

Postsecular Philosophy as Metaphoric Theology: On Dussel's Reading of Marx

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ABSTRACT

This article articulates the ways in which the Argentine-Mexican philosopher and theologian Enrique Dussel advances a distinctly postsecularist and decolonial reinterpretation of the Marxist critique of religion. Specifically, this article explores Dussel's *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx* [*The Theological Metaphors of Marx*], a text that exposes how Marx often deploys the Bible against the Christian in a way that presumes the original criticality of an “un-inverted” or “unfetishized” Christianity. Such an interpretative maneuver promises to add a new layer of complexity to the well-known Marxist critique of theology as a critique of politics. At stake in such an interpretation is the rejection of facile readings of Marx's presumed secularism and the reconceptualization of the relation between theology and philosophy in the context of epistemic decolonization.

IN the Westernized academy, it continues to be a common assumption that Marxist thought is an essentially secularist, and thereby anti-religious, discourse. Almost four decades ago, David McLellan's now-classic *Marxism and Religion* confirmed this rule by examining its exceptions, from the relatively obscure cases of the Austrian Max Adler or the Czech Vítězslav Gardavský to the more familiar cases of Antonio Gramsci and Ernst Bloch (McLellan 1987). If some of the most mainstream currents of Marxism have suffered from a “simplistic” account of secularization, as McLellan puts it (McLellan 1987, 169), one can nevertheless uncover a more complicated account of the place of religion in processes of social transformation by engaging the works of these often-overlooked heretical Marxists. Indeed, in the context of the ongoing twenty-first-century assault on the modern “secularization thesis” across the humanities and social sciences, which has deeply interrogated the assumption of a direct relationship between processes of modernization and processes of secularization (the latter understood as religion's decline in social relevance), it is worthwhile to articulate some of the contributions that such a heretically nonsecularist Marxism can provide to the enduring conceptual exploration that has gone by the name of “the postsecular.”¹

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¹ For accounts of this contemporary postsecular debate, see Gorski et al. 2012; Molendijk 2015; Beaumont 2019.

In “The Postsecular Marx,” Gregor McLennan initiated this crucial conversation on the “re-assessment of the question of Marxism-and-religion” in the specific context of the postsecular subversion of the classical secularization thesis (McLennan 2019, 72). McLennan outlines various existing “postsecular options on Marx” (McLennan 2019, 82) across divergent theoretical and political commitments, from the “compatibilist” position of Terry Eagleton (that separates the critique of capitalism from the existentialist role of religion but does not see them as contradictory), to the “theologist” articulation of Roland Boer (who conceives of the critique of capitalism as being essentially theological). A valuable starting point for this much-needed conversation, McLennan’s diagnosis is nonetheless restricted by two related apprehensions that prevent a deeper analysis of the question: his deep skepticism regarding the theoretical value of the notion of “the postsecular,” and his tacit Eurocentrism that reiterates a triumphant “rhetoric of modernity” (Mignolo 2010) into the account of a specifically modernizing and Westernizing process of secularization. It is against these two tendencies that I hereby propose an alternative option on the postsecular Marx.

Against an understanding of the postsecular as a conceptual horizon that emerges from a “postmodern” questioning of the legacies of modernity, as McLennan conceives of the project (McLennan 2019, 74), the postsecular horizon that I have in mind emerges from the margins of modernity where the latter is experienced as “coloniality” (Mignolo and Escobar 2010). From this fundamental thesis, as advanced by various decolonial thinkers, it is the attempt to “decolonize” the coloniality of “the secular” as one of the components of modernity/coloniality that sparks the critical examination of the classical secularization thesis rather than any internally Eurocentric “postmodern” attitude that renounces the rationalist legacies of modernity.² An idiosyncratically postsecularist and decolonial Marx thereby emerges from this vantage point to contest the Eurocentric disposition of ongoing postsecular interpretations of Marx as well as the often implicitly secularist tone of decolonial interpretations of Marx. Such a postsecularist and decolonial Marx is the one made possible by the premises of a distinctively Latin American philosophical movement: *liberation philosophy* or *filosofía de la liberación*.

Despite a shared thematic objective with its far more recognized theological sibling (*liberation theology*), *liberation philosophy* is an autonomous intellectual movement whose discrete analyses and contributions must be understood in their own terms.³ This is a difference often overlooked in the reception of Latin American thought, when the very existence of liberation philosophy is not entirely ignored. McLennan’s aforementioned *Marxism and Religion*, for instance, while concluding that liberation theology is “more radical than even the most ‘progressive’ theologies produced in the West” (McLennan 1987, 149), says nothing of liberation philosophy’s own efforts to reformulate Marxism for the purposes of a Latin American historical context. Reacting against such Eurocentrism that expunges Latin America from the domain of philosophical relevance, liberation philosophy emerges in the early 1970s to relocate Latin America in the history of philosophy and to articulate an original and critical Latin American contribution to the philosophy of the day.⁴ Accordingly, the aim of the present article is to explicate how the method and focus of liberation philosophy allows for a postsecularist and

² Building primarily on the work of Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2008a, 2008b, 2014, 2017, 2019), I have articulated aspects of such a coloniality of the “modern/colonial secular” (Vizcaino 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022), which I also expand in a forthcoming book. Another recent decolonial account of the modern/colonial secular from distinct conceptual premises and disciplinary commitments can be seen in An Yountae (2024).

