



Herzen's Interpretation of Religion as an Illusion of Open Philosophy: Taking into Account the Research Perspective in Poland¹

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ABSTRACT: Herzen's critical analysis of religion and religiousness of man allows one to better understand his anti-dogmatic intellectual stance, dubbed here as open philosophy. The article shows Alexander Herzen as opposing any type of religion, understood broadly as any set of beliefs (not necessarily relating to the transcendent sphere) that stifles individual freedom and is, in effect, an illusion of open philosophy. All religiousness is connected with the notion of a dogma; yet, Herzen claimed in addition that "there would be no freedom in the world unless religion and politics become a simple human matter, open for criticism and rejection." The article also aims to show that Herzen's ideas revolve around the place of women in the world organised by religion and, thus, that Herzen's 19th century contribution is an important voice in the debate on the emancipation of women. The overall conclusion stemming from the arguments presented in the article is that there exists a clearly emerging tension between Herzen and religion. The open philosophy, as presented by Herzen, is at the same time areligious and explorative.

KEYWORDS: Alexander Herzen, Religion, open philosophy, Russian philosophy, Polish philosophy.

Introduction

The task of analysing Alexander Herzen's (1812–1870) ideas on religion and religiousness can be helpful in understanding his open, anti-dogmatic intellectual stance. He deals with religion on at least two levels; and for both of these, the notion of dogma is key. Firstly, as a studious reader

¹ This article is a revised version of the chapter of my book *Aleksandra Hercena dyskurs o człowieku, czyli projekt rosyjskiej filozofii otwartej* (IFiS PAN, Warszawa 2016).



of Feuerbach, Herzen rejects all revealed religions, although it should be said that in his writings, he distinguishes Christianity as a religion culturally closest to himself. Secondly, he is also a vehement enemy of religion understood as any collection of beliefs, not necessarily touching on transcendent issues but simply sanctifying some aspect of the material world. It is with this broader definition in mind that Herzen critiques the religion of progress and various “isms,” e.g. communism. Viewing his ideas this way allows one to better understand the peculiar situation of the intellectual legacy of this Russian thinker. For Herzen is either deemed as not fitting any theoretical framework or, on the contrary, misappropriated under various labels, often alien to his thought.

Herzen's approach to religion

With this broader definition in mind, it can be seen that in his view all religiousness is related to dogmas and all religiousness with its “gods” and “cults” is related to some form of an enslavement. We also note that any attempt at tying Herzen's ideas to a specific notion of religion would mean that his proposal morphs into a formal imperative, thus making his philosophy a closed system. This is because Herzen would have to then consider some chosen statement—either revealed or accepted on some other basis—as unalterable and ultimately certain, whereas he goes against all holiness: “there is no freedom in the world until religion and politics become a simple human affair open to criticism and rejection. ... It is not enough to despise the crown, one also needs to stop respecting the Phrygian cap”². Religion in any guise is, according to Herzen, an obstacle to freedom. Lactantius, a Christian apologist, derived the word “religion” from Latin “religare” (to tie, to bind), which was supposed to indicate a bond between man and God.³ However, in Herzen's interpretation, religion becomes a bondage, indicating a dependence and enslavement of humans—in that reading, religion separates man from the real, temporal, existence.

Yet, his conclusion on how the presence of religion in human consciousness leads to de-realisation of man's existence does not mean that Herzen wishes to wage a total war against the Church or the Christian God. Instead, the thinker, who is often referred to as an atheist⁴ in the literature, found

² А. Герцен, *С того берега*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 6, Академия наук СССР, Москва 1955, p. 46. According to Walicki, “the repulsion against all ‘religion,’ all doctrinaires stayed with Herzen till the end of his life” (A. Walicki, *Osobowość a historia. Studia z dziejów literatury i myśli rosyjskiej*, PIW, Warszawa 1959, p. 168).

