

Problems of Religion and Irrationalism in Georg Lukács' Life and Work¹

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At a cursory glance it may seem as though delving into the problematic of religion and religiosity was not a concern of particular significance in the oeuvre of Georg Lukács. And indeed, although Lukács wrote an important work on the destruction of reason, and devoted profound critical analyses to the interrelationship of religion, art, and science, as well as to the nature of religious utopias, the fundamental orientation of his oeuvre was under the auspices of positive categories as, for instance, totality, history, realism, dialectics, the characteristics of artistic reflection, labor, reproduction, and the social alternatives.

When, however, instead of looking at the titles of chapters in Lukács' books, we consider the course of his intellectual development, the seminal importance of the question of religion is bound to emerge. In the first place, the precondition of Lukács' conversion to Marxism-Leninism was his efforts to acquire the Marxists scientific approach to problems and Marxists consciousness, shedding the naive and belief-like interpretation of the most important questions of world view and, later on, of socialism. Secondly, as Lukács was a committed advocate of the revolutionary working-class movement, he considered it imperative to subject the irrationalism of the era of imperialism to radical criticism, and, just like Marx, he regarded the sagacious and competent analysis of religion as a key precondition of all social criticism.

To avoid any misunderstanding: he could differentiate between entering into a political alliance with the religious representatives of progress, and assessing the ideology that these personalities stood for. On the one hand, he rejected the convergence of Marxism and religious belief and, on the other hand, he appreciated that, for example, Simone Weil, a religious thinker, had an affinity

with the left wing. Such an attitude on Lukács' part could only be the result of the full recognition of the lessons of a strenuous life, one that Georg Lukács devoted to the struggle against inhumanity of capitalism and the creation of mankind's genuine history: socialism and communism.

1

It will be recalled that, as early as 1905, the young Lukács was profoundly aware of the crisis of a decadent bourgeois culture. He rejected positivism and bourgeois rationalism, which, in his view, had degenerated into the apologia of an alienated world. His critical attitude notwithstanding, he was far from identifying himself with the idea that marked social democracy in its Hungarian, German, or Austrian variants at the beginning of the century. Under the circumstances of what can be described as a social and intellectual vacuum, Lukács, like many other prominent figures among the contemporaneous intelligentsia of Europe, appears to have professed forms of religiosity without God. As he put it in a study of the time, the profoundest ambition of man was "to come to know himself in the reality of his dreams." It was precisely the "religious force infusing the soul in its entirety"² that, he claimed, was missing from the socialism of his era. Early and medieval Christianity possessed it, and so, Lukács argued, did the 'prophetic faith' and 'missionary veto' of the great Hungarian poet of the time, Endre Ady, and the subjective mysticism of the poet and playwright Béla Balázs.

At the time, Georg Lukács was not familiar with any work of Lenin's. He is

2 LUKÁCS, Georg. **Eszztétikai kultúra**. In: *Ifjúkori művek (1902-1918) [Early Works 1902-19018]*. Budapest, 1977, p. 428.

unlikely to have read any writings of Lunacharsky who, in what is usually referred to as his “god-creating” period, contended that the “theory of social myth” was applicable to the examination of the “proletarian religious consciousness.” Lunacharsky stated that God was nothing but ‘humaneness at the pinnacle of potential’. Neither is he believed to have encountered Gorky’s *Confession*, which included the declaration: “God was created not by man’s weakness, but by the abundance of power. He is not outside, he is within us.” For all that, Lukács and the above authors started out from the same conviction: totality had been shattered, and the forces striving to bring about change were weak. They shared illusionary compensation boiled down to the subjective desire for a new totality and form, and an order that needs to be reconstructed.

“Forms arise from a yearning for substance,” Lukács wrote, “so that they could promote the redemption of substance from lie to truth;” when ascending to God, “all difference disappears. All doubt falls into silent here: only one redemption is possible.”³ Earlier, this redemption took the form of a personal fusion with totality, a sort of Neo-Franciscan *unio mystica*, like a song that guides the soul toward God in a god-forsaken world.

Later, during World War I, at a time of deepening crisis, Lukács had the whole society of the time in mind when he raised the question whether “we are really about to leave the age of absolute sinfulness.”⁴ And he was searching for a solution with an almost apocalyptic obsession:

totality, as the formative prime reality of every individual phenomenon implies that something closed within itself can be

3 LUKÁCS, Georg. **Von der Armut am Geiste: Ein Gespräch und ein Brief.** *Neue Blätter*, 2 (1912), no. 5-6, pp. 90-91.

4 LUKÁCS, Georg. **The Theory of the Novel.** London, 1971, p. 153. Translated by A. Bostock.

completed; completed because everything occurs within it, nothing is excluded from it and nothing points at a higher reality outside it; completed because everything within it ripens to its own perfection and, by attaining itself, submits to limitation.⁵

For the subject of this paper it is a question of secondary importance that in that period Lukács saw the force capable of bridging the gap between totality and the object world in form, which he considered as an active principle operating in art. For Lukács, the decisive turning point in art was expected to take place when the novel would be replaced by the new epic. Already at that time, however, Lukács had the power to transcend this narrowly aesthetic wording of the problem when he sharply confronted what he described as the age of absolute sinfulness with the new redemption, the revolution of the soul, the prevailing of the ultimate values, and paradise in its true form.

