

RELIGION IN GEORG LUKÁCS' WORLD VIEW

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Abstract. The paper analyses the young Lukács' religious belief in the light of the late Lukács' understanding of religion. Lukács was born in an unreligious assimilated Jewish family and had contacts with Jewish and Lutheran religions. The need for something to believe in lead young Lukács to Marxism and communism in the messianistic-revolutionary movement of 1918–19 Hungary. There was a direct connection between Lukács' Marxian messianism and his former Christian messianism, which in his later works is almost but concealed. Therefore, in Lukács' later Marxism the moment of suspension predominates over that of preservation while in his whole life work the reverse was the case.

Georg Lukács' views on religion have been widely discussed. To this day the scholars and teachers of Marxism have used the analyses of religion given in his comprehensive *Aesthetics* and *Ontology* with profit. Study of the young Lukács has also elucidated the role of religion in his early years and in the development of his personality. In the present paper I am going to discuss only certain aspects of this picture; that is, I shall investigate the problematic only from a specific perspective. Let me begin, therefore, with an analysis of the young Lukács' religious belief in the light of the mature Lukács' conceptions of religion, and, in turn, characterise the Lukács' notion of religion in terms of the young Lukács' religious belief.

The young Lukács had personal contacts with two religious beliefs: Jewish (or, as it was customary to say officially, Israelite) religion on the one hand, and Christian (namely Lutheran) on the other. He was not in the least influenced by the former, which is not surprising if we take into account certain circumstances of the time. All the relevant recollections of the Lukács-family state that they were unreligious just like the majority of the assimilated families of Jewish origin at about the turn of the century. As a result of the *Volksreligion* character of the Jewish religion, an assimilated person had to abandon or renounce his religious observance. On the other hand, the liberal-nationalistic spirit of the age permitted the assimilation without formal baptism, that is, by a simple commitment to the Hungarian national ideal.

Through family tradition, therefore, Lukács had not inherited an elaborate religious system. While his father had presumably sublimated the transcended Jewish religion into general humanistic principles, the young Lukács possessed (for the time being, at least) nothing to transcend. But the need for religion, for "something to believe in" was very strong in him. According to the above-mentioned recollections, the only serious influence that derived from Jewish spirituality, was exerted by a remote relative, a man immersed in rabbinical mysticism; the young Lukács needed similar ideals, as he longed for authentic, external measures of judgement. This could be attested by an interesting extract from a letter to Lukács from his father, who warned his son against the exaggerated "adoration" of his friends László Bánóczy and – later – Leó Popper: "You are just like me. I, too, had always to have someone... I am afraid you have the same lack of confidence..." (Lukács 1986:96) In a moment of crisis Lukács describes his own personality in a similar manner in his diary from 1910; when writing about *das Lukács'ische* he notes: "We are all enthusiasts without phantasy; irrational to the extreme, yet clinging to our earthliness; realists (by way of obligation) without a sense of reality." (Lukács 1981) The diary and other documents offer ample evidence of the fact that Lukács' great love for Irma Seidler was, for him, a kind of a religious experience; one can read his essay on Kierkegaard as a sublimated restatement of this theme. "This, here, is the ideal of love of the ascetic mediaeval knights, but it is, like anywhere else, more romantic than that. ...This, I believe, is the root of Kierkegaard's religiosity. God is, that can be loved in this way, and it is only God that can be loved so. ...My love is sure and unquestionable only if I am never right: and God alone can give me this calm." (Lukács 1974:34–35) The need for "something to believe in" – provided one takes it seriously, as Lukács undoubtedly did – leads to some religious system of ideas in the end. This was realised in Lukács' conversion to Christianity.

What was Lukács' Christianity like? On the one hand, it was Protestantism, in the broadest sense of the word; Protestantism, which emphasised a direct relationship between the believer and God – and Lukács, no doubt, interpreted religious belief in such a way. His Franciscanism – on good grounds often mentioned in the literature – and his recourse to German mysticism do not, in themselves, stand in contradiction to his Protestantism; for, as it is well known, the representatives of the Franciscan movement, and especially those of German mysticism, were the forerunners of Reformation. At the same time, the medieval forms of religious belief appealed to Lukács of necessity, for they meant for him a sound basis, an outward support, as it were, as opposed to his 'subjective' belief. We can assume that if Lukács had been born in a Catholic or a conservative Protestant family, and his religious experiences had, from the outset, been shaped by religious practice or objectivised forms, his development would have led from objectivised religion to the interiorisation of such belief. But Lukács' path led in the opposite direction: he advanced from the subjective desire "to believe in something" to an objective religious system of ideas. The preface to the collection

of his essays on Béla Balázs supports this point: "Already in my secondary school years I was deeply indignant at the Byzantium scene of "The Tragedy of Man" [a drama of Imre Madách], though I was a passionate atheist at the time... For I felt at that time, and continue to feel now (as must everyone with any feeling for religious life, for a life to be lived on a metaphysical level): what else should a Christian die for, if not for his belief, if not in the struggle for one side of the alternative: Jesus is either of the same essence with God, or he just resembles God... And what is to become of Christianity – as Paul puts it and with him everybody who has experienced the essence of Christianity – if we do not know whoever Jesus is? (This does not mean, though, that the problem is comprising as to the essence of Christianity.)" (Lukács 1977:703)

