emancipation of mankind from Judaism.”

–Bari Weiss, How to Fight anti-Semitism

The full substance of Bauer’s arguments in Die Judenfrage and Die Fähigkeit der heutigen Juden und Christen, frei zu werden must be kept in mind when reading Marx’s responses in “On the Jewish Question.” This is not always done in the relevant scholarly literature, regardless of the reader’s position on the relative merits of the text. Instead, post-war interpretations of the two essays comprising Zur Judenfrage tend to follow one of two dogmatic paths. The first, more prominent path is that of the ‘anti-Semitic Marx,’ a position first articulated in detail by Edmund Silberner, but

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There is relatively little attention paid to Zur Judenfrage until after World War 2, when the question of Marx’s anti-Judaism became a far more urgent problem for Marx’s interpreters. In the late nineteenth-century, when a self-consciously “Marxist” international working-class movement began to coalesce, Zur Judenfrage was either taken to be unproblematically accurate in its assessment of Judaism and its social roots, as in the case of Rosa Luxembourg, or Marx’s writings were edited in order to exclude any seemingly anti-Semitic content. For biographers and readers of Marx like Franz Mehring, Sidney Hook, and August Cornu, Marx’s evident anti-Judaism provoked little more than curiosity. After 1945, however, both Cold War partisans and those interested in investigating the roots of Nazi anti-Semitism revisited Marx’s texts on Judaism with greater purpose.
taken up and elaborated by a host of subsequent commentators\(^{*}\). For partisans of this position, Karl Marx was both the originator and most outstanding exemplar of a tradition of left-wing antisemitism that continues to this day, a status that he earns by virtue of the evident meaning of the second essay of “On the Jewish Question,” a series of anti-Jewish comments in his private correspondence\(^{44}\), and biographical conjecture related to the circumstances of his family’s baptism and its psychological effects on the young Marx\(^{45}\). Though assessments vary as to the severity of Marx’s anti-Semitism and the extent to which it is a feature of his thought more broadly, there is nevertheless broad agreement that Marx is an essential founder of modern anti-Semitism.

The second path adopts a deflationary strategy, interpreting “On the Jewish Question” in light of Marx’s relevant critiques of Hegel’s and Bauer’s respective conceptions of the political state, his

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\(^{43}\) Edmund Silberner is the most important early proponent of this position, propagating the figure of the anti-Semitic Marx from the 1940s through the 1980s. Over the next few decades, however, Marx’s anti-Semitism was identified and denounced by a host of other figures. Although a counter-current to this narrative has existed since the 1960s, its prominence can be seen in how it is unproblematically adopted in survey accounts of Marx’s thought. In David Nirenberg’s *Anti-Judaism*, Paul Rose’s *Revolutionary Antisemitism from Kant to Wagner*, Miriam Leonard’s *Socrates and the Jews*, and J. Lorand Matory’s *The Fetish Revisited*, to name a few prominent, the antisemitism of Marx’s thought is taken for granted. Other texts that have together contributed to this representation of Marx include: E. Silberner, “Was Marx an Anti-Semite? (1949), *Socializten zur Judenfrage* (1962); D.D. Runes, “A World Without Jews” (1959); L. Poliakov, *The History of Anti-Semitism, Volume 3* (1968); R. Misrahi, *Marx et la question juive* (1971); R. Wistrich; *Revolutionary Jews from Marx to Trotsky* (1976); H. Hirsch, “The Ugly Marx” (1978); J. Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism* (1978); N. Weyl, *Karl Marx: Racist* (1979); N. Rotenstreich, *Jews and German Philosophy* (1984); S. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred* (1986); A. LeRousseau, *Le Judaïsme dans la philosophie Allemande* (2001); M. Wolfson, *Marx: Economic, Philosophy, Jew* (2003)

\(^{44}\) Léon Poliakov’s multivolume work *The History of Anti-Semitism* has been particularly influential in popularizing the epistolary evidence for Marx’s anti-Semitism. In the third volume of the series (first published in 1968), Poliakov lists in order the evidently derogatory uses of the word Jew or descriptions of Jews in Marx’s correspondence as evidence of the “alchemy of anti-Semitic passion” which gripped him. For representatives of the ‘anti-Semitic Marx’ camp, this documentation has provided an invaluable resource. *History of Anti-Semitism Volume 3*, p. 425 ff. (2003).

\(^{45}\) The biographical ‘evidence’ for Marx’s antisemitism plays a crucial function in this discourse. As we will see in reading Marx’s essay itself, the text puts up tremendous resistance to a straightforward anti-Semitic interpretation, a problem that even the most critical interpreters of Marx tend to notice. In such moments of interpretive friction, the biographical certainty of Marx’s anti-Jewish sentiments provides a crucial source of certainty. Albert Künzli’s *Karl Marx: Eine Psychographie* (1966) and Maximilien Rubel’s *Karl Marx: Essai de biographie intellectuelle* (1957) make a particularly strong case for this position, though based solely on conceptions of what it must have been like for Marx to deal with the psychological burden of his family’s baptism in 1824. It does not help matters that other biographers have punted on the question, including those of Franz Mehring and Isaiah Berlin. Only last year, with the publication of the first volume of Michael Heinrich’s *Karl Marx and the Birth of Modern Society* does this biographical portrait of Marx receive serious interrogation, upon which interrogation it falls to pieces. See: M. Heinrich, *Karl Marx and the Birth of Modern Society* (2019), p. 46 ff.
vision of human emancipation, and the lingual conventions of 19th century Europe. For the representatives of this latter group, Marx’s evident hostility to Jews and Judaism is either an excusable feature of his general antipathy toward religion, an unfortunate, un-Marxist residue of medieval anti-Semitism, or a product of anachronistic readings that insist on interpreting Marx in the shadow of the Holocaust. In any case, such readers conclude, it would be inappropriate to read Marx within the canon of modern anti-Semitism.