For the time being, the only means that Lukács could see to supersede this evil dichotomy of *Sein* and *Sollen*—mean reality and the aspiration for a better reality—was religion and myth, which he used to respond to the fact that the bourgeois system of values had slipped into relativism. He relied on these two forces in his search for the possibility of a radical turnabout. When Lukács spoke of his age as fully pervaded by sin and alienation, he gave expression to the mood of intellectuals who were incapable of associating themselves with the social force, which, though itself the chief victim of the burdens of alienation, was, at the same time, the paramount component in the struggle against alienation, namely, the working class of the modern era. Lukács was shifting from the mysticism of Francis of Assisi and of Master Eckhart to the ideas of Joachim of Floris and Thomas Münzer, partly under Ernst Bloch's influence. From what can

⁵ Ibid., p. 34

be referred to as Lukács' "Waldensian" period, he was moving toward what could be described as the "Albigensian" heresy. He was freeing himself from Kierkegaard's influence and came to identify himself with Hegelian tenets. Lukács yearned for order in the objective reality, wished to see the "new polis," and desired to come close to the Absolute. At that time, however, the sphere of changes was confined for him to the inner self of individuals. Decisive in this process were, to his mind, the great Tolstoyan moments that rock the universe, moments that, he claimed, enable the individual "to experience nature in its essence." Consequently, as Lukács later said of this stage in his career, he was in search of immediate access to nature and man in a romantic anti-capitalist manner. If, in his view, that period was the age of "absolute sinfulness," then the only redemption might be the realization of order in absolute perfection.

In 1918-19, however, the same social tension to which Lukács at the beginning of the century could only respond with a quasi-religious belief in the redeeming power of form, demanded not religious, artistic, or philosophical solutions, but a political one, not the divine irresistibility of forms, but the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat in Hungary.

It is well known that, on becoming a people's commissar of the Republic of Councils, Lukács did not hesitate to transcend the political confines of his younger years. Nevertheless, where ideology was concerned, it took a long time for him to come to grips with his earlier self. For a rather long time, his Marxism remained embedded in the framework of Hegelian utopia. In fact, the solution that he arrived at by the early twenties—he wrote in retrospect—indicated that he had "out-Hegeled Hegel himself." Yet, when objectively assessing *history and Class Consciousness*, we should speak up against the subjectivistic glorification of

the work (put forward mainly on the part of the New Left) against which Lukács himself protested—with the acknowledgment of the work's genuine values and lessons.

2

History and Class Consciousness undoubtedly bears some traits of messianism, of which Lukács spoke in clear terms in his *"Tactics and Ethics"* (1918): "the ultimate objective of socialism is utopian [...] The Marxist theory of class struggle, which in this respect is wholly derived from Hegel's conceptual system, changes the transcendent objective into an immanent one."⁶ In the course of studying the forms of alienation under capitalism, Lukács, for whom the only means of overcoming the domain of sin had previously been recourse to sin—class violence, which he saw as a collective sin—thought that he had found the formula to resolve this poignant moral dilemma. The formula that he proposed was, however, idealistic and messianistic, since he expected the ultimate, decisive turnabout to take place in the form of a single major act, in which the proletariat would come to its consciousness, when subject and object would merge into one. Consciousness's coming to its own self can be considered only as an end to history, just as when Hegel's absolute idea comes to recognize itself when reaching the stage of the absolute spirit. At that time, Lukács' conception of revolution resembled some form of secular redemption. The vehicle of revolution that Lukács had in mind, the proletariat, was somewhat reminiscent of the sea of workers whose faces were like Christ's, as depicted on Lajos Szántó's famous poster of 1919 (subtitled *"Proletarians! Forward! You are the saviors of the world!"*),

6 LUKÁCS, Georg. **Tactics and Ethics**. London, 1972, p. 5. Translated by M. McColgan.

or the “red god” that Árpád Tóth was describing in his fine poem as the proletarian re-builders of “our sinful and stale planet.”

