CHAPTER 16

BLOCH'S ATHEISM AND ONTOLOGY: A SKETCH

The aim of this chapter is to bring to light the kind of atheism in Bloch's thought, the reasons he has for this atheism, and the ontological model that underlies what serves as a reason - at least insofar as such ontological presuppositions mesh with one of the ontological models presented in the preceding section, namely, the subject-object or will-nature model. This purpose serves this essay's larger intent, to see how hope-analysis and analysis of grounds for hope incline towards theism or atheism, particularly as mediated by certain ontological presuppositions. For this larger purpose, then, Bloch's thought serves as a paradigm of one kind of atheism and one type of ontology.

Much of Bloch's evaluation of religion has been dealt with earlier. Religion is not simply the opium of the people; it is also their outcry, their protest against oppression. But it must be correctly interpreted, it must be "inherited," and Marxism provides the general canons for correct interpretation. The basic message of religion correctly interpreted is messianism. Bloch maintains that the history of religions establishes this. From Cadmus to Moses and Jesus, religion has been characterized, in an ever stronger and clearer way, by three features: the proclamation of deliverance and the promise of the kingdom of God (messianism); increasing identification of the message and the messenger insofar as deliverance is proclaimed by one who is himself the deliverer; and increasing clarity that the deity referred to is not a Lord above, but is rather an open future ahead - the corollary of this last feature is atheism. In Moses Bloch finds a shift from the Sinai Lord of heaven above to the Exodus-God. Moses himself is one who not only announces liberation but also leads his people out of Egypt. Bloch typically understands Jesus through interpretations of the Anselmian phrase Cur Deus homo and the passage from the Gospel According to John "I and the Father are one." Bloch takes traditional homoousios doctrine in a radical anthropological sense: corrected, message and messenger declare homo

1. This is the gist of the argument of PH's chap. 53, translated in MO as "Man's Increasing Entry into Religious Mystery." The argument is carried out concerning Christianity in Atheism in Christianity.

2. PH 1402, 1450ff., 1456f., MO (MIE) 150-51, 165ff., 171f.

3. The Anselmian phrase is employed to the indicated effect in PH 1417, 1515, MO (MIE) 165, 209, and in AC 218/170. The Johannine text is cited in AC 214/167.

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homini Deus – whatever is humankind’s God is really humankind itself. What is really proclaimed and declared possible is the kingdom of God – without God.

Bloch’s principal argument for atheism is thus one from the history of religions: correct interpretation of religion’s message and of religious founders brings to light an atheism for the sake of the kingdom. The style of such interpretation is derived from Feuerbach. There is, however, an implicit secondary argument in favor of atheism, one that proceeds from the very kind of deities found through history of religion. God shows up in the manner of a Lord and Pharaoh; beneath such deity humanity is in thrall. But religions’ message is that the kingdom is possible, and this kingdom is not possible with a “throning” deity. Therefore no such Lord-above is consistent with the core of religions’ message.

Yet while Bloch follows Feuerbach, he also has a quarrel with him. Feuerbach’s God was bourgeois, and consequently so was his Man. But, correctly interpreted, the future which religion proclaims, and the hope it urges, is “explosive, total, and incognito.” “Totally Other” still applies – to humanity. Deus absconditus is actually homo, but no less absconditus; it is still hidden what man can become.

It is beyond the paradigm-character of this sketch of Bloch’s atheism to review his long analysis of the history of religions and give detailed evaluation of his approach. His atheism involves an unmasking of a God lording it over man; he does this for the sake of declaring for human possibilities.

4. PH 1521, MO (MIE) 213; PH 1493, MO (MIE) 190-91; AC 215-17/168-69. See also Bloch’s use of the phrase Eritis sicut Deus in PH 1504, MO (MIE) 202; TEP 183, MO (RT) 114; PH 1556.

5. “Where there is a great master of the world there is no room for freedom, not even for the freedom of God’s children. Nor is there any room for the figure of the kingdom, for the mystical democracy of chiliastic hope. The utopia of the kingdom wipes out the fiction of a divine creator and the hypostasis of a God in heaven, but precisely does not wipe out the final space in which ens perfectissimum has the abyss of its yet unthwarted latency. The existence of God – indeed God as such, as a distinct being – is superstition; faith is solely the belief in a messianic kingdom of God, without God. Therefore, far from being an enemy of religious utopianism, atheism is its premiss: without atheism there is no room for messianism.” PH 1413, MO (MIE) 161-62. God is “überflüssig.” PH 272.