Yet neither position has much to say about the text of “On the Jewish Question” itself—particularly in the case of the second essay. Such disregard takes different forms on either side of the interpretive divide. Those who are more generous readers of Marx tend to focus on the first essay, assigning it priority over the second such that the latter can be read as simply restating the conclusions of the first in a regrettable provocative idiom. Avoiding the specific language of the second essay altogether, they often cite contemporary texts like the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* or *The Holy Family* instead, restating those arguments as less alienating summaries of Marx’s position. On the opposite side of the divide, Marx’s critics opt not for aversion but for a brutally literalistic reading of the text, such that Marx’s admittedly grotesque anti-Judaic language becomes sufficient proof in itself of Marx’s anti-Semitism. Focus on the shocking quality of the idiom effectively papers

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*More recently, there have been attempts to deal more closely with Zur Judenfrage as a critique of anti-Semitism. Beginning with Yoav Peled in 1992, subsequent interpreters have focused on the rhetorical dimensions of Marx’s use of the word Jude in the text. The best example of this trend is Robert Fine’s 2014 essay “Rereading Marx on the ‘Jewish Question’: Marx as a Critic of Antisemitism?” Fine argues ideologues of the anti-Semitic Marx as much as apologists such as Hal Draper that Marx’s redeployment of anti-Semitic predicates to apply to civil society as such undermines the legitimacy or possible referentiality of such stereotypes altogether. The second essay would therefore be a mirror of the first essay in its rhetorical relationship to Bauer, and its function would be similarly to render the Jewish Question incomprehensible as a question. I’m extremely sympathetic to Fine’s reading of Zur Judenfrage. What separates me from him, as well as from other more attentive interpreters of Marx’s essay is my focus on its position in the lineage of German critiques of religion and the way in which takes aim not only at explicit anti-Judaism but also at the implicit anti-Judaism of existing paradigms of reason.*

*The evasive strategies deployed to avoid the problem of Marx’s anti-Semitism can be more or less subtle. Take Michael Maidan for one example. In his 1987 essay “Marx on the Jewish Question: A Meta-Critical Analysis,” he lauds Marx’s first essay as a radical salvo in favor of Jewish emancipation, but then simply refuses to read the second: “it is based on common prejudices against Judaism, and is not worth dealing with” (Maidan 37). David McLellan is equally unconcerned. In Marx Before Marxism, he spends the duration of a section on Marx’s publications in the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher interpreting Marx’s first response to Bauer, before turning to the second only to dismiss the accusations of Marx’s anti-Semitism, suggesting in passing that Marx’s use of Judentum throughout the second essay is a pun at Bauer’s expense (McLellan 142).*
over any resistance put up by the essay itself.

We will take a different approach to the text. As has been noted, Marx composed these two essays in the summer of 1843 in Kreuznach, between the suppression of the Rheinische Zeitung and the publication of the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher in Paris. Marx had been interested in writing on the Jewish Question since at least 1842, when he wrote to Dagobert Oppenheim, manager of the Rheinische Zeitung, to request all articles written by conservative Karl Hermes in the rival Köhnsche Zeitung on the topic of Judaism. In his letter to Oppenheim, Marx states his intention to write an article that would, if not settle the Jewish Question, “nevertheless make it take another course” (eine andere Bahn bringen wird). Marx postponed writing such an article until 1843, however, by which time debates concerning the corporate status of Jews in Prussia, the Damascus affair, and the publication of Bauer’s two essays made its composition only more urgent.

In the same period of time, Marx developed a critique of the political state that set him in stark opposition to Bruno Bauer, for whom the state remained the proper horizon of emancipation and political life the scene of actualization for ‘real freedom’ (wahre Freiheit). This critique receives its fullest articulation in a text written concurrently with Zur Judenfrage—the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, where Marx refines his understanding of existing political institutions and civil society through a commentary on Hegel’s doctrine of state. In sharp contrast to Hegel, Marx argues that the political state issues from the material conditions of civil society rather than from the rational development of its own concept, but that it does so in inverted form. Even as the state incorporates the constitution and divisions characteristic of civil society (particularly in the estates), it does so only politically, such that these features are suppressed and rearticulated as immaterial distinctions subsidiary to the more fundamental equality of citizenship.

The case of the individual citizen is exemplary. In citizenship, the individual must “undertake an essential schism within himself,” by which one posit oneself as both human and citizen. The trick of this schism is that one must not only split oneself in this way, but also renounce one’s status in civil society, and in doing so renounce one’s own empirical reality. The requirements of citizenship

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81 Marx to Oppenheim, August-September 1842. MECW 1: 391-393; MEGA III.1, 31-32.
82 Ibid.
83 Marx. Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, 77.
in a political state thus acquire a religious character in the sense that Feuerbach gives to religion, in that in becoming a citizen one posits one’s political existence external to and above one’s material existence, and invests that phantasmatic political existence with real significance. Just as in the case of religion human beings alienate and reify their own species-essence (Gattung or Gattungswesen) in an external figure, invested with absolute authority and absolute reality, so too in the political state empirical human beings project themselves as political beings to the exclusion of their material existence. The political state, so long as it rests on a paradigmatically religious division between one’s material and political personhood, is therefore a thoroughly theological entity.

Marx’s criticism of Hegel and the political state is very much in the background of his critique of Bauer in the first essay of Zur Judenfrage. Indeed, for Marx the fundamental problem with Bauer’s treatment of the Jewish Question is the restriction of his thought to the horizon of political emancipation and the political state. For Bauer, the political abolition of religion—i.e. the abolition of the explicitly religious foundation of the state—demands as its corollary the abolition of religion as such, in every sphere. Insofar as religion is understood to be an obstacle to human emancipation, then, the realization of the political state entails a general overcoming of religion and consequently a general emancipation. For Marx, however, such an approach leaves political emancipation itself uninterrogated, and so preserves the material conditions of religious alienation as the natural foundation of the political state. Through an excavation of the unspoken presuppositions and theological pretensions of Bauerian emancipation, Marx details an entirely different approach to the Jewish Question, the terms of which he reverses in order to pose it as the question of political emancipation and its limits. Doing so allows him to delink the Jewish Question from emancipation altogether, while reaching beyond the constraints of the political and posing instead the question of

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51 Ibid 81: “In other words, his character as a member of the state, as a social being, appears to be his human character.”