³ See Z. Zdybicka, *Człowiek i religia. Zarys filozofii religii*, TN KUL, Lublin 1993, p. 280.

⁴ Apparently, Mikhail Bakunin called him a “raging atheist,” see A. Kamiński, *Michaił Bakunin*.

courage to also point to the positive aspects of religion. This positive response is best visible in the Hegelian period of his ideological development, when he engages in a polemic with the formalists that looked down at the concrete, individual from the heights of lifeless, universal rationality. In his article "Concerning a certain drama," he says that despite "religion *being directed* towards the other world, where earthly passions are not present," it is also a place where "personality is acknowledged, universality is lowered to the level of an individual, and conversely, an individual is raised to the level of universality without ceasing to be himself" and further that "religion has essentially two categories: universal divine personality and individual human personality. A formal approach stifles the living individuals for the sake of the abstract universals"⁵. The position of religion, given it is present on the two levels of reality, the universal and the individual, is higher than that of the Hegelian formalism. Herzen notes that the supporters of the formalist approach viewed the world focusing on the extreme forms of universality: "in religion it is not only the ascending to the universality that takes place, but one also observes a descent from such heights to the level of individuals, exhibiting concern about them"⁶. Thus, religion is the place where two areas come into contact—the lowered human (individual) sphere and the raised divine one.

Herzen's moderately positive approach to religion is also related to his personal story, connected to the experiences of the exile when still a young person (in the 1830s). The thinker, exiled by the government to live in the province, saved himself from the hardships of isolation by reading the Gospels: "in that period . . . more than ever I was inclined toward mysticism. Separation, exile, religious exaltation present in the letters I had received, love that had been overcoming my soul and the sense of contrition that was tormenting me Even two years after that period, mystical and social

Życie i myśl: Podpalacz Europy (1848–1864), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 2013, vol. 2, p. 202.

⁵ А. Герцен, *По поводу одной драмы*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 2, Академия наук СССР, Москва 1954, p. 61.

⁶ А. Герцен, *Дилетантизм в науке*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 3, Академия наук СССР, Москва 1954, p. 70. Interestingly, already in his *Diary* from 1842, Herzen writes the following, comparing the orthodox thinker Aleksey Khomyakov and the formalists: "when it comes to consistency, he is often way ahead of the Hegelian formalists, saying directly that the Hegelian principles cannot be the basis for *Persönlichkeit Gottes, die Transcendenz* without falling for the trap that this necessarily entails *Immanenz*" (А. Герцен, *Дневник 1842–1845*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 2, Академия наук СССР, Москва 1954, p. 250).

ideas influenced me”⁷. His religious inclinations, despite their seeming depth, I view in terms of being lost, and thus resulting from a momentary dimness of mind. I am inclined to believe that this was the case, given his decidedly areligious scientific interests in the period preceding the exile.⁸ The argument for considering his stance as religious indifference can also be supported, in my opinion, by the fact that Herzen, interested in the notion of social transformation allowing for the realisation of the ideal justice, directed his attention toward the French socialists. Young Herzen’s scepticism translates, as I see it, into criticism and anti-dogmatism, which are characteristic of the philosophical approach to problems.⁹

Herzen’s second abandonment of religion takes place at the beginning of the 1840s as a result of his acquaintance with the works of Hegel and Feuerbach. He gradually comes to realise that while religion does contain certain elements that help amend spiritual pains, this comes at a price of

⁷ А. Герцен, *Былое и думы*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 8, Академия наук СССР, Москва 1956, p. 288. Grzegorz Przebinda noticed that “in his early, religious, phase (1834), Herzen viewed Haydn’s symphonies as a great depiction of human joyfulness from the period before the fall related to the original sin” (G. Przebinda, *Od Czaadajewa do Bierdiajewa. Spór o Boga i człowieka w myśli rosyjskiej (1832–1922)*, Polska Akademia Umiejętności, Kraków 1998, p. 77). Andrzej Walicki notes that “it was a phase when his religious feelings were in full swing. While in prison, in detention, Herzen read the New Testament with teary eyes; ... he came to realise that the world is nothing but ‘vanity of vanities’ and turned to God” (A. Walicki, *Aleksander Hercen przed rokiem 1850*, [in:] A. Hercen, *Pisma filozoficzne*, przeł. J. Walicka, PWN, Warszawa 1965, vol. 1, p. XII).