No doubt, Lukács was not the only thinker of his age to express messianistic “leftism.” It spread in many parts of Europe, especially due to a widespread desire for a world revolution. Some of Lukács’ former comrades-in-arms retained an atheistic religiousness throughout their life. In the case of Lukács, however, the situation was already more complex at the outset. In the early twenties, he was apparently not aware that what he had created to replace old myths did not exclude a new mythology. Unaware of the objective content of his conception, he brought mythology under sharp criticism, and stressed its failure to penetrate the object.⁷ Lukács took up the argument of Marx, who had found the origin of the world historical calling of the proletariat not in its divine mission, but, on the contrary, in the fact that the working class was divested of its human character. Furthermore, Lukács opposed the overemphasis of the anthropological aspects in the study of man, for, in that case, “man himself is made into an absolute, and he simply puts himself into the place of those transcendental forces he was supposed to explain, dissolve, and systematically replace.”⁸

He declared that the Absolute should not be interpreted as a state or substance, but, instead, “treated as an aspect of the process itself.”⁹ He pointed out that “mythologies are always born where two terminal points, or at least two stages in a movement, have to be regarded as terminal points without its being

7 LUKÁCS, Georg. “What is Orthodox Marxism.” *In: History and Class Consciousness.* London, 1971, p. 18. Translated by R. Livingstone.

8 LUKÁCS, Georg. “The Standpoint of the Proletariat.” *ibid.*, p. 187.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

possible to discover any concrete mediation between them and the movement."¹⁰ In order to find a solution, Lukács argued, the stance of reified immediacy had to be abandoned (a stance that had once been represented by Master Eckhart and, in the twenties, by Ernst Bloch), and the stance of the isolated individual soul replaced with the aim of grasping man's concrete being in the concrete totality of human society, with the ultimate objective of assuring the possibility of the genuine of the genuine transcending of immediate (estranged) reality.¹¹

IT is clear that, in the passage quoted above, Lukács repudiated the quasi-religious features of his own former approach with the devotion that always marked the critical evaluation of his own work. "In fact, the criticism must be more severe," Lukács wrote a quarter of a century later, "the greater the value that others attributed to the works that in my view were erroneous and have been transcended in my development."¹²

As Lukács' approach to the relation of subject to object was idealistic and he identified alienation with objectification, his resolution of the contradiction between subject and object could not stop at overcoming alienation, and slipped into the error of losing sight of the innate material nature of objects. Apparently, he could not as yet disentangle himself from the messianistic tenet concerning the "last judgement over all things."

Lukács confronted proletarian consciousness, which he had come to recognize through theoretical reasoning, with the immediacy of religious utopianism. However, by identifying the subject with the object in the

10 Ibid., p. 194.

11 Ibid.

12 LUKÁCS, Georg. "Leszámolás a múlttal" [Settling accounts with the past]. In: **Új magyar kultúrúért** [For a New Hungarian Culture]. Budapest, 1948, p. 180.

consciousness of the proletariat, his theoretical conclusion was bound to coincide with that of religion itself, at least according to Gramsci. The Italian thinker argued that religion is “utopia in gigantic form or, in other words, ‘metaphysics’ of the greatest dimension history has ever seen, for this is the most ambitious attempt at reconciling the real contradictions of history.”

Let us pause for a moment here. If utopian socialism is to be acknowledged as a source of Marxism (the works of Saint-Simon, Weitling, and Moses Hess prove that utopian socialism could never shed all traces of its religious origin), then we have to admit it to be true that a road from religious utopia toward Marxism exists. In other words, certain religious and utopian movements can be guided by social ideals similar to, or even identical with, those followed by the movements associating themselves with scientific socialism. The difference does not necessarily lie in the ends, but, rather, in the choice of the ways and means.

Genuine Marxists have no alternative to rejecting what is abstract, speculative, messianistic, and metaphysical in utopianism. Lukács, too, came to transcend the messianistic utopianism of *History and Class Consciousness*. But he did so in a dialectical way: he dissociated himself from positivism, which absolutized the narrow horizons of the time, while retaining his desire for a change in the status quo. He was aware that utopianism could not be superseded, except through the strength of the praxis of the socialist movement and the joint struggle of the working people; while the two groups may be of different outlook, they have common aims. The utopia to be superseded was not confined to that of others – it could be our own. However, as Lukács stressed in the postscript to the Italian edition of *History and Class Consciousness*, he himself relapsed into that immediacy when he regarded all epistemological contrasting

of the object and its reflection as the product of alienation.¹³ Such a procedure was correct in stressing the class character of Marxist theory, although it challenged its cognitive endeavors. As Lukács himself pointed out in one of his late works, without accepting the objective dialectical character of nature, it is not possible to evaluate correctly the material sensuous activity that mediates between man and nature, man's appropriation of nature, labor, and production. It is impossible to give a materialistic interpretation of the aforementioned mediations without accepting the objectively dialectical character of nature.¹⁴

3

At the end of the twenties, on coming to understand Lenin's works more profoundly and having had the opportunity to read Marx's previously unpublished *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Lukács broke with his earlier philosophical position. Already in his study of Hess, he challenged, under the auspices of a "true dialectical realism," the abstract utopianism that derived its definitions from sources other than historical reality and, therefore, had to have recourse to mental constructs in order to fabricate images of reality. Hess, Lukács wrote, failed to recognize in moments of the world around him the real motive power of the overcoming of the world in its form at that time.¹⁵ He discussed Hess' view against the background of the Marxist-Leninist method of criticizing political economy, a criticism based on the analysis of the historical categories of mediations, pointing out the concrete historical genesis of social

13 LUKÁCS. "The Standpoint of the Proletariat." *In: History and Class Consciousness.*

14 LUKÁCS, Georg. "Preface to the New Edition (1967)." *In: History and Class Consciousness.*

15 LUKÁCS, Georg. "Moses Hess and the Problems of Idealist Dialectics." *In: Tactics and Ethics.*

phenomena.