52 This is not to say that Marx rejects Jewish claims to emancipation. Indeed, though he is critical of the political state and the rights that it extends, he nevertheless supports their extension without qualification. One can see an instance of this in his letter to Arnold Ruge from March 13, 1843, where Marx relates to Ruge the following: “I have just been visited by the chief of the Jewish community here, who has asked me for a petition for the Jews to the Provincial Assembly, and I am willing to do it. However much I dislike the Jewish faith [so widerlich mir der isrätische Glauben ist], Bauer’s view seems to be too abstract.” Often cited as the smoking gun of Marx’s personal anti-Semitism, it suggests instead what was at the time a fairly radical commitment to Jewish civic and economic equality in existing political circumstances. That commitment might explain why Marx was in a position to be approached by a representative of the Köln
human emancipation and its material conditions of possibility. To the extent that the Jewish Question retains any exemplarity, it does so only in its function as a lens through which to distill the contradictions of the society that poses it. That Jews themselves represent some particular resistance to history or challenge to emancipation—the Jewish Question in its traditional formulation—is discarded altogether.

For Marx, the problem with Bauer’s analysis of political emancipation comes through first as an empirical problem: despite the apparent contradiction between religiosity and political citizenship, religion flourishes best in states that have completely emancipated themselves from religious foundations. Drawing on his earlier studies of the United States and its constitutional tradition, Marx argues that the fact that the United States is “the land of religiosity par excellence” confronts Bauer with a problem that he cannot seem to account for: “If in the land of complete political emancipation we find not only that religion exists but that it exists in a fresh and vigorous form, that proves that the existence of religion does not contradict the perfection of the state.” If religion is in fact a defect, a position which Marx shares with Bauer, then the flowering of such a defect in precisely the place that it should wither demands a more thorough investigation—not into religion, but into the state under which religion remains viable.

The question that must be posed, for Marx, is not Bauer’s question of what standing the Jews have to demand political emancipation, but instead: “Does the standpoint of political emancipation have the right to demand from the Jews the abolition of Judaism, and from man the abolition of religion?” The Jewish Question no longer has anything to do with Jews, but with the nature of the state for which the Jewish Question is articulable, and the paradigm of political emancipation which justifies it. Marx joins this inversion to a second interpretive move—that of secularization. Once political emancipation becomes the proper object of critique, that critique must proceed along secular, rather than religious lines. If there is a defect in the state, that is, the source of such a defect must be sought in terms of its own secular presuppositions and contradictions.

Marx’s analysis of the state in Zur Judenfrage is similar to his work in the Critique. As in the

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Jewish community in the first place.


Ibid, 48.
latter text, Marx argues in *Zur Judenfrage* that the political state develops in opposition to civil society only as an abstraction from the real conditions of existence which govern civil society. In the political state all questions of one’s empirical existence are annulled—the inequalities of birth, wealth, or social status are effaced in the formal equality of one’s participation in popular sovereignty. Yet the political state annuls such distinctions only by asserting that they do not have political relevance. For instance, when the state declares private property, education, or occupation to be immaterial, it nevertheless permits the non-political salience of such ‘immaterial’ distinctions: Far from abolishing these *factual* distinctions, the state presupposes them in order to exist; it only experiences itself as *political state* and asserts its *universality* in opposition to these elements. For Marx, the abstract abolition of empirical life in the political state is essentially a form of religious self-deception and alienation. When one gains liberation in the political state, one does so only in contradiction with oneself as an un-liberated member of civil society. Every declaration of one’s status in the state—as equal, as atheist, and so on—because it requires the intercession of the political state as its intermediary, is therefore of a religious character. Altering Feuerbach’s precedent slightly, Marx argues that precisely insofar as religion is “the devious acknowledgement of man, through an intermediary,” the state functions as a religious entity; “The relationship of the political state to civil society is just as spiritual as the relationship of heaven to earth. The state stands in the same opposition to civil society and overcomes it in the same way as religion overcomes the restriction of the profane world i.e. it has to acknowledge it again, reinstate it, and allow itself to be dominated by it.” In political life as much as in religion, one effects a distinction within oneself between their brute existence as an individual and their species-existence (*Gattungswesen*). The political emancipation that for Bauer promises the closure of religion and the advent of genuine human freedom therefore has a common foundation with the forms of religious alienation that it is meant to overcome. The universality of such a state is consequently only an illusory universality, in which the actual distinctions and exclusions of civil society are maintained without alteration.

What does this mean for Bauer’s demand that people—specifically Jews—must abandon their

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55 Ibid, 51.
56 Ibid, 50
57 Ibid, 51-52.
religious identity for participation in the life of the state? In Marx’s analysis of the religious foundations of the political state his empirical observation that the perfected state does not abolish real religiosity becomes a logical claim, namely, that the political state cannot demand or effect the abolition of real religiosity. Because the political state is itself a religious fiction through which emancipation is accomplished only abstractly, it can claim only an equally abstract authority over the religious lives of its participants. In the case of Jews specifically, we consequently find that there is no case of Jews specifically. Where Bauer argued that behind every Jewish citizen lurks the Jew who cannot become a citizen, Marx argues instead that behind every citoyen lurks the bourgeois, that is, the member of civil society. Marx then agrees with Bauer that Jews takes part in political life in only a sophistic or chimerical way, but that this sophistry has nothing to do with being Jewish, and instead everything to do with “the sophistry of the political state itself.” The difference that Bauer tries to articulate between the Jew and the citizen is equally “the difference between the tradesman and the citizen, between the day-laborer and the citizen, between the landowner and the citizen, between the living individual (lebendigen Individuum) and the citizen (Staatsbürger).” As a result, it betrays a misapprehension of the political state to suggest that Jews cannot claim civic and political rights from it: indeed, if documents like the Declaration of Rights of Man or the Declaration of Independence guarantee anything, it is the right of the human to retain all the particularities, distinctions, and divisions characteristic of the egoism of civil society, religion included.