⁸ In that respect, his *My Past and Thoughts* are revealing. Herzen in the eyes of others is seen as a free-thinker, an opponent of Orthodox Church, a supporter of Saint-Simon and a man without religion, see А. Герцен, *Былое и думы*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 8, pp. 351, 352.

⁹ Herzen grew up in a peculiar situation: “as I was about fifteen years old, my father asked an Orthodox priest to teach me theology, which was necessary for someone willing to be accepted at a university. I studied the catechism after I had read Voltaire. ... My father thought that religious education is a mark of a well-educated individual; he often said that the Scripture should be accepted on faith, without trying to understand it, as reason cannot help us in fathoming anything ... He hardly ever talked to the batiushka himself, and he sometimes asked the priest to sing in an empty room, for which he would send him the blue banknote. In winter months, he would say that the priest and the deacon bring the chill inside and he is afraid to fall ill. ... Each year, my father told me to prepare for confession. I was afraid of that and in any case the church’s *mise-en-scène* filled me with amazement and awe; I trembled when taking communion but this was not a religious experience; it was that fear, which is induced by everything that is unintelligible and mysterious, especially when served with solemnity: this is the way, in which all divination and witchcraft work. Having eaten my fill of eggs, paskha and cakes after the resurrection, I did not spare a single thought to religion for the entire coming year” (А. Герцен, *Былое и думы*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 8, pp. 53-55).

accepting dualism and the separation of man from the real, material world. Religiousness pushes an individual towards resentment and a pernicious illusion, and this illusion is nothing like the ones experienced elsewhere, e.g. while reading a book or enjoying a theatre play and as a result moving beyond the every-day reality. Both a book and a dramatic performance eventually do end (with the last page or with the lowering of the stage curtains), marking the comeback to the reality and thus reinforcing the feeling that the time is up for this temporary transposition to the world of magic. Religion, by contrast, completely encompasses those exposed to it and does not offer this sort of termination. It is interesting that Herzen's ideas are very similar to the views on religion held by young Karl Marx, who in 1844 wrote that the "criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism The criticism of religion disillusions man to make him think and act and shape his reality like a man who has been disillusioned and has come to reason"¹⁰—fighting the religious picture of the world means also fighting for a human-centred picture of the world. Instead of the imagined God and transcendence, both Marx and Herzen choose the real man and immanence. Marx also notices that religion—similar to a medicine or opium—reduces pain, provides consolation for the lonely, poor, lame or disenfranchised: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless"¹¹, religion is like a flower placed over shackles that does not truly address the source of pain but simply covers it. Indeed, the position of the lame or poor does not change with the discovery of God. Herzen is clear about rejecting the sort of consolation provided by yielding to the sacrum for the price of cutting ties with the empirical world: he rejects such a relief, as it dangerously moves man closer to insanity. This is so since one that believes in religious claims, just as the inhabitants of the Platonic cave, mistakes the shadows for the reality. For Herzen, the biblical Abraham, although arguably internally ecstatic, on no level can be called a knight of faith and will forever be a psychotic child murderer.¹²

¹⁰ K. Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction*, [in:] K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, Lawrence & Wishart 2010, pp. 175, 176. Isaiah Berlin thought that "Herzen owes more to Marx than he is ready to admit" (*Listy Isaiaha Berlina do Andrzeja Walickiego. 1962–1996*, [in:] A. Walicki, *Spotkania z Isaiahem Berlinem. Dzieje intelektualnej przyjaźni*, IHN PAN, Warszawa 2014, p. 91).