³ For an overview of the conceptual, methodological, and interpersonal overlaps between both movements, see Fornet-Betancourt 1987, 2000. This is not to say that liberation philosophy is simply the secular counterpart to liberation theology, a point that I have examined elsewhere (Vizcaino 2021a, 2021c).

⁴ Such movement positively responds to earlier debates in the region concerning the validity of an “authentic” Latin American philosophy. For an overview of these debates, see Rivera Berruz (2019). For a helpful introduction to liberation philosophy, see Dussel ([1993] 1996).

decolonial re-interpretation of Marx's work that can be helpful for the critique of the secularization thesis.

The outline of this article is as follows. First, I contextualize liberation philosophy's attempt to develop a new interpretation of the Marxist critique of religion. Such an attempt hinges on the "first thesis" of liberation philosophy, the anti-fetishist method that diagnoses domination as a process of self-sacralization or fetishization (Dussel [1993] 1996, 11). It is through such a lens that the Marxist program is then re-read, especially as outlined in the introduction to Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, where the critique of religion is taken to be "the premise of all criticism" (Marx and Engels 1975, 175). Although liberation philosophy is often inclusive of figures such as Rodolfo Kusch, Juan Carlos Scannone, Horacio Cerutti, Leopoldo Zea, and Ignacio Ellacuría, among others, this article will focus on the work of the Argentine-Mexican philosopher and theologian Enrique Dussel, simply because it comprises the deepest and most sustained engagement with Marxism within the entire movement. In the second half of this article, I therefore expound on Dussel's recently translated *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx* [*The Theological Metaphors of Marx* (Dussel [1993] 2024)], a work of tremendous originality that reveals a "proto-theology" or "implicit theology" in Marx's critique of political economy (Dussel 1993, 18, emphasis in original).⁵ At stake in such inquiry is the rejection of facile readings of Marx's presumed secularism, a conclusion that likewise promises to reconceptualize the relation between theology and philosophy in the context of epistemic decolonization.⁶

CRITIQUE OF FETISHIZED RELIGION AS THE PREMISE OF ALL CRITICISM

Though substantially expanding in the 1970s and 1980s, Dussel's engagement with Marxist theory can be traced to the beginnings of his intellectual production in the 1960s. Of relevance to this point is a retrospective characterization that Dussel asserted during the twilight of his career in the late 2010s, in which he reflected that his reading of Marx (and most precisely Marx's critique of religion) is virtually impossible to comprehend without taking into account a significant concentration of his earlier work: the "inversion" of a messianic Christianity into an imperial Christendom (Dussel 2019, 28n6). In other words, the fact that Dussel's earliest intellectual preoccupations have to do with the history of Christianity, markedly Christianity's imperial and colonial conditions, is key to deciphering the methodology of Dussel's idiosyncratic reading of Marx. For it will be argued that Marx's critique of religion does not target a generic abstract entity called *religion*. Rather, it targets the "inversion" of a specific religion into its "fetishized" form. Concretely, it marks the "inversion" of a messianic Christianity into a "Latino-Germanic Christendom" (Dussel 2019, 29). Marx's "critique of religion" is thus less a critique of *religion* as such than a critique of *fetishized religion* (Dussel 2002, 182).

Part of Dussel's interpretation of Marx's critique of religion consequently demands an understanding of Christianity's complex historical emergence and transformation into a global imperial religion. Given Christianity's messianic and anti-imperial origins, at the margins of the Roman Empire, this means understanding what had to be "inverted" or upturned for Christianity to become an imperial formation of its own. Legal procedures such as the Edict of Thessalonica (AD 380), which made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire, here

⁵ In this article, all Spanish to English translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated. Below, I also point out several translation errors found in either Dussel's sources or in his own Spanish manuscripts, most of which went uncorrected in the recent Duke University Press translation.

⁶ I have argued elsewhere that the encounters between liberation philosophy and liberation theology can show how to reconfigure disciplinary divides with an eye to epistemic decolonization (Vizcaino, forthcoming).

become part of a first “inversion” in a broader theory of “fetishization,” the latter understood as the justification of profane domination through an obfuscating process of self-sacralization.⁷ In short, what once began as an anti-imperial movement is gradually “fetishized” to lend ideological justification to a new imperial formation. This distinction between an originally authentic religion and its fetishized form, between religion as a “mytho-ethico ontological nucleus” and religion “as fundamentalism,” as Dussel puts it elsewhere (Dussel 2002, 179), is thus central to Dussel’s interpretation of Marx’s critique of religion.