I argued earlier that Bauer’s essays make a twofold argument against Jewish emancipation. First, that Jewish particularity and lack of historicality preclude their participation in a universal and genuinely historical state. In the first essay comprising Zur Judenfrage, Marx deconstructs the pretensions of this argument against Jewish emancipation, rephrasing the Jewish Question as the question of the constraints of political emancipation. By doing so, he not only discredits any form of objection to Jewish equality in the political state, but dissolves the coherence of the Jewish Question itself. Yet it is important to note that Marx does not thereby give up his critical concern for religion. That religion is not just permitted but guaranteed by the political state doesn’t grant it any legitimacy; it only undermines the political as the proper horizon of emancipation. Religion remains the

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58 Ibid, 52.
59 Ibid, 52
challenge to be dealt with, but it must be dealt with differently, by focusing on the material or secular conditions that allow it to flourish in the first place. Only in a thoroughly secular critique does human emancipation become a real possibility.

This interpretation of the Marx’s first essay is relatively uncontroversial in twentieth-century literature on Zur Judenfrage. With some noteworthy exceptions, both critics and more generous readers of Marx agree that Marx is highly critical of Bauer’s conception of the state, that he is supportive of Jewish emancipation without qualification, and that his approach to the Jewish Question at least in the first essay must be understood as one face of that more fundamental critique.

Things become much more contentious in the case of the second essay, where Marx seemingly takes up the question with which the first essay concludes, namely, that of the secular conditions of Judaism and the proper means of its abolition. Ostensibly, the essay would then consider Judaism not as a religious but as a social and historical phenomenon, but as commentators like Julius Carlebach have noted, this is not at all what happens. Instead, Marx seems to content to consider Judaism solely in the terms offered by contemporary ideologues of the Jewish Question and philosophical predecessors such as Hegel, Feuerbach, and Bauer. In terms inherited from the venerable tradition of German philosophical anti-Judaism, Marx identifies the secular basis of Judaism as egoism, thereby ascribing to Judaism a privileged status as the religious expression of capitalism par excellence. Given Marx’s famous hostility toward capitalism, it directly follows that

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60 Robert Misrahi’s Marx et la Question Juive takes a very different approach to Zur Judenfrage. For Misrahi, it is highly concerning that Marx’s essay, despite being titled Zur Judenfrage, only spends 6 pages or so actually answering the Jewish Question: “Le premier chapitre commence certes par évoquer la question juive, à travers Bauer, mais, malgré son titre, il est pratiquement consacré tout entier à l’exposé d’une doctrine de l’État en général et non pas le moins du monde du problème juif.” For Misrahi, Marx’s relative inattention to the Jewish Question in favor of a critique of the state indicates a secret coherence between the Marxist analysis of the state and the genocide of European Jews one century later. For both Marx and the Final Solution, what must be accomplished is “la négation de l’existence de l’homme juif comme tel.”


62 Carlebach narrates this tradition—in which Kant, Hegel, and Feuerbach stand out as major contributors—in terms of a systematic identification of Judaism with enslavement. As an inheritor to this intellectual lineage, “Marx now completed the picture by making Jewish egoism the essence of Judaism, the source of human greed. We might say that there is here a notion of the continuity of Jewish self-imposed slavery first to the law (Kant), then to God (Hegel), then to egoism (Feuerbach) and to money (Marx)” (153). Carlebach correctly captures one element of this tradition, but in focusing solely on enslavement misses the related importance of particularity as a structuring figure of anti-Judaism.
the overthrow of bourgeois society is equally the abolition of Judaism, understood not only in a figurative sense as the spirit of commercial life, but in a more sinister and radical sense as actual Judaism and its adherents.\footnote{The consequences of the argument ascribed to Marx are far-reaching. By investing Judaism with the philosophical content of the dominant ideological expression of bourgeois society, Paul Rose argues, Marx provides “the foundation of an entirely secularized form of Jew-hatred far more systematic in tis theory than the other revolutionary efforts of Bauer and company.” (Rose 302)}

In support of this interpretation is the shockingly anti-Jewish language of the second essay, the language of which goes beyond even the customs of contemporary usage in its representations of Jews and Judaism\footnote{The extent to which Marx’s anti-Judaic idiom in the essay is or is not conventional for his time and milieu is a matter of dispute among readers of the text. For a good Marxist like Hal Draper, Marx’s anti-Judaic language is entirely unremarkable, once properly historicized: “The synonymy of Jew and some form of commercialism was taken for granted not only by those who threw epithets at the Jews but equally by those who defended them” (603). Other noteworthy German Jews like Heinrich Heine, Eduard Gans, and Moses Hess used what we would consider anti-Semitic caricatures of Jews freely, most often in criticism of wealthy Jews. Carlebach argues to the contrary, however, that Marx exceeds his contemporaries in vitriol in this essay. While it would be wrong to read him anachronistically as a proto-Nazi, Carlebach, it is nevertheless misleading to represent his language as harmless or simply conventional.}\. For example, Marx writes concerning the social position of Judaism in the contemporary world:


What is the secular basis of Judaism? Practical need (praktische Bedürfnis), self-interest (Eigennutz).

What is the secular cult of the Jew? Haggling (Schacher). What is his secular God? Money.”\footnote{Marx. “On the Jewish Question,” 65.}

Such language seems consistent with the worst anti-Semitic tracts of the late-19th and 20th centuries, a clear indication of Marx’s strident anti-Jewish animus. Even worse are the conclusions that Marx’s characterization of Judaism justifies:

“As soon as society succeeds in abolishing the empirical essence of Judaism—the market and the conditions which hive rise to it—the Jew will have become impossible, for his consciousness will no longer have an object, the subjective basis of Judaism—practical need—will have become humanized, and the conflict between man’s individual sensuous existence and his species-existence will have been superseded. The social emancipation of the Jew is the emancipation of society from Judaism.”\footnote{Ibid, 69.}

Only the most shameless kinds of interpretive subtlety could misrepresent the clear and literal
meaning of Marx’s text here. Yet even Marx’s most righteous critics run into trouble when carrying out a full interpretation on that basis. Carlebach, as usual, is the most conscientious about the kinds of problems that such interpretation raises. For him, the anti-Judaism of the second essay is potentially problematic in three ways: its inconsistency with Marx’s other work, its inconsistency with Marx’s biography, and its flat contradiction with the other work that Marx edited in the same issue of the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*. This first inconsistency concerns both content and method. We find virtually no sustained treatment of Judaism elsewhere in Marx’s work, a curious fact given the supposed centrality of the critique of Judaism to the critique of capitalism here. The only exception—*The Holy Family*, published with Engels one year later, doesn’t help the case much. There Marx repeats the arguments contained in *Zur Judenfrage*, with two important differences—he abandons the anti-Judaic idiom, and consistently includes citations of Jewish criticisms of Bauer published in the interim. Either Marx enjoyed some considerable personal growth between 1843 and 1844, or the ostensible anti-Judaism of *Zur Judenfrage* was never an essential part of the argument. Methodologically speaking, Carlebach notes that Marx’s consideration of Judaism in the second essay departs dramatically from the historical-genetic method that characterizes the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* and becomes so integral to the formulation of historical materialism in Marx’s work on political economy. While for Carlebach this is an unfortunate inconsistency and an indication of the contorting effects of anti-Judaism on his analysis, it also raises another possibility: that Marx is quite conscious of this friction, and that his essay is doing something else entirely.