I think that the examples quoted above illustrate the general tendency in the young Lukács' thinking although they are not necessarily direct references to religion as such. It is a commonplace that this cultural criticism and romantic anticapitalism showed strong affinity with the (more or less) "closed" cultures of the past. This is attested not only by *The Theory of Novel*, but by his much earlier essay on Theodor Storm as well. It is namely the "closed" culture that Lukács appreciated from the Middle Ages, forgiving even its hostility to art. "The early Christian hostility to art was necessary for the art of Giotto and Dante, Meister Eckhart and Wolfram von Eschenbach to come to be. Early Christianity created the Bible, the fruits of which nourished the art of many centuries. And because it was authentic religion, capable of creating the Bible, it did not need art; neither did it require, nor tolerate art, because it wanted and was able to master the soul of man alone." (Lukács 1977a:428) Thus one can justly ask: why did Lukács then not become a Catholic? Neither did he become a Catholic, nor did he practise his Protestant belief. This can probably be explained by the turn of the century "Enlightenment", by the tendency inherent in the young Lukács; thinking to give his theoretical conclusions not simply a metaphysical, but an explicitly scientific foundation. Lukács expressed several times his high regard for Béla Zalai's work; and we can also cite his words from a letter to Paul Ernst: "I deal almost exclusively with epistemological questions these days. Until we can have a definite border-line ... all my philosophy is but idle talk. Unfortunately, it is only in mathematics that we can find the border-line. So I have to study it for a while. There is no hope for quick results, for the time being, I just want to clear the way for my aesthetics and ethics." (Lukács 1981:440)

Are the Gods really dead? Is it really impossible to return to the objectivised forms of religion? Lukács dealt with these questions in the context of Nietzsche's and Dostoyevsky's ideas in the second decade of the present century. "But if, for all that, God exists? Perhaps only one God has died, and another, of a younger generation, of another essence, who is in different relationships with us, is yet to come. Perhaps the darkness of our aimlessness is only that of the night between the sunset of one God and the dawn of another? ... Is it certain that we have found here – in the world of tragedy, a world devoid of all the gods – our ultimate goal?

Hidden in our desolateness, isn't it the cry of sorrow, the desire for a God to come?" (Lukács 1916:17) Although he speaks about the advent of a new God, he cannot imagine it to come about in any of the traditional, metaphysical forms. Thus, for the time being, he arrives at the "religious atheism" of the heroes of Dostoyevsky. – What, then, about the new community? Lukács' "revolution in the soul" proclaimed that time made only a spiritual and not a real community possible – that of the "Sunday-circle", for example... Thus it was inevitable that Lukács had to search for a renewal in which – as one of his first studies on the theme puts it – "the mysticism of Saint Francis and Meister Eckhart... is gradually transcended by the spirit of Gioacchino da Fiore and Thomas Müntzer". (Jozsef Lukács 1979:85) For one should not forget, first of all, that Lukács had discovered religious features in Endre Ady's poetry ("the socialism of Endre Ady is religion" (Lukács 1977b:249)), and that Ady influenced him to a great extent; he found religious characteristics in Marxism as well, which he had considered to be a good means to explain social and cultural phenomena already in his youth: "The system and world-outlook of socialism – that is, Marxism – is a synthesis. Perhaps the cruellest and most severe synthesis since mediaeval Catholicism." (Lukács 1911:156) It was the joint effect of these two influences that, in the end, led Lukács to Marxism and communism in the messianistic-revolutionary movement of 1918–19 in Hungary.

Let us now change our perspective and examine the great works of the mature Lukács: *The Specificity of Aesthetics* and *Ontology*. We are not concerned here with the development of the messianic idea in the lifework of the Marxian Lukács, a narrative which has already been analysed in detail. In this case, too, the material is all too plentiful to be discussed in every detail; we shall concentrate only upon certain points of interest connected with our theme. In the first chapter of the *Aesthetics*, Lukács attempts to separate the 'true' anthropomorphism of art from the 'false' anthropomorphism of religion. He maintains that the former is justified, because it goes with scientific criteria, while this is not true for the latter. He argues that religion, having postulated a transcendence and directed man's attention to it, leaves the world of immanence intact, thus it can be characterised as a simple supplement to or only as a part of the alienated everyday life. In the last chapter of the *Aesthetics*, which discusses the "war of independence in art", this struggle is presented in such a way that the reader concludes that art has to fight, as it were, exclusively against religion. "In this respect," Lukács writes, "science and art exert an influence in the same direction: these are, apart from the ethical attitude, the strongest impetuses for the qualitative transformation of particularity, therefore they confront religion together, whose main tendency is to preserve particularity. ... The religious formation of everyday life does not thoroughly transform the 'deep structure' of it; science and art - each according to its own quality – do, on the other hand, modify it." (Lukács 1963:776–780) It cannot be doubted that this interpretation of the role of science, in which the traces of "scientism" are apparent, can be dated from