¹¹ K. Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction*, p. 175. It should be mentioned that Marx was neither the first nor the only one to have used the opium metaphor. Andrzej Nowicki's book contains the information that this way of describing religion can be found in the works of the poet Heinrich Heine, Bruno Bauer or Moses Hess, among others. See A. Nowicki, *Ateizm*, Iskra, Warszawa 1964, pp. 82–83.

¹² In his novel entitled *Dr. Krupov*, Herzen vividly presented the essence of religiousness

In the middle of the 1840s, the mystical ideas disappear from Herzen's writings and, making good use of Feuerbach's philosophy, he begins perceiving religion as a destructive force, which can alienate rather than provide authentic consolation.

Herzen's areligious rationalism

One could ask, what is the content of this areligious rationalism as exemplified by Herzen? His approach to religion—and Christianity takes the centre stage here—is clearly critical, with negation being a natural consequence of his views. His thought horizon is determined by a mortal human individual placed in an immanent sphere of existence that is composed of both material and spiritual sides (as reflected in history on the one hand and culture on the other). In the project of Herzen's open, that is anti-dogmatic, philosophy there is no space for any type of universality subduing man in a reified form as an element of a metaphysical schema. The individual, according to Herzen, defending his objective status, rebels against the domination of universality, and this also means that in this ontological and existential programme the Christian God has no place. Feuerbach stated that in Christianity man "places in God all the features that he considers values. This way, he rids himself of values, an opposition between the sacrum of the underworld and the divine inhabiting it and the de-sacralised order of man's earthly existence. If God is good, loving, just, wise, etc., then man is not"¹³. Herzen adds that the Christian God impoverishes man, rids him of pride, dominates over him and pushes him along the path to the perceived happiness, which necessarily leads through the gates of death.¹⁴

(in its transcendent and immanent guise alike) as a result of tunnel vision, immaturity and mental illness: "Open any history book. You will be struck by the fact that instead of real goals, everything is governed by the imaginary ones; notice in the name of what all the blood is shed and humans suffer the worst tortures, what is being praised and what is being condemned and you will be confronted with a conclusion that all this is a result of a mental illness. This might sound sad, but on a closer look it is truly uplifting. . . . Here Curtius jumps into the abyss to save the city, there a father sacrifices his daughter in order to bring a favourable wind and finds an old fool who slaughters the poor girl. And yet that madman was not put in shackles but announced the highest priest! . . . Once the Christians stopped being tortured and thrown to be eaten by wild animals, they started to torture and oppress their own kind with even the greater zeal" (А. Герцен, *Доктор Крупов*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, Академия наук СССР, Москва 1955, vol. 4, pp. 263-264).

¹³ R. Panasiuk, *Feuerbach: filozofia Boga i człowieka*, [in:] L. Feuerbach, *Wybór pism*, transl. K. Krzemieniowa, M. Skwiecieński, PWN, Warszawa 1988, vol. 1, p. XXXVI.

¹⁴ An interesting fragment is contained in Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts*, describing Christianity as a religion of death, a religion alien to life: "this is precisely what Christianity