According to Dussel, Marx’s account of the fetishization of religion is perceived most explicitly in the stand-alone introduction to Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*, where the task of critique is articulated across the secular/religious divide.⁸ In this short but well-known text, Marx follows Ludwig Feuerbach’s critique of religion to conceive of religion as a reflection of man’s self-alienation, as an “inverted world-consciousness” and the “sigh of the oppressed creature” (Marx and Engels 1975, 175). It is in this context that the acquainted (if poorly understood) religion as the “*opium* of the people” axiom takes place, exposing religion’s role in the justification of human systems that cause alienation (Marx and Engels 1975, 175, emphasis in original). The task of philosophy, Marx tells us, is the unmasking of all such forms of human alienation, whether in “*holy*” or “*unholy*” garb (Marx and Engels 1975, 176, emphasis in original).

However, against the facile assumption that this text purports a simplistic secularist rejection of religion, a close reading of it displays a more complex and nuanced account of religion as something more than the mere ideological justification for domination. Feuerbach’s critique of religion, Marx claims, is the assertion that “*man makes religion*” (Marx and Engels 1975, 175, emphasis in original). But man “is no abstract being encamped outside the world. Man is *the world of man*, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, an *inverted world-consciousness*, because they are an *inverted world*” (Marx and Engels 1975, 175, emphasis in original). In this presentation, we see Marx the historical materialist at his best, adding concrete historical context to the materialist but ahistorical secular critique of Feuerbach. From this new viewpoint, religion is, indeed, an alienated reflection of man (an “inverted world-consciousness”), but not because there is something universally inverted or inverting in religion. Rather, the “inverted world-consciousness” that is religion is the result of a historically specific materially “inverted world,” which is to say, the modern capitalist world.⁹

In other words, Feuerbach’s critique of religion is incomplete and therefore skewed. The unmasking of religion’s idealist inversions is only one part of the task of critique, the remaining task being the unmasking of the material sources of such inversion. And it is such a materialist analysis that now discloses a certain expressive function of religion as “the general theory of that [inverted] world” that nonetheless *expresses* “real distress” (Marx and Engels 1975, 175). It is for this reason that the critique and “struggle” against religion is “indirectly a fight against *the world* of which religion is the spiritual *aroma*” (Marx and Engels 1975, 175, emphasis in original).

⁷ As Lorand Matory has articulated (Matory 2018), the trope of fetishism is indebted to a colonial anthropology of religion that conceives of African spiritual practices and their objects (the so-called “fetish objects”) as metaphors for processes of alienation and mystification. Elsewhere (Vizcaino 2021a), I have offered a genealogy and critique of Dussel’s reliance on this trope throughout much of his work. Despite such problematic conceptual origins, I have nonetheless argued that Dussel’s redeployment of this trope offers a fruitful diagnosis when applied to the modern “dialectics of secularization” (Vizcaino 2021c; Habermas and Ratzinger [2005] 2006).

⁸ It is worthwhile to remember that only such “introduction” was actually published during Marx’s lifetime, appearing in 1844 in the short-lived journal *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, which Marx co-edited with Arnold Ruge. The complete volume as *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law* was not published until 1927.

⁹ Amer Meziane (2020) has analyzed this point in the context of the *postcolonial* critique of the secular. The comparative examination of how specific *postcolonial* and *decolonial* approaches overlap and diverge on the question of modern secularization and “religion-making” remains one of the most urgently outstanding tasks of religious studies today. For a helpful starting point, see Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair (2011).

The materialist critique here manages to comprehend religion in its ideological and expressive functions while demanding “to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions” in the first place (Marx and Engels 1975, 176, emphasis in original). This is ultimately why, in Marx’s formulation, Feuerbach’s “criticism of heaven” must necessarily turn “into the criticism of the earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics” (Marx and Engels 1975, 176, emphasis in original).

It is such a programmatic formula that provides Dussel with the cipher through which to comprehend all of Marx’s subsequent engagements with religion. Dussel’s wager is that if read carefully and in line with the materialist analysis of the ideological and expressive functions of religion, one could carefully distinguish between religion in its authentic or un-inverted forms and religion in its fetishized or fundamentalist forms in a way that makes possible talk of religions of liberation and religions of domination. In so far as Marx follows Hegel to conceive of philosophy as the overcoming of religion “in its *illusory* actuality,” there should not be any essential opposition between religion and philosophy, but only one of form (Marx and Engels 1975, 89, emphasis in original). As such, the secularist reading of Marx that simply dismisses all religion as ideology for the purposes of revolutionary theory and practice is partly mistaken. As the “general theory of that [inverted] world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in a popular form [...] the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions” (Marx and Engels 1975, 175), religion is the initial medium through which the critique of the invertedness of the world takes place. It is, therefore, in this *postsecularist* way that, from philosophical rather than theological premises, Dussel reformulates the Marxist aphorism to read: the critique of *fetishized religion* is the premise of all criticism (Dussel 2002, 182).