Lukács' change of position – within his Marxism – in the first half of the thirties, and which, in the last analysis, can be traced back to the "Enlightenment" tendencies of the Hungarian *fin de siècle*.

I do not, of course, mean to say that Lukács' statements about religion are, in themselves, false. The problem lies rather in what he keeps silent about, what he mentions only in passing. The *Aufklärerei* of the Hungarian mind at the turn of the century appears first of all in Lukács' approximation of the problematic: explicitly or not, he speaks almost exclusively of the form of religion that he was, at the turn of the century, acquainted with – of a thoroughly retrograde ideology, which consecrates the inhuman, alienated relations of class society, and promises to transcend them only in the hereafter. (It is characteristic that in the *Ontology* he illustrates the reactionary role of religion by noting that, in the Great War, the Churches had blessed the troops before they left for the front...) Lukács discusses other forms of religious development only as long as they do not contradict the main line of his argument. Thus, he emphasises that revolutionary movements within religious frames remained isolated; that even Reformation could not dissolve mythological elements in religion radically enough; finally modern forms of religious belief – with their "religious atheism" – play the same role as traditional religion: that is, they sanctify alienation. The most astonishing is, however, that though he admits that philosophy and religion – though from different perspectives – tackle approximately the same problems, he assumes a sharp boundary between them. "Let us consider, for instance, the diverse forms of theodicy, teleologically based philosophy of society and history. ... They are not directly religious, although they took over many ideas from religion, and in turn, had their impact upon theology. The reason is that they are not meant to appeal to the individual, or particular man; Hegel's philosophy of history – insofar as it attributes a teleologically determined automatism to history – is ... anthropocentric, but ... the 'subject', that is the centre of history, is humankind in general. If a theodicy is really to be looked upon as religious in character, the relation has to be reversed: the general teleological order of humankind's history can – and it should – take on the form of a theodicy, but it should allow of being observed by the particular individual, so that he could face his own fate in it as an object of inner experience..." (Lukács 1963:783) Lukács excludes two possibilities here: he maintains, on the one hand, that no system of religion can raise the standpoint of the individual (or, as he says, "particular" man) to that of humankind, and, on the other hand, he radically denies that philosophy could, in turn, descend from the perspective of the species to that of individual men... This de-anthropomorphic attitude refers us to the scientific residue in his thinking, mentioned above, and the whole methodological attitude of the chapter reflects the tendencies of *Aufklärung*. He could, in fact, he should have written of a "war of independence in art" against religion just as well as against politics, or even ethics. For, as Marx pointed out, there are two fundamental features of alienation: man is to realise his essence in "illusionary" forms, and these – politics, morality, religion, art,

philosophy – are confronted to each other respectively. "It stems from the very nature of estrangement (alienation) that each sphere applies a different and opposite yardstick for me. ... for each of them are specific forms of estrangement (alienation) of man, they determine their particular domains of the alienated essential activity, and stand alienated from the others' alienation" (Marx 1974:106) In the chapter on the war of independence in art, however, it is exclusively religion that appears to be a hindrance to the development of art and of humanity.

The incomplete analyses of Lukács' comprehensive *Ontology* reflect the same problems in an even sharper way. On the one hand the "scientistic" characteristics of "Enlightenment" are intensified. Lukács tends to differentiate scientific from philosophical "generalisations" almost exclusively in terms of quantity. He makes the constant claim about religion that its ontological foundations have, since Galileo, "collapsed"; in this context, his main example of religious manipulation is cardinal Bellarmin. (That Lukács' whole methodology, and thus his conception of science, belongs to the turn of the century is shown by his absurd polemics against Einstein and against modern physics in general.) Though Lukács is acquainted with Barth's new theology and once he refers to the work of Tillich as well (be it a reference to the twenties), he considers that the only thing worth mentioning in connection with Barth is that he derives, in a negative way, from Bellarmin. And he affirms about the ecumenic movement that its essence is the unification of believers in the struggle against atheists... On the other hand, the analyses of the *Ontology* are more prepared to take into account the negative aspects of science; first of all, that an exaggeratedly scientific and positivistic conception of science does not benefit humankind, but, on the contrary, can be a hindrance or a curb to social development because it claims that every human and social problem will be solved by technological development alone. Of greater interest for us are, however, places where Lukács, in analysing the phenomena of religion, pays serious attention to untraditional, not at all retrograde forms of religious practice.