To reveal the roads in the present that lead to the future—this anti-utopian self-critical approach was to become dominant for Lukács. He carried this approach so far that a sort of conservative classicism and indifference to the future were attributed to him not just by his bourgeois critics, but even by some of his comrades-in-arms, such as Brecht and Eisler. That this criticism was rather groundless can be proven both by a thorough investigation into the development of his treatment of the category of realism, and the analysis of his major works written between 1930 and the mid-fifties. For it cannot be accidental that, in *The Young Hegel*, Lukács discussed precisely that early phase in the philosopher's career in which his progressively critical observations on society could be seen in their full vividness, and Hegel—especially by realizing the mediating function of the tools of labour—could, to a certain degree, anticipate historical materialism.

The way that Lukács treated Hegel in that book was diametrically opposed to that in *History and Class Consciousness*. Its true significance cannot be gauged, however, unless we also consider what he said in *The Destruction of Reason*. This latter work was once dismissed with the following criticism: prompted by the political considerations of anti-fascism and opposition to Cold War, it glorified rationalism in all its forms without reservations, while it rejected every form of irrationalism. Although there might be some truth in that argument, it must, nevertheless, be born in mind that, in that work, too, Lukács' treatment of rationalism and his emphasis on the mediating function of scientific thinking were meant to counterbalance and correct the one-sided conception that he had voiced in *History and Class Consciousness*, in which he had condemned rationalism as having only apologetic functions. His emphasis on the dialectical, Marxist-

Leninist approach to reflection constituted a similar attempt to rectify earlier errors.

It would, however, be an oversimplification to confine the assessment of *The Destruction of Reason* to discussing its self-critical and political aspects. It was not Lukács' aim to defend rationalism in the abstract sense. He strove to emphasize that tendency of cognition which aimed at making "purely rational thinking," the rational exploration of reality by the natural and social sciences, the starting point of dialectics, the "start and course" of the further development of thinking. On the other hand, Lukács intended to warn the reader that the reverse of this progressive process could also come to pass. He described that process historically, using the example of the disintegration of the Hegelian school, and logically, through the analysis of the process of cognition (which can approach but never fully reach its object) and of the crises that arise in the wake of the acceleration of scientific cognition:

The source of the discrepancy lies in the fact that the tasks directly presented to thought in a given instance, as long as they are still tasks, still unresolved problems, appear in a form which at first gives the impression that thought, the forming of concepts, breaks down in the face of reality that the reality confronting thought represents an area beyond reason [...] What if (thought) hypostasizes the inability of *specific* concepts to comprehend a specific reality [...] and rational perception in general to master the essence of reality intellectually? What if a virtue is then made of this necessity and the inability to comprehend the world intellectually is presented as "higher perception," as faith, intuition, and so on?¹⁶

Such an irrational tendency can gain ground wherever social history displays

16 LUKÁCS, Georg. **The Destruction of Reason**. London, 1980, pp. 99-100. Translated by Peter Palmer.

a leap that resists interpretation with notions adapted to the characteristics of a former state of affairs. Suffice it to refer to the embarrassment of most of the social democrats when they found themselves confronted with the emerging imperialism. (Another example: new achievements in the sciences call for novel interpretations by philosophy, which is, however, an insuperable task for some scholars.)

The Destruction of Reason discusses the disintegration of Hegelian dialectic. On the one hand, this dialectic was the source of Marx's dialectical materialism, through the mediation of Feuerbach's anthropological materialism. On the other, precisely because Hegel's idealist dialectic—due to its internal but necessary inconsistencies—could not fully transcend its religious and theoretical antecedents, it became the source of intuitionism, which even fascism made use of, and of open irrationalism, through the mediation of Schelling, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and life philosophy.

Yet *The Destruction of Reason* is not a work with interest only for historians of philosophy. First and foremost, it is a declaration of adherence to what is of lasting value in the philosophical legacy of the age, especially the achievements of dialectics, materialism, and dialectical reason. It is a declaration of opposition to the myth of the immediacy of cognition.