THEOLOGICAL METAPHORS AND THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

Having shed some light on some of the premises behind Dussel’s *postsecularist* reading of Marx, I now turn to Dussel’s *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx*, the place where he most systematically reconstructs Marx’s critique of theology as a critique of politics. Though a partial survey for the purposes of the present article, I hope to clarify how, as the liberation philosopher and distinguished Dussel translator Eduardo Mendieta has recently put it in his foreword to the English translation of *Metáforas*, Marx’s critique of political economy, as a critique of commodity fetishization, could also be read as “a theological critique of the idolatry of the commodity in bourgeois political economy” (Mendieta 2024, xiv). Furthermore, it will be this overview of how a certain philosophical approach deals with a theological question that will put on the table the reconceptualization of the relation between theology and philosophy in the context of epistemic decolonization.

Like the more well-known case of Jacques Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* (Derrida [1993] 1994), *Metáforas* first appears in print in 1993, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike Derrida’s monograph, however, *Metáforas* is not entirely composed as an immediate meditation on this historical circumstance. In fact, Dussel writes the bulk of the book in the 1970s, concurrently coinciding with the emergence of liberation theology and its own creative redeployment of Marxist theoretical frameworks.¹⁰ Indeed, throughout the 1970s, Dussel explored the various ways in which Marxism can elaborate a dialectical account of religion that can account for both the oppressive and the liberative elements in religion (Dussel 1977, 1980). By the early 1980s, the first half of *Metáforas*, the genealogy of fetishism in Marx’s work,

¹⁰ For Dussel’s detailed account of the relation between Marxism and liberation theology, see Dussel (1988).

is essentially completed, first partially appearing in Mexican academic journals before being anthologized as part of Dussel's *Praxis latinoamericana y filosofía de la liberación* (Dussel 1983). Curiously, though this intellectual production parallels the historical development of liberation theology, *Metáforas* explicitly avoids standing on theological grounds, being rather conceived as a work situated within the parameters of liberation philosophy. To fully grasp this maneuver, I believe that we must consider one more component of the book's historical background.

On August 6, 1984, the Vatican, by way of Joseph Ratzinger, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (and future Pontiff Benedict XVI), issued its contentious Instruction condemning liberation theology's "terrible contradictions" caused by its deployment of Marxist categories (CDF 1984). If this Instruction immediately made theology an inhospitable disciplinary space to explore the complex set of relations between Marxism and religion, it simultaneously made philosophy a more appealing space to do so, as the Vatican could not claim the privilege of hermeneutical authority there. In my view, it is as a reaction to these circumstances that Dussel's earlier explicitly *theological* explorations involving the place of religion in Marx and Marxism would begin to be methodologically revised on strict *philosophical* grounds. We see the consequences of these modifications just two weeks after the Vatican's Instruction as part of a series of lectures that Dussel delivers in Kerala, India, material that first appears in Spanish in 1985 and then in French in 1988. This revised material would end up becoming, almost one decade later, the core of *Metáforas*.¹¹

The philosophical grounds of *Metáforas*, outside of the hermeneutics of any one religious tradition, separates this text from theological approaches to the question in the liberationist tradition, such as José Miranda's *Marx and the Bible* ([1971] 2004), published in Spanish in 1971, or Franz Hinkelammert's *The Ideological Weapons of Death* ([1977] 1986), published in Spanish in 1977. In Miranda's case, the task is to diagnose the correct Christian biblical exegesis that can correspond to a Marxist conceptual framework (Miranda [1971] 2004). In the case of Hinkelammert, although in part sharing the content of *Metáforas* by also paying attention to Marx's theory of fetishism, the function of such an analysis is in due course a theological one that intends to develop an account of fetishism as the "spirituality" of capitalism in conversation with the "Christian message" (Hinkelammert [1977] 1981, 65, 164).

Established on philosophical rather than theological grounds, Dussel's *Metáforas* is in this sense closer in form to a text like Ernst Bloch's *Atheism in Christianity* (Bloch [1968/1972] 2009), published in German in 1968, which aims to establish a conversation between Marxism and religion "purged of ideology" (in the latter's case) and "purged of taboo" (in the former's case) (Bloch [1968/1972] 2009, 51). But whereas Bloch reads the Bible dialectically to find traces of Marxism in it, Dussel reverses the argumentative strategy by reading Marx to extract the until now hidden biblical references in his work. Subsequently, it could be said that Dussel's *Metáforas* shares the form but reverses the content of Bloch's *Atheism*, just as it partially shares the content with Hinkelammert's *The Ideological Weapons of Death* while differing in interpretative form and function.¹²

Interpreters who miss these methodological distinctions end up all too quickly diagnosing the failure of *Metáforas* because it is perceived as a forced theologization of secular concerns.¹³

¹¹ The English translation of this propaedeutic material would not appear until 2003, when they were published in *Radical Philosophy Review* under the leadership of Eduardo Mendieta (Dussel 2003a, 2003b).

¹² By extension, it could be said that Miranda's *Marx and the Bible* shares the content of Bloch's *Atheism* (a biblical exegesis) while differing in interpretative form—theological for Miranda, philosophical for Bloch. This is why, in Dussel's view, Miranda's account is ultimately that of "a Christian who looks at Marx, and not a properly Marxist interpretation" of the encounter between Marx and the Bible (Dussel 1988, 145, my emphasis). To be sure, the mutual influence and critical exchange between Dussel and Hinkelammert remains one of the most understudied topics within Latin American thought. The larger project of which the present article is a part seeks to contribute toward filling such a gap.