The difficulties that arise when trying to square the essay with his biography point in the same direction. As Carlebach notes, Marx personally knew plenty of Jews who fit neither the stereotype of Sabbatsjuden nor that of the *Alltagsjuden* in the text. These personal contacts not only included his immediate and extended family, but also his intellectual comrades, several of whom wrote

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67 Although there are references to Judaism scattered across Marx’s published oeuvre and private correspondence, he nowhere else bothers with Judaism as a serious object of inquiry (with the exception of *The Holy Family*, published one year later). For Silberner, this in itself is suspect. That Marx never wrote about Judaism indicates the extent of his disregard for the religion, which so far as he was concerned might as well not have existed. If Marx is the committed anti-Semite that he seems to be, though, and if the careers of other anti-Semites are any indication, however, it would seem much more difficult to leave the topic alone than vice versa.

68 That Marx’s father Heinrich experienced a falling out with his Jewish extended family after his conversion is taken as a truism in much of the literature on Marx, as is the psychological toll that this traumatic split had
articles for the *Jahrbücher* that either contradict and undermine his approach to Judaism in *Zur Judenfrage*, or make similar arguments with no mention of Jews whatsoever, as in the case of Engels. Again, this information does not point in any direction conclusively. What it does do, however, is show the complications that arise when one tries to read *Zur Judenfrage* as a statement of Marx’s antisemitism, either on its own or as the distillation of an anti-Judaic animus that Marx maintained privately. What otherwise seems to be a straightforward anti-Semitic screed turns out to be more complicated. At the very least, the inconsistencies between a literal reading of the essay and Marx’s other work suggests that the text deserves more careful interpretation than it has henceforth received.

As we’ve already seen, in addition to Bruno Bauer’s more straightforward argument against Jewish emancipation, in which the status and character of Jews themselves was the primary issue, Bauer also made an argument over the course of his two essays concerning the nature of history and the essentially Christian foundations of the European Enlightenment. According to this argument, we found, the contemporary irreligious state as well as *reason itself* are the exclusive products of Christianity in the process of its self-overcoming. Bauer’s commitment to this conception of the history of reason, as well as his own embrace of such a reason, means that he retains the logical form of Christianity’s self-definition even as he dispenses with Christianity as a religion. In human emancipation, therefore, critique must not only dispense with religious constructions of the political, but also—and perhaps more importantly—religious constructions of rationality, which inadvertently reanimate religion even as they define themselves in opposition to it.

It is only as a response to this more encompassing argument that the second essay of Marx’s *Zur Judenfrage* can be properly understood. As in the case of the first essay, Marx begins with a

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on the Marx family throughout Marx’s childhood and adolescence. Michael Heinrich successfully shows, however, that Marx’s family continued to be in close contact with his Jewish family throughout their lives, including Heinrich’s brother Samuel, the rabbi in Trier, and Marx’s mother Henriette’s family in the Netherlands. That Heinrich also continued to own and operate a vineyard with local doctor Lion Berkastel suggests that perhaps his break with the Jewish community of Trier was not so traumatic or final as long thought. Also significant is the discovery that Heinrich was baptized in 1819, 5 years before the rest of the family followed suit in 1824. Franz Mehring, one of Marx’s most important early biographers, portrays Heinrich’s baptism as “an act of civilized progress of the freer spirits of Judaism...the change of religion made by Heinrich Marx for himself and his family in 1824 must be understood in this sense and no other” (Mehring 31). That Heinrich was baptized in order to continue working as a lawyer, and that he delayed baptizing his children until several years later, when the young Karl was preparing to enter Christian school, suggests that it was a more mundane, practical affair.
restatement of Bauer’s conclusion in “The Capacity of Present-Day Jews and Christians to Become Free”—that emancipation for Jews consists in a religious conversion, not to Christianity, but to Christianity in its dissolution. As such, Marx mockingly restates, “if the Jew wants to liberate himself, he has to complete not only his own task but also the task of the Christian—the Critique of the Evangelical History of the Synoptics [by Bruno Bauer] and the Life of Jesus, etc. [by David Friedrich Strauss].”

Poking fun at his Young Hegelian interlocutors, Marx underscores both the pretense of philosophers like Bauer who situate themselves uniquely at the point of passage between Christianity and Enlightenment, as well as the figural significance of Judaism to that project as the antitype against which “critical criticism” is defined.

In the first essay Marx subjected Bauer’s position to criticism through a straight-faced critique of the paradigm of political emancipation and its secret solidarity with religious abstraction. Here he restates that analysis, but in terms drawn from the position of figures such as Hegel, Feuerbach, and Bauer—most notably those pertaining to Judaism. In his Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Hegel first describes Judaism alongside Greek religion as a religion in which the spiritual is separated from the natural and elevated above it. Where in Greek religion spirit is raised above the natural while nevertheless retaining natural characteristics, in the Jewish religion (the religion of sublimity), an absolute transcendence of spirit vis-a-vis nature is achieved, such that nature becomes entirely divested of subjectivity and made into a purely external mechanism, consistent within itself but subject to the arbitrary whims of the transcendent subject that created it and intervenes in it.