There is yet another reason why Herzen deems Christianity suspicious: it is a way to propagate the dualistic approach to ontology, which is alien to this Russian thinker, and to artificially split being into immanence and transcendence, into body and immaterial soul. Herzen concludes that this division of reality into two spheres of being brings unnecessary complications to already complex problems dealt with by philosophers and scientists alike. Moreover, science is thus tangled with the magical space of religion, with its puzzling category of God, with all the uncertainty about whether God exists and what God's attributes are. The introduction of such peculiar themes, which go beyond what is material, seems to Herzen ridiculous and potentially damaging, as does taking heed of descriptions that lack a concrete reference points. In that sense, a discourse about God might equally be replaced with a discussion about the ways in which fairies could be said to exist. Herzen's critical approach, often laced with sarcasm, was also related to the fact that religion seems to equate man with his soul, viewed as an element that brings man closer to God, the purest of spirits. The problem is that this Christian affirmation of spirit leads to a contempt for corporeal dimension and a disregard of vitality. Herzen compares the claims made within Christianity to those made in ancient times, stating that these pictures of reality are antithetical: "instead of pride, Christians exhibit humility; instead of accumulating goods—they willingly push themselves into poverty; instead of relishing their senses, they find pleasure in sacrifices"¹⁵. In Herzen's view, religion rids man of his humanity—and this view is clearly influenced by Feuerbach, who argued that man, when placing in his creation of God the most beautiful side of himself, is stripped of this beauty, becomes impoverished, belittled and degraded.

needs for a complete apotheosis of death; a contempt for the earth, a contempt for the body does not have another sense. Therefore, to oppress all that is connected to life and reality: pleasure, happiness, health, joy, a carefree tuning into one's own existence" (А. Герцен, *Былое и думы*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, Академия наук СССР, Москва 1956, vol. 9, pp. 25-26. Some researchers claim that at this point, the ideas of Herzen and Nietzsche converge. See С. Булгаков, *Душевная драма Герцена*, [in:] К. Исупов [ed.], *А. И. Герцен: pro et contra. Личность и творчество А. И. Герцена в оценке российских исследователей и деятелей культуры*, Санкт-Петербург 2012, pp. 254-255. According to Grzegorz Przebinda "Nietzsche, similarly to Herzen in Russia before him, considered Christianity a *religion of death*" (G. Przebinda, op. cit., p. 327).

¹⁵ А. Герцен, *Письма об изучении природы*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 3, Академия наук СССР, Москва 1954, p. 220. The same work states that the Christian "New World did not believe in the material reality and physical phenomena, it rejected the passing reality, believed in spiritual phenomena, beauty was considered as an imperfect expression of what exists at the highest level" (ibid., pp. 221-222).

Naturally, such an approach to religion leads to questions regarding the status of the corporeal element. The rebirth of the body worship was considered by Herzen a way of rebelling against Christian morality, which negated the sensual side of humans.¹⁶ Just as history and culture are an extension of the natural world, the spirit is not separate from the body and instead forms a whole with it. Herzen rejects the notions of a pure spirit or pure awareness: in the immanent reality, the spirit has no place outside of the body. Herzen aims to “take back what has been lost [by a man—J.U.] for the sake of a mythical God”¹⁷. He also claims that in the process, man lost his corporeality, sensuality and the ability to manifest his own original Ego. Christianity seems to him a religion that despises life and happiness. This is most visible in the beautifully written fragments on the body of the virgin-mother: “with her, into the eternal funerals, the doomsday and other atrocities concocted in the Church theodicy, comes life, love and gentleness. ... Truly, she is disruptive to the Christian rites: she cannot separate herself from her human nature, and thus warms the cold church, above all remaining a woman and a mother. With her natural birth, she takes vengeance for the unnatural conception and forces a blessing for her bosom from the mouths of monks who otherwise curse all corporeality”¹⁸. For Herzen, the sensual side of human existence, which is expressed by the passions of the body, is the basis for humanity. In order to show man as the unity of body and spirit, Herzen makes yet another symbolic use of the biblical Mary, who “born like the rest of us, pleads for humans and pities them; with her a living union of body and spirit seeps through to religion. If she had not been born in a regular, human, way, there would have been nothing in common between us and her, we would not have felt sorry for her, the body would once again have been cursed”¹⁹. Let me emphasise that Herzen’s argumentation is indirectly, yet unmistakably revolving around the notion of woman’s place in the world as organised by religion and church. Women play an indirect role, placed at the outskirts, and their bodies are viewed as an instrument leading men to perdition. I view Herzen’s remarks as a brave attempt to voice an opinion in the discussion on the emancipation of women. In his writings, this leads to the emphasis on the value of temporality, presence, momentariness, living in the here-and-now. In 1835, in his letters to Natalya Zakharina,

¹⁶ See A. Герцен, *Дуализм — это монархия*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 12, Академия наук СССР, Москва 1957, p. 234.