¹³ I reconstruct parts of this methodological distinction in two different places (Vizcaino, forthcoming; 2021c).

As Michael Löwy puts it, the metaphors explored by Dussel “are used by Marx as instruments for a scientific analysis, whereas, in liberation Christianity, they have a *properly religious* significance” (Löwy [2001] 2008, 232, my emphasis). However, this conclusion misses the entire point of *Métáforas*, which is to *philosophically* rescue the critical value of theological metaphors as a critique of politics—which is to say, to probe the theological as the unspoken infrastructure of the politico-economic. *Métáforas*, therefore, philosophically uncovers Marx’s “proto-theology” or “implicit theology” made possible by the conceptual labor of metaphoric language (Dussel 1993, 18).¹⁴

This argument is further illuminated in the context of Marx’s own critical inversion of the Hegelian system of philosophy, which *materializes* a historical idealism in an analogous way to Marx’s *historicizing* critique of Feuerbach’s *ahistorical* materialism. The influence of Hegel’s *Science of Logic* on Marx’s *Capital* is key here. If the former is understood to be the culmination of an idealist philosophy as a “science of spirit” (Hegel [1969/1816] 2010, 844), science representing “the [true] theodicy,” as Hegel once put it (Hegel 1984, 123), then its inversion would symbolize something like the true *anti-theodicy* (Dussel 1993, 12).¹⁵ This is to say that, if Hegel’s *Logic* traces the development of consciousness culminating in a self-sacralizing Absolute Idea, Marx’s *Capital* does the reverse on material politico-economic terms: it traces the development of capital as a self-sacralizing *profane* divinity, as the “fetishizing” producer of an inverted world and its inverted world-consciousness. Capital self-absolutizes itself to become the “anti-god, the Antichrist, Moloch, or the fetish” (Dussel 1993, 12). Against the all too common Althusserian reading of *Capital* as a plain science of economics, Dussel discovers not only an ethics (Dussel 1990, 429–49) but, most significantly, a “demonology” that diagnoses the alienating character of capital as a fetishized (inverted) profane divinity (Dussel 1993, 131).¹⁶

Let us take, for instance, the third volume of *Capital*, one of Marx’s last writings, published posthumously in 1894, where Marx makes the following remark concerning the character of capital: “In its capacity of interest-bearing capital, capital claims the ownership of all wealth which can ever be produced, and everything it has received so far is but an instalment for its all-engrossing appetite. By its innate laws, all surplus labour which the human race can ever perform belongs to it. *Moloch*” (Marx and Engels [1894] 1998, 394, my emphasis). This is one of many occurrences throughout Marx’s oeuvre where he compares the workings of capital to the worshipping of a divinity, in this case Moloch, the ancient Canaanite god of child sacrifices. Evidently, Dussel’s training in theology and his philosophical-anthropological investigations on ancient Semitic cultures (Dussel 1969) makes him a very perceptive reader with the ability to capture the subtle ways in which Marx deploys biblical metaphors—such as this one—to explain the workings of capital accumulation in the modern world. It is within and through this metaphoric language that the criticism of theology becomes the criticism of politics.

Now turning all the way to the early Marx, the profane self-sacralization of capital appears most explicitly in his account of money as the “worldly God” in his contentious “On the Jewish Question,” published in 1844—almost forty years before Marx’s death and fifty years before

¹⁴ Following Hinkelammert, some contemporary scholars committed to epistemic decolonization are currently exploring these dynamics in the terms of a “profane” rather than a “metaphoric” theology as a way to avoid reifying an “Enlightened” distinction between philosophy and theology (see, for instance, Orospe Hernández 2023). In my view, however, the solution to a question concerning the coloniality of knowledge cannot be solved simply by blurring or obscuring an analytic and methodological distinction. The task must be a *dialectically* creative one that redraws and re-articulates the distinction anew. For my review of Orospe, see Vizcaino (2023).

¹⁵ For a recent examination of the relation between Marx’s *Capital* and Hegel’s *Logic*, see Moseley and Smith (2014). For Dussel’s account of this relation, see *El último Marx* (1990, 334–84).

¹⁶ Dussel has most recently re-articulated the reading of *Capital* as an ethics in his *14 tesis de ética* (Dussel 2016, 118). Such an ethical approach can be traced to the influence of Emmanuel Levinas on Dussel’s philosophical framework. This is why Mendieta, for instance, in an assessment of Dussel’s *Métáforas* that precedes the book’s English translation, compares Marx’s *Capital* not to Hegel’s *Logic* per se but to Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* (Mendieta 2003, 9).

the posthumous publication of the third volume of *Capital* (Marx and Engels 1975, 170). Although some scholars have made the argument that this text endorses anti-Semitic depictions of Judaism and Jews (Lewis 1986, 112; Macoby 2006, 66), others have argued that “only the most superficial reading” of it can produce such a reactionary interpretation (Hampsher-Monk 1992, 496). Indeed, Dussel reads “On the Jewish Question” in the paradigm of the critique of religion as a critique of law, where Judaism is evaluated as having become a fetishized religion that justifies the inverted world order.