This representation of Judaism is taken up in turn by Feuerbach, with the crucial addition that this disunity between nature and spirit is expressive of a fundamental egoism at the core of Judaism. In The Essence of Christianity, he argues that the doctrine of creation emerges only from a standpoint which “makes Nature merely the servant of his will and needs and hence in thought also degrades it to a mere machine, a product of the will.”

The externality and mechanistic qualities of nature inherited from Hegel are here further interpreted as expressions of a standpoint that is egoistic to the precise extent that it is practical: “when...man places himself only on the practical standpoint

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70 Though perhaps implicit in his thought, for Hegel the egoism of Judaism is not so much a question of its attitude toward nature as its representation of God as a national, and therefore partial, God.
71 Feuerbach. The Essence of Christianity, 112.
and looks at the world from thence, making the practical standpoint the theoretical one also, he is in disunion with Nature; he makes Nature the abject vassal of his selfish interest, of his practical egoism. Only the egoistic self has proper existence in Judaism, on Feuerbach’s interpretation. To the extent that anything else exists at all, it does so only in a “gastric” sense, i.e. as matter for consumption by the ego.

Bauer, in turn, argues that such egoism is the determining factor in decertifying Jewish claims to citizenship. It is the source of their insoluble particularism and tenacious resistance to historical evolution. Bauer notes another consequence of this egoism, however, though he does not dwell on it: further indicative of the extent of Jewish egoism is Jewish success in civil society. Itself driven by need, demand, and utility, civil society presents the ideal venue for the pursuit and consummation of characteristically Jewish aims. That Jews in spite of their historical obsolescence and unfitness for politics evidently flourish in the economic life of society (itself a widespread stereotype) does not challenge Bauer’s contention concerning the irresolvable contradiction between Judaism and the modern world. Because the modern state alone is the authentic bearer of historical progress, civil society takes on no historical character. Civil society, like the industry of the Jews that flourishes within it, “has nothing to do with the interests of history.”

Marx adopts the very same terminology in the second part of Zur Judenfrage. Indeed, when he writes, “What was the essential basis of the Jewish religion? Practical need, egoism,” we are able to

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72 Ibid, 113.
73 Ibid, 114. This is not the place to deal fully with the incoherence of Feuerbach’s denigration of Judaism within The Essence of Christianity, a text that constantly purports to valorize the material while deriding Judaism along the lines of a sarx/pneuma distinction drawn from the annals of Christian anti-Judaism. Compare his dismissal of Judaism as having only a gastric or dietetic significance with his self-congratulatory analysis of Christian rites of baptism in the last chapter of the book: “We free ourselves from these and other irreconcilable contradictions, we give a true significance to Baptism, only by regarding it as a symbol of the value of water itself. Baptism should represent to us the wonderful but natural effect of water on man. Water has, in fact, not merely physical effects, but also, and as a result of these, moral and intellectual effects on man” (275). What is this if not a reduction of nature to egoism, and an interpretation of Christianity such that its truth consists in precisely that egoistic relation to nature? The problem with Feuerbach may not only be, as Marx astutely puts it, that he remains at the level of contemplation rather than practice, but moreover that he fails to grasp the robust anthropology he everywhere thinks he’s achieved precisely to the extent that he is unwilling to think reason beyond the antagonistic and anti-Judaic oppositions of sarx/pneuma, particular/universal, or enslavement/freedom.
read in his language a verbatim repetition of the characterizations of Judaism in Feuerbach and Bauer. At first glance this seems to be a wholly consistent extension of the argument of the first essay. If one of Marx’s problems with Bauer is that Bauer takes Judaism as a purely religious phenomenon and therefore fails to interrogate its secular bases and well as the secular bases of the political state, then a subsequent critique of egoism as the *practical basis* of Judaism would be next logical step. Marx seems to signal this himself in the essay’s opening paragraphs, when he takes his distance from Bauer in writing the following: “We will try to avoid looking at the problem in a theological way. For us the question of the Jews’ capacity of emancipation is transformed into the question: what specific *social* element must be overcome in order to abolish Judaism?” So far so good. The abolition of religion—Judaism specifically—remains the horizon of critique, but that nature of such critique is transformed from Bauer’s stubborn theological critique into a properly secular form. Marx continues, “For the capacity of the present-day Jew for emancipation is the relation of Judaism to the emancipation of the present-day world. This relation flows inevitably from the special position of Judaism in the enslaved world of today.” This passage should raise flags. What is the special position of Judaism in the enslaved world of today, exactly? In the literature on *Zur Judenfrage* it is taken as a matter of course that Marx means to signal the unique ideological coherence of Judaism as a religion with commercialism or capitalism as the organizing logic of civil society. Yet the argument of the preceding essay points in exactly the opposite direction. Marx has already discredited the idea that Judaism is in any sense uniquely antithetical to the political state or to emancipation. Indeed, he argues against Bauer that Jewish resistance to political citizenship is in no way particular to the Jew; it is the resistance of empirical existence, of the living individual, to a citizenship that is only ever sophisticated.

That Marx makes this statement concerning the “special position of Judaism” in flagrant contradiction with his earlier effort to dissolve the intelligibility of such a position is not simply a result of his own intellectual inconsistency, or the deleterious effect of prejudice on his faculty of

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76 This is roughly the position of Paul Rose, for whom the second essay marks a secularization and radicalization of medieval religious anti-Judaism into fully modern anti-Semitism, as well as Michael Maidan, for whom the interrogation of the secular bases of Judaism follows neatly from the argument of the first essay. Miriam Leonard notes the prevalence of this argument in passing, but is more interested in the subterranean opposition between Hellenism and Hebraism that she finds in the text. In any case, this is a fairly common interpretation of the relationship between the two essays.
judgment. Instead, Marx signals in the contradiction between this argument and that of the prior essay that his adoption of the stance of the philosophical anti-Semite is self-conscious, that it is a pantomime of rather than an identification with that position. We should therefore be suspicious when Marx goes on to describes this content of Judaism’s “special position.” He begins: “Let us consider the real secular Jew [(den wirklichen weltlichen Juden)—not the sabbath Jew (Sabbatsjuden), as Bauer does, but the everyday Jew (Alltagsjuden).” For most readers of Marx, this signals again an analytic shift from the religious to the secular, but, as we have already shown, Alltagsjude lacks any specificity as a referent for Marx. The Alltagsjude is indiscernible from the everyday Christian, the everyday tradesman, the everyday opera singer, or any other living person.