It should be stressed that Lukács' emotional affirmation of what was progressive in the philosophical legacy of the era showed that, acting in the spirit of Lenin, he emphasized the importance of conviction, consciousness, and theory, which were superior to spontaneity and to immediacy derived from and verified by belief; the latter, resting either on traditional religious-theological or on "modern" religious atheist foundations, create only new exclusive myths, "the

eclectic unity of nihilism and mysticism.”¹⁷ He was aware that the new myths could spread as they conformed only too well to certain tendencies of everyday thought that attribute fetishistic power to appearances, fail to differentiate between theory and practice, and regard scholarly and scientific abstraction of any sort as suspicious.

There is no point in denying that in *The Destruction of Reason* Lukács made no distinction between the various shades of irrationalism according to their social functions. Hence, he overlooked the very path that he himself had travelled, a road that led from irrationalism through atheistic religiousness and Hegelian dialectic to Marxism, and not the other way around: from dialectics to irrationalism.

Today it is especially timely to pay attention to the path of thinkers in either of the two directions. Certain forms of contemporary bourgeois rationalism can serve conservative or even retrograde ends; one thinks, for instance, of certain positivistic tendencies. The analyst of *The Destruction of Reason* must bear in mind that irrationalist relapses can occur at any time, as it is illustrated by the diverse tendencies of “left-wing” and “right-wing” messianism, or retrograde utopias.

The critical analysis that Lukács offered in that work is now of especial topicality, as a fanatically anti-communist, neoconservative, and anti-intellectual myth of immediacy and spontaneity has become prevalent in the capitalist world in general, and in the United States in particular since the late seventies—while, in a manner somewhat similar to that of the thirties, another global catastrophe is threatening us. If we also take into consideration the fact that Lukács made his

17 LUKÁCS, Georg. **A Marxista filozófia feladatal az új demokráciához** [The Tasks of Marxist Philosophy in the New Democracy]. Budapest, 1948, p. 48.

final break with his earlier messianism in this work, and—let us repeat—defended rationality, which he had formerly interpreted merely as the apologia of capitalism, with a single though resolute objective (i.e., to promote its development in the direction of dialectics), then it becomes clear that the work is not only of political, but also of philosophical significance.

4

Having proceeded along this road, untiringly developing and correcting his former views, Georg Lukács, in the last one-and-a-half decades of his life, following the twentieth congress of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party of the Soviet Union, found it imperative to create syntheses. The result of that effort are his *Über die Besonderheit als Kategorie der Ästhetik*, *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen*, and *The Ontology of Social Being*. Incomplete as these works have remained, they are indicative of the immense intellectual power of their author, his unceasing capacity to update his views, and his endeavour to present Marxist philosophy and aesthetic as tools and vehicles of social development.

In his *Aesthetic*, Lukács described the ascent of the arts and sciences from the naively empirical, emotional, belief-ridden, and anthropomorphic bounds of everyday thinking, and the process whereby the arts and sciences gradually separated themselves from religion, and became opponents. Religion, Lukács argued, transcend everydayness only within the bounds of everydayness.

Religious behaviour is at first glance distinguished from common everyday life through its emphatic emphasis on faith. Faith here is not an opinion, a preliminary stage of knowledge, an imperfect, unverified knowledge, on the contrary, it is a behaviour which

alone opens up access to the facts and truths of religion [...]¹⁸

However, in religion belief is superior to verification, and subjectivity is more important than objectivity of any sort, factual, scientific, or artistic.¹⁹ Revelation remains an evidence similar to the empirical facts of everyday thinking. The anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism of religion evoke the patterns of everyday thought in the form of a transcendent "other," and on both levels the employment of immediate analogues dominates: parallels are made between the human and the trans-human, the subjective and the objective.

Religion, naturally, differs from everydayness, for example, in its institutions and dogmas. Another difference is that, at variance with everyday belief, the content and practical consequences of religion affect man's existence in his entirety. Religion appears to be a force that is destined to affect man's entire fate, and in that capacity it represents some kind of universality, in contrast to the particularism of daily life. Religion is the imaginary realization of the human essence, the realization determined by the given standards of the time.

It is only necessary to point out that, in contrast to science itself, whose starting points and conclusions must always be verifiable, theology necessarily takes as its basis, without criticism, those objects and contexts which are anthropomorphised by faith, and simply generalises them in thought, thereby fixing them as dogmas, without the will and the ability to abolish their anthropomorphising nature.²⁰

18 LUKÁCS, Georg. **Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen**. N. p.: 1963, vol. I, p. 126. [T. N.: the original citations here were translated from the original in German, alongside the official Spanish translation of the *Aesthetics*. For the Spanish edition reference, cf. **Estética**, vol. 1, p. 132].

19 See *ibid.*, p. 124.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 123. [T. N.: **Estética**, vol. 1, p. 129].

These processes take place on the basis of the immediacy of the relation of theory and practice, which in turn has its source in the undifferentiated relationship of subject and object, in the last analysis, in the backwardness of the level of production.