One of the more controversial passages that fit this interpretation is the following:

Money is the jealous god of Israel, in face of which no other god may exist. Money degrades all the gods of man—and turns them into commodities. Money is the universal self-established value of all things. It has therefore robbed the whole world—both the world of men and nature—of its specific value. Money is the estranged essence of man’s work and man’s existence, and this alien essence dominates him, and he worships it. The god of the Jews has become secularised and has become the god of the world. The bill of exchange is the real god of the Jew. His god is only an illusory bill of exchange. (Marx and Engels 1975, 172)

For Dussel, the object of critique in this passage is not Judaism per se but a fetishized Judaism that worships money, a formation that must be negated to make possible the emancipation not only of the Jew but also of the Christian and of the entire human community (Dussel 1993, 44). From this anti-fetishist perspective, rather than endorsing an antisemitic tirade, Marx offers a *materialist* critical response to Bruno Bauer’s *The Jewish Question* (published in 1843), which actually argues (from *idealist* premises no less) for the wholesale abolition of Judaism as the very precondition for the political emancipation of Jews in nineteenth-century Germany. Making a distinction between Judaism as an originally authentic religion and its fetishized form in the fundamentalist profane worship of money, the Marx that Dussel construes targets the latter as a critique of law (specifically the so-called Jewish question in Germany) while bracketing the former and leaving room for its contributions to the critique of politics.¹⁷

The argument regarding the self-sacralization of money continues in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, where Marx claims that Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* “excellently depicts the real nature of money” as a “visible divinity” (Marx and Engels 1975, 324, emphasis in original).¹⁸ Dussel here asserts that for the Jewish prophetic tradition, the visibility of divinity is tantamount to a “satanic” or “idolatrous” divinity that “cannot be God” because God is transcendent and therefore not visible (Dussel 1993, 50n79). It is at this point that Marx’s metaphoric theology attains a high level of sophistication. For the “divine power of money,” Marx argues, “lies in its *character* as men’s estranged alienating and self-disposing *species-nature*. Money is the alienated *ability of mankind*” (Marx and Engels 1975, 325, emphasis in original). This is to say that the profane fetishization of money into a worldly God is effectively the inversion of Christianity—that is, the inversion of the divine God (Christ) who alienated himself to become human. To put it plainly, money usurps the place of Christ but through the exact inverse route that Christ took to come into this world: if Christ alienated himself to become human, money alienates the human to become divine itself (Dussel 1993, 19). This is why a fetishized Christianity (itself the supersession of a fetishized Judaism) becomes the

¹⁷ Meziane has similarly argued that Marx’s account of Judaism describes “how religion is produced in modern liberal societies” (Amer Meziane 2020, 227). On this point, it should be noted that Dussel’s *Metáforas* anticipates Gil Anidjar’s argument in *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* for an “economic theology as hematology” that accounts for the “history of religion as political economy” (Anidjar 2014, 140–42).

¹⁸ Peter Demetz has argued that Marx’s encounter with Shakespeare helped him lose his tongue concerning the social character of money (Demetz [1959] 1967, 157). Dussel cites Demetz’s *Marx, Engels Und Die Dichter* as one of the few scholarly analyses attuned to Marx’s demonology (Dussel 1993, 18n29).

model religion of capitalism: it is the “inverted world-consciousness” that mirrors and thereby justifies an “inverted world.”

The correspondence between the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and “On the Jewish Question” lends credibility to the assessment that Marx is not staging an anti-Semitic viewpoint. So contrary to the drastic opinions of scholars who claim that Marx was ashamed of his own Jewishness (Macoby 2006, 63) or those on the other end who contend that “there is no evidence that Marx’s Jewishness directly influenced his views on religion” (McLellan 1987, 8), Dussel reveals the Judeo-Christian hermeneutic horizon on which Marx inserts his own theological metaphors. Said otherwise, it could be claimed that Marx belongs to a prophetic messianic tradition that conceives of the critique of profane fetishization as the condition of possibility for revolutionary praxis (Dussel 2002, 181). This is a tradition that includes figures such as “Isaiah, Jeremiah and Jesus, all of whom affirm that ‘the origin of all criticism is the criticism of (fetishist) religion’” (Dussel 2002, 182). Indeed, failing to grasp this “argumentative strategy” in Marx would likely result in the accusation of “anti-Semitism,” but it would have to be an “anti-Semitism” that also applies to the critiques of Israel made by the likes of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Jesus (Dussel 1993, 136n4). Evidently, such a superficial reading would miss the very distinction between an originally authentic religion and its fetishized form, overlooking the metaphoric deployment of the theological register as a critique of capitalism.