What does it mean then for Marx to juxtapose two uses of the word Jude here? By distinguishing the Sabbatsjude and Alltagsjude, Marx plays on a polyvalence of the word Jude already well-established in 19th century German usage and clearly indicated in contemporary dictionaries. In J.A Ditscheiner’s 1848 Neuestes und Vollständiges Grammatisch-Orthographisch Hand- und Hilfs-Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache, for instance, Ditscheiner provides two definitions of the word Jude: the first is that of a member of the Jewish religion, the second a gewinnsüchtige Mensch, that is, a profit-seeking person, or a Wucherer, a usurer. Years earlier, in his 1801 Deutsch-Englisches Wörterbuch, Nathan Bailey lists the same multiple definitions of Jude, along with a series of derivative words and idiomatic expressions that express the words common polyvalence. Perhaps most indicative is the Grimms Wörterbuch, the first volumes of which were published in 1854. The Wörterbuch lists ten definitions of the word Jude. The fifth refers to the synonymy between Jude and trade (Handel), the ninth defines Jude as ein Gedicht, or figmentum, fabula. The sixth however is of particular interest: “Auch, abgesehen von der religion, der, welcher gewinnsüchtig und wucherisch verfährt, wird eine Jude genannt” [Apart from religion, he is who is profit-seeking and

79 Bailey, Nathan. English-German and German-English Dictionary Frommann, 1801.
This usage continues throughout the nineteenth-century and into the twentieth century. See also: J.G.
usurious is also called a Jew], a definition which includes an example usage from Lessing’s 1754 play Der Jude: “Es gibt doch wohl auch Juden, die keine Juden sind” [there are also Jews who are not Jews].

A number of Marx’s commentators make the argument that the multiple meanings of Jude would have been familiar to Marx’s contemporary audience. Michael Maidan, for instance, writes that Judentum, the German word for Judaism, had the derivative meaning of ‘commerce,’ and it is this meaning which is uppermost in Marx’s mind throughout the article. ‘Judaism’ has very little religious, and still less racial, content for Marx.” Hal Draper in turn argues that “virtually the entire population of Germany...habitually used and accepted the words Jew and Jewry in the manner of Marx’s essay whether they were favorable to the Jews’ cause or not, whether they were anti-Semitic or not, whether they were Jews or not.” Even Marx’s less charitable readers note the unstable referentiality of Jude in the essay, though Robert Fines chafes at the way in which the multiple contemporary usages of Jude are cited in order to exculpate Marx of the anti-Judaism/Semitism of the document.

My interest here is not to exonerate Marx, but only to show that the significance of the word Jude is already sufficiently unstable to permit its deployment as a rhetorical figure in service of a critique of philosophical anti-Judaism and its centrality to contemporary accounts of reason. Marx’s use of

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Flügel, 1843; D. Sanders, Handwörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache (1869); M. Heyne, Deutsches Wörterbuch (1892); A. Heintze, Deutscher Sprachhort: Ein Stif-Wörterbuch (1900).

Maidan, 142.

Draper, Hal. Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977, 591. Draper additionally argues that this ambiguity in the word became less attached to actual Jews over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, as the commercial activities associated with Judentum became a virtually ubiquitous feature of European economies. Citing Abraham Léon, Draper continues that “the rise of capitalism to dominance in the social system went hand in hand with the decline of Jewry in this function. Thereupon the Jews were pushed more and more into the interstices of the system, especially in a capacity as distribution middle-men and as usurers dealing more with the poor than with kings, as formerly.” (601) The anti-Semitic potential of the association of Jews with commercial exploitation remained powerful, however, and justified anti-Semitic violence throughout the 19th century.

Paul Rose, for instance, writes, “Marx fluctuates constantly between Judentum as a purely allegorical depiction of civil society and as the term for actual Jewry. One one page he can emphasize first that Judentum is the essence of civil society and then smoothly shift to the claim that the actual Jew's essence is economic. The distinction between the Jew as a real person and the Jew as a metaphor is hazed over intentionally throughout the essay” (Rose 301). David Nirenberg, though he notes Marx’s figural use of Jude and Judentum, asserts that in spite of this Marx continues to need the concrete referentiality of the terms (real Jews) in order for his argument to work. What a ‘real Jew’ might be for Marx I hope is sufficiently problematized by this point to at least render this suspect.

Fine, 148.

That this is in fact what Marx does is proven even in those passages where Marx is supposedly at his word.
the word *Jude* is best understood in this essay not as a straightforwardly anti-Semitic usage *nor* as a play on words that nevertheless makes the overcoming of Judaism its primary objective.

Rather, Marx’s use of the word *Jude* should be understood as *tropological* in the sense which Sarah Hammerschlag gives to that word in her 2010 book *The Figural Jew*. There, Hammerschlag interrogates the symbolic and rhetorical force of the figure of the Jew in postwar France in light of a much longer history of French usage, in which the symbol ‘Jew’ “shifted from signifying an entrenched particularism in the eighteenth century to functioning as a metonym for abstract universalism by the time of the French Revolution’s centennial.” In the postwar period, the symbol of the Jew acquired another set of ambivalent and even contradictory meanings centering on the identification of Judaism with rootlessness, which could in different settings be enlisted to critique the stability of French national identity, the abstractions of political universalism, or the construction of identity along a universal/particular axis as such.

In the work of figures such as Sartre, Levinas, Blanchot, Lyotard, and Derrida, Hammerschlag identifies a crucial distinction between *mythic* deployments of the figure of the Jew, which propose a reified model of identity to be either imitated or attacked, and *tropological* deployments, which self-consciously harness the political potential of figurative language in such a way that they undermine their own claims to referentiality and and so foreground the essential *untruth* of their usage. Drawing on the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, Hammerschlag suggests that “Figural language, which presents itself as such through the forms of metonymy and metaphor, marks itself as a substitution for some proper referent. It signals a relation of both proximity to and distance from its object, declares itself both to be and not to be what it represents.” For Hammerschlag, such language has significant political potential, which in the milieu of post-war France consists in a disruption and deracination of mythic constructions of identity in addition to its

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For instance, immediately following the passage in which Marx identifies “practical need” as the secular basis of Judaism, “haggling” as its secular cult, and “money” as its secular God, he writes, “Well then! (*Nun Wohl*) Emancipation from *haggling* and from *money*, i.e. from practical, real Judaism, would be the same as the self-emancipation of the age” (65). The obvious facetiousness of this conclusion repeats the delinking of Judaism from the egoism of civil society while also showing up his repetition of anti-Judaic language as intentionally farcical.