In his *Aesthetic*, Lukács did not intend to create a comprehensive theory of religion. Yet what has been quoted from the work thus far can inform the reader of Lukács' attitude to religion, his description of the relation of religion to everyday consciousness and to science, his analysis of the objective conditions and mental patterns that give rise to and sustain religion, and of the forces that can be employed objectively to supersede religion. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács offered a critical analysis of religion in fact only on the basis of subjectivity, describing religion as an alienated form of consciousness. In *The Destruction of Reason*, he ascended to a higher stage: starting out from objectivity, a materialistic scientific methodology, and social consciousness, he expounded the causes that pushed thinkers who faced crises in their cognitive activity back to irrationalism. In his *Aesthetic*, Lukács made a comparison between various stages of cognition that has developed on the basis of man's productive activity in the course of history, and outlined the possibilities of grasping religion in theoretical terms.

The ultimate goal, Lukács argued, is to attain a genuine nature- and man-centred world view. This is not retrogression to "back to nature" and man in the abstract; on the contrary, the achievement of man's dominance over mediations, over the objectifications of the object world. That is the objective precondition for proving the nonsensical character of tenets alleging that man is the product of creation, and that he is dependent and exposed. This striving is the precondition

of redirecting human energies, which are frustrated in this-worldly efforts, and are seeking refuge in religion and the overcoming of particularity in the other world, in activities that can render life meaningful. As he wrote:

Essential to this is the foundation of the religious need in everyday life, the desire that the causal nexus of events, which functions completely independently of human consciousness, experience a teleological inflection that corresponds to the most elementary and genuine vital needs of the particular individual in question.²¹

Yet this development presupposes that the anthropomorphic world picture and the ethic substantiated purely with emotions should be replaced with a coherent, but dialectically open, scientific world picture. A positive world view should be attained, so as to enable man to understand and optimally realize the objective possibilities of social progress, and to consider himself both the self-conscious author and actor of history. In that development he cannot only discard the myths concerning the conception and formation of history, but those of his own fate, too. A new world picture is required, which awakens people to the consciousness of totality. And this totality is no longer the restoration of the identity of subject and object; instead, a historically given and internally structured unity of being, whose different spheres, precisely due to their manifoldness, concrete richness, and contradictory nature, make possible the many-faceted and free development of individuals.

Lukács was fully conscious that no change in the relations of production can directly bring an end to religious needs. He knew that while capitalist development was itself demolishing long-established myths and divesting religion of its anthropomorphic character, capitalism witnessed the appearance

²¹ Ibid., Vol. II, p. 796. [T. N.: **Estética**, vol. 4, p. 496].

of new, “reified” myths in the vacuum left by historical religions. Lukács pointed out that secularization, the decay of traditional values, the process of “disideologization,” the decreasing prestige of religious revelation, the growth of formalism in religious rituals, and the spread of the atheistic myth of anguish should not be interpreted as indicating the decline of religious needs. (Let us add that this development can have negative consequences as well.) Religion—as Kierkegaard said—is becoming a simple postulate, but, as such, it will persist for a longer time. In this complex situation, forces that are opposed and devoted to the maintenance of religion are existing side by side and the Marxist theory of religion is as yet far from drawing all the necessary conclusions from this situation. True, in his *Aesthetic*, Lukács described religion as a form of compensation that the individual seeks in exchange for the failures, insecurity, and futility of his life. At the same time, religion, nevertheless, reflects the individual’s striving to introduce a measure of order into what he sees as chaos, and to impart sense and support to spheres that lack them, to use transcendence to turn even suffering into a tolerable and sensible activity.

Yet the decision between this world and the one hereafter is not a theoretical and individual question, Lukács wrote. The outcome of the choice depends on

whether they [human beings] succeed in fulfilling their deepest life needs on earth or at least in fighting for their future fulfilment in a way that is capable of lending their own lives an inner meaning [...] the way in which this need develops, evolves or perishes is very essentially conditioned by the social and ideological developments just outlined.²²

22 Ibid., pp. 801, 803. [T. N.: **Estética**, Vol. 4, p. 501, 503].

These conditions, Lukács continued, concerning the concrete relation between everyday life and science, are, in principle, different under socialism and under capitalism. But Lukács warned that even under communism everyday thought will not be fully absorbed in science, and science and art cannot win an absolute victory over daily life: "there will therefore still remain a world of immediate reaction to a reality that has not yet been elaborated."²³

Consequently, religions is to persist for a long time to come and, in fact, various social and political tendencies are expected to appear under the aegis of religion. In World War I, Lukács wrote in a letter to Renate Rierneck, the church and the believers in most countries concerned gave their blessing to the weapons of the imperialist forces of individual countries. However, in World War II,

there appeared a Karl Barth and the Confessing Church with its martyrs. We are all aware that war, a third world war, the destruction of our globe in a nuclear catastrophe, is a real danger, but one that can be avoided. What prevents the Marxists and the people of religious persuasion from putting aside basic differences in their outlook and joining forces in order to find a solution worthy of mankind, and jointly to strive for the purpose? [...] Problems arise in the life of society day by day, for the solution of which Christians and Marxists act together. Furthermore, questions arise whose humanist settlement should be regarded by every Marxists as his duty. (Think of the right to marry someone belonging to another denomination, the right to divorce, the right to abortion, etc.) Where the theoretical aspect of the question is concerned, this world, and the hereafter continue to be in antagonistic opposition. But the people [...] on both sides of the camp who have the courage to speak honestly of the differences that divide them, can, by all means, find the forms of cooperation in several issues that are posed by reactionary inhumanity and