At last, it should not come as a surprise that Dussel finds in the first volume of *Capital* (published in 1867), specifically that most famous section on “The Fetishism of Commodities,” one of the strongest illustrations of Marx’s theological argumentative strategy. This section contains an explicit allusion to the theological backdrop of commodities: “A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and *theological niceties*” (Marx and Engels [1872] 1996, 81, my emphasis). To illustrate such a theological backdrop, Marx notoriously relies on the concept of *fetishism*, which European intellectuals formulated in the eighteenth century to explicate the workings of some animistic religions in Africa, where “the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race” (Marx and Engels [1872] 1996, 81). For Marx, such a concept of fetishism permits him to make the critical assertion that modern European societies engage in practices of profane worship analogous to those found in a seemingly “pre-modern” Africa.¹⁹ In both cases, the social relations of production out of which human constructions are produced (commodities and fetishes) are concealed by an ideological process encapsulated by the notion of *fetishization*. Indeed, it is specifically out of this notion of *fetishization* that Dussel builds his own theory of fetishization that correspondingly makes possible the postsecularist reading of Marx that we have only begun to partly uncover in this article.

Excursus on Translation

Before concluding this article, it must be said that part of Dussel’s overall interpretation of Marx’s critique of theology as a critique of politics relies on an until now overlooked error found in Pedro Scaron’s translation of *Das Kapital* into Spanish, which is the only Spanish translation that Dussel cites, even while also citing the German original. The German original for the first quote from the first volume of *Capital* cited above is as follows: “Eine Waare scheint auf den ersten Blick ein selbstverständliches, triviales Ding. Ihre Analyse ergibt, daß sie ein sehr vertracktes Ding ist, voll metaphysischer Spitzfindigkeit und theologischer Mucken” (Marx and Engels [1872] 1987, 102). Scaron uses the term “endemoniado” [demonized] (Marx [1872/1975]

¹⁹ See note 7 for a critical inquiry on the trope of *fetishism*. The larger project of which the present article is a part expands this critical reception.

2008, 87) to correspond to “vertracktes” in the German (Marx and Engels [1872] 1987, 102), which is translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling in the standard Engels-supervised English edition as “queer” (Marx and Engels [1872] 1996, 81). Rather than being a tricky or complicated object [“vertracktes”], the commodity here appears to be *over-represented as a demonized object*—“un objeto endemoniado, rico en sutilezas metafísicas y reticencias teológicas [a demonized object, rich in metaphysical subtleties and theological reticence]” (Marx [1872/1975] 2008, 87, my emphasis; Dussel 1993, 154).

What is most noteworthy is that none of the other major Spanish translations of Marx’s *Das Kapital* ([1867/1946] 2021, [1890/1976] 2007, [1890] 1990) reproduce this error: Wenceslao Roces translates “vertracktes” as “intricate” [“algo muy intrincado”] (Marx [1867/1946] 2021, 72, my emphasis), whereas Vicente Romano García and Cristian Fazio use “complicated”—“una cosa muy complicada” for Romano (Marx [1890/1976] 2007, 101, my emphasis) and “un objeto muy complicado” for Fazio (Marx [1890] 1990, 77, my emphasis). To be clear, correcting this specific mistranslation does not entirely refute Dussel’s reading, as the trope of *fetishism* is the primary evidential focus of it. It does result, however, in a more subtle account of Marx’s “argumentative strategy.” Even scholars who have otherwise greatly contributed to a better understanding of Dussel’s postsecular reading of Marx, such as Gabriel Livov (2005, 203, 228) and Mario Orospe Hernández (2016, 89), have missed this error and thus reproduced it verbatim, even while also explicitly citing the German original.

Given the above, English readers of Dussel’s work ought to be especially careful with the posthumous English translation of *Metáforas* (undertaken by Camilo Pérez-Bustillo), as it often reproduces some of these originally erroneous references (see, e.g., Dussel [1993] 2024, 42, 65, 90). Even when Pérez-Bustillo does cross-reference and thereby correct Dussel’s Spanish citations of Marx with the Moore and Aveling standard English translation of *Capital*, there is no additional translation commentary that might explain why “queer” is meant to signify Marx’s “theological intent” (Dussel [1993] 2024, 88, emphasis in original). Perhaps even more problematic is the fact that just below that reference, Pérez-Bustillo takes additional creative liberties to translate Dussel’s/Scaron’s “objeto endemoniado” as a “transcendent” object (Dussel [1993] 2024, 88), ostensibly undoing the entire materializing and *immanent* aspect of the profane self-sacralization that the notion of *fetishization* is supposed to denote in the first place.

Though this is not the place to examine the potential reasons behind and broader implications of these errors in Dussel’s scholarship (and the translations of his work), I hope this short excursus has at least made clear that a cautious and methodical study of them is in order.