Lukács distinguishes what he calls "sectarian religion" from religion organised in churches. He thinks that the greatest representatives of the former are Jesus, Saint Francis, Meister Eckhart and Thomas Müntzer. He concedes – and this, too, recalls his youthful ideals – that these "tendencies transcend the routines of everyday life: emotionally, and especially on the level of thinking, they transcend bare, immediate particularity, and their ultimate goal through the mediation of other men, through commitment to the affairs of the community is directed towards *Gattungsmässigkeit für sich*. Hence it is by no means by chance that figures such as Jesus bring about by their preaching enduring effects that are to be compared only to the greatest achievements of art and philosophy." (Lukács 1984:616) But why is this recognition, which goes beyond the former limitations of his ideas, unable to bring about radical changes in Lukács' conception of religion? For Lukács' line of reasoning concludes in the statement that "sectarian

religion" cannot really maintain itself: it is constantly obliged to make compromises with religious forms organised in churches, which in their turn function as alienated forms of politics and morality. "Subjectively sincere sectarian religion..., for no doubt, forms one part of the process towards *Gattungsmässigkeit für sich*; Hegel was half correct (!) when in the context of art and philosophy he spoke about it as absolute spirit, but he was, of course, mistaken ... when he failed to take into account that religion as a whole can have no such intentions, and that these characterise only particular currents within it ..." (Lukács 1984:618) Though Lukács did not exclude the possibility that the situation in art and philosophy is the same, i. e. that they themselves are unable to transform reality in a radical way, but, as Hegel put it, are "reconciled" to it – Lukács himself, at the same time, rejects it.

Lukács is unwilling to evaluate this "sectarian religion" as belonging to the real, inner core of religion (though Marx clearly characterised this form of belief as the "phantastic realisation of the human essence"), and this is immediately connected with his vehement rejection of the above-mentioned possibility. From this point of view his argument is an instructive one. Having mentioned that certain ideals preached by Jesus became "democratic demands of everyday practice", and having noted similar tendencies in the heretical movements and vernacular Reformation, he argues: "It is easy to realise, however, that, after certain historical changes, these tendencies – even in the activities of Cromwell's adherents or in the leftist jacobinists – have played an important role, and that their undoubted ideological impact had far-reaching effects." But before one can raise the question as to the actual degree of this effect, Lukács quickly adds that "the practical failure of this type of attitude justifies the sharp political criticism which Marx directed against every form of utopianism". (Lukács 1984:207–208) If Lukács had conceded the presence of similar utopian features in art and philosophy, he would have had to concede, too, the fact that neither the former nor the latter is nowadays able to transform reality in a radical way. In the twenties, in the analyses of *History and Class Consciousness*, among other matters, he spoke about precisely this issue; namely, that Marxian philosophy can first turn into a theory of practice, and then can become a practical and realised theory. "Science", even at that time, did not furnish any evidence for such a view, as Lukács himself was fully aware: "By separating the inseparable, the opportunists have barred their own path to this knowledge, the active self-knowledge of the proletariat. Hence their leaders speak scornfully – in the authentic tones of the free-thinking petty bourgeoisie – of the 'religious faith' that is said to be the basis of Bolshevism and revolutionary Marxism. The accusation is a tacit confession of their own impotence. ... What they call faith and seek to deprecate by adding the epithete 'religious' is nothing more nor less than the certainty that capitalism is doomed and that – ultimately – the proletariat will be victorious. There can be no 'material' guarantee of this certitude. ...The so-called religious faith is nothing else than the certitude that regardless of all temporary

defeats and setbacks, the historical process will come to fruition *in our deeds and through our deeds.*" (Lukács 1971:42. f.)

Thus Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* confessed *belief* in an open and conscious way, for he knew that, on the one hand, belief is not necessarily unquestioning of itself, nor directed against science and knowledge, and, on the other hand, he has not forgotten that belief, although it may depart from knowledge, always transcends it. To confess belief as belief and not as "objective knowledge" became for him impossible precisely in the course of that process in which time and again he had to compromise his belief with reality. In the period 1919–23 he could sense an immediate connection between his former Christian messianism and his present Marxian messianism; later, however, he felt himself compelled to conceal it as much as it was possible. Therefore, his later Marxism appeared for him necessarily as a transcendence of his former Christianity, in which the moment of suspension predominates over that of preservation. If in his whole life work the reverse was the case – and this is my opinion and belief –, Marx's paraphrase of the Bible holds true for Lukács also: "Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es." (They do not know what they are doing).

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