87 Ibid, 14.
demonstration of the aporias of figuration as such.

Although the circumstances of the tropological deployment of the figural Jew in France are not identical to those in which Marx wrote, Hammerschlag’s argument does provide us with an appropriate theoretical vocabulary to describe what Marx is doing with the figure of the Jew in *Zur Judenfrage* and the possible consequences of its deployment. We have already shown that Marx self-consciously uses the word *Jude* and its predicates in a way that undermines the significance of the term and detaches it from any mythic construction of Jewish identity. The question now is: To what effect?

In the second half of *Zur Judenfrage*, Marx ostentatiously reverses the historical narration of Christian supersessionism, arguing that Judaism has survived in history *not* as a form of resistance to history nor as a historical appendage to Christianity, but rather as the practical principle of Christianity itself. If in narratives of religious history such as Hegel’s, Feuerbach’s, and Bauer’s Christianity negates and surpasses Judaism, consigning it to historical irrelevance, here Christianity realizes the principle of Judaism in an entirely different sense. Judaism, Marx writes, has persisted alongside Christianity because the practical Jewish spirit, Judaism, has managed to survive in Christian society and has even reached its highest level of development there.**88** The historical vocation of Christianity is thus relativized with respect to Judaism—Christianity functions solely to develop a principle here attributed to Judaism, and once it has done so it dissolves again into Judaism**: “Christianity sprang from Judaism. It has no dissolved back into Judaism.”**90

That Christianity resolves itself back into Judaism has at least two meanings here. The first plays on the identification of Judaism with commercialism and the egoism of civil society in order to argue in continuity with Marx’s first essay that Christianity (whether in religious, reasonable, or political guise) remains inescapably determined by empirical existence, regardless of the finality with which it attempts to separate itself from that material foundation. In the case of contemporary society, this means specifically that Christianity and the forms of theological criticism with which Marx associates

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**89** Marx here gives the relationship between Judaism and Christianity and inverted Hegelian structure, such that an abstract principle present originally in Judaism realizes itself through Christianity up until the point at which that principle is fully developed, at which time Christianity passes back over into Judaism. Christianity here serves only prepare the reconciliation of Judaism with itself in its concreteness.

**90** Ibid, 68.
it recapitulate in religious form the alienation and inequality characteristic of what he elsewhere calls capitalism: “Translated into practice the Christian egoism of eternal happiness inevitably becomes the material egoism of the Jew, celestial need becomes terrestrial need, and subjectivism becomes self-interest.” Any paradigm of reason—for instance those peddled by Feuerbach and Bauer—that attempts to articulate itself in opposition to Christianity as an expression of religious alienation without contending with the material conditions of such alienation will only succeed in taking over those conditions as its own.

In the second case, Marx’s statement that “the Christian has once again become a Jew” concerns more explicitly the representation of Judaism in contemporary philosophy. Throughout the second essay of Zur Judenfrage, Marx upturns the anti-Judaic premises of modern philosophy by showing how that philosophy—insofar as it remains at the level of theoretical consciousness—collapses into the denigrated terms through which it initially defines itself. In disavowing existence emancipatory pronouncements of rationality, universality, or freedom inadvertently revivify the very one-sidedness they claim to surpass. Every form of thought that casts itself as alone properly historical, universal, or human in opposition to egoism, particularism, and enslavement does so only in the form of a theological abstraction that nevertheless has its foundation in the very world that it renounces. Every emancipation is yet another iteration of alienated self-consciousness, every proclamation of reason another form of religion. In light of this argument, the series of terms with which Judaism is saddled—particularity, practical need, materiality, flesh—become the privileged terms through which a non-theological reason must conduct itself, the legitimate horizon of a Kritik for which Christian supersessionism is unviable as either historical precedent or logical paradigm.

Commentators are correct, then, to note the importance of “On the Jewish Question” to the development of Marx’s thought, and to see in his critique of both the political state and the inhumanity of civil society a prelude to his more developed critiques of political economy that would occupy much of his focus over the next forty years. Indeed, it may be possible to trace the roots of his critique of Feuerbach and the development of the method of historical materialism as described first in the Theses and The German Ideology to the arguments of “On the Jewish Question.”

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91 Ibid, 69.
92 Ibid, 68
such commentators are wrong, however, is in regarding Judaism itself as somehow incidental to the development of his thought, or worse as essential in their expression of an anti-Semitic kernel that everywhere remains secretly operative. For Marx the Jewish Question remains crucial, even if he rejects entirely its traditional formulation in European philosophical and political discourse. The exemplarity of the Jewish Question no longer consists in the exemplary resistance of the Jews to history, reason, or political universality, but rather in the status of the Judaism as the privileged figure in relation to which an illegitimate emancipation defines itself. To interrogate the Jewish Question as a feature of philosophical discourse thus becomes a means of disclosing how various paradigms of philosophical reason presuppose and reinforce material conditions of alienation and domination.

On the basis of this reading, it becomes possible to reinterpret the infamous last line of *Zur Judenfrage*: “The social emancipation of the Jew is the emancipation of society from Judaism.” The emancipation from Judaism is not simply emancipation from Judentum understood as the commercial character of civil society. Much less is it the elimination of Jews themselves. Social emancipation of Jews as much as of anyone else requires along with everything else emancipation from Judentum as a structuring figure in what remains an essentially Christian theological paradigm of Enlightenment reason. “On the Jewish Question,” in its tropological deployment of the rhetorical figure of the Jew, forecloses the intelligibility of any such reason and its mode of articulation, in the process of doing so opening at least provisionally onto an entirely different configuration of reason, religion, and liberation.

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93 Ibid, 69.