CONCLUSION

Not a theology in the sense that it does not depart from within the hermeneutics of a community of faith, Dussel’s postsecularist philosophical reading of Marx nevertheless allows for a reconceptualization of the relation between theology and philosophy in the context of epistemic decolonization. The conclusions of Dussel’s postsecularist turn outside of theology nevertheless return to the theological register by directly responding to the Vatican’s Instruction against liberation theology, which saw the relation between Marxism and religion (Christianity as a revealed truth, to be specific) as one of direct contradiction. Dussel instead detects the theological subtextuality in Marx’s work to open a new horizon of interpretation between Marxism and religion, “purged of ideology” and “purged of taboo,” just as Ernst Bloch sought to do in his *Atheism in Christianity* (Bloch [1968/1972] 2009, 51). Given Dussel’s solid standing within both liberation philosophy and liberation theology, it is noteworthy that the movement for the decolonization of philosophy of the last few decades (Maldonado-Torres et al. 2018; Monahan 2019; Mungwini et al. 2019) led Dussel, in one of his last works published before his death,

to call for the decolonization of theology “as the last stage” of his career, even as it was “from the beginning a traveling companion of the decolonization of philosophy and history” (Dussel 2020, 153, my emphasis). This formulation of the decolonization of theology as “the last stage” that returns to the beginning is indicative of the dialectical and symbiotic relation between liberation philosophy and liberation theology, out of which a new trans-disciplinary reorganization can grow to expose, as Marx sought to do, the profane divinities of an inverted world, “hidden by secularism and invisible to their worshippers” (Dussel 2020, 154n8).

Dussel’s *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx* ultimately unveils the ways in which Marx’s deployment of theological metaphors makes a fundamental critique of modern political economy. In this “argumentative strategy,” just like the German preacher Thomas Müntzer did over three hundred years before during the German Peasants’ War of 1525, Marx turns the Bible against the Christian in a way that recognizes the original criticality of what was once put on its head.²⁰ A fundamental contradiction between fetishized religion (particularly Christianity, though also Judaism) and capitalism is put forward, where Marx’s critique of religion corners the modern Christian to respond to the theological justification of alienation, exploitation, and domination. If capital is a profane divinity, the Christian must either abandon Christianity in the name of capitalism or renounce capitalism in the name of Christianity (Dussel 1993, 131). Marx’s critique of theology as the critique of politics aims precisely to refute any potential attempt to reconcile these two extremes. On the one hand, the critique of theology exposes the fetishization of Christianity as the religion of Moloch—as the theory or logic of capitalism, as Alberto Toscano puts it (Toscano 2010, 16). On the other hand, the critique of politics warns against an understanding of a capitalism that corresponds to such inverted Christianity (Dussel 1993, 131). At a crossroads between theology and philosophy, Dussel’s postsecularist and decolonial Marx performs a “messianic return to the origins,” where a critical Christianity “inverts the inversion of Christianity” to make it “contradictory to capitalism” (Dussel 2020, 148, emphasis in original).

Such a postsecularist and decolonial Marx promises to contribute toward the opening of several venues of investigation not only within the field of religious studies but also within the philosophical study of Marx’s work and the decolonial critique of modernity/coloniality more generally. Most apparently, the widespread assumption regarding Marx’s presumed secularism is clearly contested by way of an analysis of Marx’s deployment of theological metaphors.²¹ Marx’s critique of religion is certainly a far more complex issue than it is often assumed. Rather than being a simplistically secularist critique of religion for being essentially alienating, what surfaces is a nuanced critique that targets a certain fetishization of religion as the ideological expression of an “inverted world.” From such an interpretation, Dussel’s reading then shows how one could begin to craft a novel (postsecularist and decolonial) philosophy of religion that recognizes the critical potential of religious discourses and practices in the context of unsettling the Eurocentric coloniality of knowledge behind the reigning “formation” of “the secular”—that is, *secularism* (Asad 2003; Dussel 2002). In short, it offers a different diagnosis of, and a

²⁰ Indeed, for Dussel, liberation theologians and Marx find their historical antecedent in the theological battles between Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer during the Reformation, which Dussel analyzes as depicted in Engels’s *The Peasant War in Germany*. Dussel, however, misreads or misconstrues a passage where Engels depicts Luther’s biblical critique of feudalism. Dussel cites this passage as referring to Müntzer, when it in fact refers to Luther (Dussel 1993, 57n96; Marx and Engels 1978, 419). This is the case even after Dussel alludes to the passage in German (Marx and Engels 1960, 350–51). This error is repeated *verbatim* in several of Dussel’s publications, even his most recent one (Dussel 2020, 146), and it is also not cross-referenced and thus missed by Pérez-Bustillo in his recent translation (Dussel [1993] 2024, 23). To be clear, this is an error that does not misrepresent Müntzer’s position per se, but it does exaggerate the differences between Müntzer and Luther. For Engels, *both* made use of the Bible against the feudal order by returning to the origins of Christianity; the contrast is that Luther “turned it against the peasants” whereas Müntzer developed a religious philosophy that “approached atheism” and a political program that “approached communism” which sought to “establish this Heaven, the kingdom of God, here on earth” (Marx and Engels 1978, 419, 422).

²¹ See the assessment of this point by Joseph Blankholm (2020).

different prescription to, the question of the modern “dialectics of secularization” (Habermas and Ratzinger [2005] 2006) across the shifting dividing lines between philosophy and theology.

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