23 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 203. [T. N.: **Estética**, vol. I, p. 213]

man's alienation caused thereby.²⁴

In this letter, Lukács remained faithful to his Marxist conviction and the materialist assessment of religious transcendence, just as to Lenin's view that people of differing persuasion can and should put aside their differences in order to join forces on the front of political class struggle for progress and socialism.

Such observations by Lenin show the comprehension that in the present situation the central problem lies lesser in the refutation of the religious statements of reality, than in the way in which people overcome religious needs themselves, as a result of the change in the social basis of their existence, the different activities arising from it, their mental evaluation, and so on. They overcome the religious needs within themselves..²⁵

By way of a conclusion, Lukács added: "However, since their spiritual basis—nihilism, irrationalism, fear and despair—is social-psychologically difficult to overcome, it can only be overcome in the way described by Marx and Lenin, through the transformation of the forms of life that produce and reproduce them."²⁶

In his *The Ontology of Social Being*—in accordance with the particular subject matter of that work—Lukács offered a more detailed and thorough analysis of those "ways of life." As he put it:

religion is a universal social phenomenon: in the beginning—and often even later—it is a system that regulates the operation of all society; its principal assignment is to satisfy the social need for the regulation of everyday life. It is expected to do that in such a form

24 "Lukács Georg level a marxizmus és a kereszténység viszonyáról" [Georg Lukács' letter on the relationship between Marxism and Christianity]. *Világosság* IX, 1968, 8-9, p. 547.

25 LUKÁCS: **Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen**. Vol. II, p. 860. [T. N.: **Estética**, vol. 4, p. 563]

26 *Ibid.*, p. 862. [T. N.: **Estética**, vol. 4, p. 565].

so that it can exert a direct influence on the life of every member of society.²⁷

For that very reason, any critique that is confined to deploying only theoretical arguments against the real sources of religion, alienation, and reification, is committing the error of ignoring "religion's real relationships to the individual of the present society,"²⁸ and losing sight of the fact that man has to respond precisely in his practical activity to the question that for the religious thinking appear to be solvable only through reference to transcendence.

In his *Ontology*, in the spirit of Marx's views, Lukács named reification and alienation under capitalism as the chief sources of situations in which all the tangible things of everyday life strengthen the tyranny of "objectified apparitions" and of the "sensibly trans-sensible" commodity and money world over man. At this point, the dual tendency in the development of labour is reaching its climax: in the prehistory of mankind, labour assures the development and wealth of civilizations, but it also gives rise to alienation. At the same time, it facilitates the conservation of the appearance of the independence of the individuals as a thinking being.

Lukács saw clearly that there can be no analysis of the modern forms of alienation without the examination of the history of Christianity. After the decay of the Greek polis, the relationship of the individual and the human species (*Gattungswesen*) gradually slipped beyond the grasp of even the brightest minds of the era. It was that very situation that created the conditions of a new type of relationship between the individual and transcendence, the one that is so

27 LUKÁCS, Georg. **A társadalmi lét ontológiájáról**. Budapest, 1976, vol. II, p. 642.

28 Ibid., p. 637.

characteristic of Christianity. Lukács wrote of the attractive features of Christianity in vivid terms: by believing in the salvation of the soul, man can imagine to be capable of overstepping those concrete mediations of the human species that can enable the individual in reality to attempt (though alienation is bound to frustrate his attempts) to overcome his particularity, and, thereby, to bring his life to fulfilment. Hence, it may follow—as exemplified especially by sectarian religiosity—that “alienation is rejected personally, in a direct manner.”²⁹ It is not accompanied by the real rejection of those mediations that are its social vehicles. This is how they find their way, subjectively, to the human species—which, considered individually, has always been possible.

In this mental process, however, the essence of man becomes transcendent for even man himself, and, hence, his particularity is no longer the manifestation of “species character in itself,” in which the possibility for its development toward “being for itself” is given as a sphere of motion. On the contrary, this human essence is degraded and reified “to become something that can be freed only with the help of transcendence”³⁰ from this predicament. This situation is aggravated by the typical attitude of the historical churches, in which the realization of lofty ideals is postponed to some remote future: this practice “is, in effect, support for species character in itself at all times.”³¹ Lukács is, on the whole, correct in his conclusion, although, historically speaking, he gave a somewhat simplified interpretation to the relationship of sects and the churches. However, it is a fact that sectarian tendencies could be integrated, one way or another, in the framework of the churches. We also have to admit that the

29 Ibid., p. 694.

30 Ibid., pp. 667-668.

31 Ibid., p. 696.

churches regard themselves as the this-worldly representatives of transcendence, and, as such, they have often opposed the regime of the day. And, though it seems certain—here Lukács referred to Dostoyevsky's *Great Inquisitor* and the personal example of Tolstoy—that the actual assertion of the moral imperatives of Christianity is incompatible with the civilization of which the church is part; relying on liturgical, theological, and philosophical devices, the Christian churches have usually been able to bridge the gap between the teachings of Jesus and the social needs of the time.

Perhaps the most important part of Lukács' analyses of religion in his *Ontology* is his discussion of the religious consequences of the overcoming of alienation in capitalism. "Only those efforts that are oriented to the future, that is, ultimately, to socialism, can possess the capacity genuinely to overcome reification and alienation."³² This is not to say that "social transformations could automatically put an end to the alienated character of religious consciousness."³³ As Marx put it, the structure of everyday life must be transformed in a "long and tortuous process of development;" only that can assure a situation in which mental forms of a higher order—science, philosophy, and art—can permeate even broader spheres of everyday life and consciousness.

But Lukács was not content to arrive at this conclusion: he knew that, for objective and subjective reasons, alienation can persist, even under socialism. At this point, Lukács laid emphatic stress on the importance of the decisions and acts of individuals within the framework of the transformation of society as a whole. Although the development of the personality depends, in the long run, on

32 Ibid., p, 737.

33 Ibid., p. 736.

the development of society as a whole,

each and every individual, who is in direct contact with other people, has to make up his mind whether he wants to break with his form of alienation. That is the very reason for which consciousness, as it is ontologically founded, derives from, and has a definitive influence on praxis, and plays such an important role. The question is whether man himself shapes his life and personality within the framework of his society, or whether he places the decision in the hands of transcendent powers.³⁴

Although, subjectively, it has always been possible to overcome alienation to a certain degree, we have to stress the importance of conscious, personal decision in that act: the real social possibilities can be translated into reality only through action that is based on those decisions. Lukács' critical analysis of religion reflected the general endeavour of his last period: to define a materialistic and social ontology that, instead of ignoring, stresses the significance of subjective striving, the conscious movement, in the activity of man—the maker of his own history.

All this sounds like a challenge—which it is in the best sense: a credo, calling attention to every individual's cultural, ideological, and public responsibility at the crossroads that mankind is now standing at. It is, obviously, not just the polemic with religion that is at stake. As Lukács wrote:

The power of reification and alienation is perhaps greater today than ever before. However, ideologically, these powers have never been so claptrap, vacant and uninspiring. Therefore, society is facing the perspective of a protracted, tortuous, and involved process of emancipation. It is blindness not to see it, but it is illusion to hope that a handful of happenings can turn this

34 *Ibid.*, p. 735.

perspective into reality overnight.³⁵

Reality, in its attainable details, in its ever-changing though unchangeable totality, is the real object of human praxis, and man is not to expect from it anything else but what he (and society) can retrieve from it.³⁶

Struggle against the this-worldly foundations of human misery, the conscious commitment to the strenuous struggle for socialism in the course of polemics with people of other conviction: this was the communist Georg Lukács' creed throughout his rugged career. Lukács committed errors in the course of his fruitful and eventful life. But what is more important than these mistakes—many of which he himself brought under criticism—is the exemplary struggle of this outstanding Marxist thinker of the century consistently to amalgamate materialism and dialectics, to shed light on the interplay of social development and cognition, and to keep Marxist-Leninist theory abreast of the great social and scholarly problems of his age.

Polemicalizing against the religious overemphasis of the importance of death, Lukács asserted:

It is evident that a harmonious rounding off, a worldly perfection in the life of the individual, is only possible on the basis of the harmony of his activity, of the emotions, thoughts, that are generated by it, with his circle of life; of course, this harmony can only ever be relative [...] indeed, even the defeat of the particular personality in such struggles can bring into being a harmony spoken of here [...] It is precisely here, however, that it becomes visible that in such a meaningful, meaningfully conclusive life, there have always been forces at work that have led such people—

35 Ibid., p. 739.

36 Ibid., p. 734.

more or less consciously, more or less decisively—beyond the immediate particularity of their given existence..³⁷

Assessing his lifework, we can justifiably regard Georg Lukács' life and theoretical legacy as a progression of outstanding Marxist scholarly achievements, which have overcome particularity. It is a set of achievements and dilemmas that inspire all those devoted to the study of the problems that he raised to work hard, all those who are duty-bound not just to preserve for posterity his achievements, but—in the same way as he himself would do—to develop them in a creative way to respond to the new challenges of life.

37 LUKÁCS: **Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen**. Vol. II, pp. 799-800. [T. N.: **Estética**, vol. 4, p. 500].