¹⁷ G. Przebinda, op. cit., p. 37.

¹⁸ А. Герцен, *Былое и думы*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 8, pp. 386, 387.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 388.

he wrote in an exalted manner that: "they say that you intend to become a nun; do not expect that this will put a smile on my face—I do understand your intentions, but things must be considered thoroughly. Is not your heart troubled with the thoughts of love? Monastery—is despair Do you doubt that you will meet a man who would fall in love with you, with whom you will fall in love as well?"²⁰. Religion, with its monastery and church, is synonymous with resignation and inaction: an escape from freedom in the name of an abstract eternity and an equally abstract salvation. Yet again, Herzen affirms life and action. In that sense, he proposes a notion of the philosophy of action. One notes that his arguments are surprisingly similar to what Nietzsche had to say when negating Christianity, which, as he put it, fed on death and mere vegetation: „But whoever belongs to me must be of strong bones, also light of foot—must be eager for wars and festivals, no gloomy Gus, no dreamy Joe, just as ready for what is hardest as for his festival, healthy and hale"²¹.

Was Herzen an anti-theist?

Let us consider now whether this clear anti-essentialism leads Herzen to anti-theism. In one of the articles, this label was described as follows: "if this notion is defined as fighting against theistic religions, the prototypical anti-theists include Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, and placing Herzen in this context (with his soft areligiousness) is controversial and adds confusion"²². Herzen does indeed, as indicated above, place what is natural immediateness (corporeality, materiality) found in the Ancient times in opposition to the spiritualism of Christianity and argues that "neither Luther nor Voltaire did draw such an impenetrable line between the old and the new as did Augustine"²³, who, nevertheless, was unable

²⁰ Ibid., p. 392. This religious tension, characteristic of the unstable exile period, is mentioned by e.g. Irena Żelwakowa, see И. Желвакова, *Герцен, Молодая гвардия*, Москва 2010, p. 63.

²¹ F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, transl. A. del Caro, Cambridge University Press 2006, p. 231.

²² J. Uglik, *Antropocentryzm optymistyczny Aleksandra Hercena*, "Principia" 2014, no. LIX-LX, p. 246.

²³ A. Herzen, *Listy o badaniu przyrody*, p. 290. The description of man as Augustine Aurelius saw him is present in Herzen's *Dilettantism in Science*. One reads there: "once Dante arrived at this light-filled land that knows neither cries nor laments, when he saw the immaterial inhabitants of the heavens, he felt ashamed of the shadow cast by his own body" (A. Герцен, *Дилетантизм в науке*, p. 69). Elsewhere in the same work we find the following:

to combine the soul and the body in the wholeness called man. No doubt, Herzen was critical of Christianity. However, remaining agnostic with respect to the actual existence of God and arguing for the unity of body and spirit, he rejected the immortality of the soul.²⁴ He also ceded the point to his ideological opponent, the Slavophile Yuri Samarin, in that it is impossible to “logically develop the thought about an immanent coexistence of religion and science”²⁵. Herzen’s attitude, his claims that beliefs in a (not necessarily transcendent) divine being are connected to intellectual immaturity, makes his approach close to atheism—and this interpretation is shared by many researchers.²⁶ However, since he distanced himself from religion, it does not seem appropriate to call him—as G. Przebinda does—an anti-theist.²⁷ In my view, he was, apart from his early years and the time of the exile, indifferent to all belief systems, including those related to theistic religions. He did not fight with any particular confession, institution or God, the existence of which he simply rejected (but not for ideological reasons). The notion of God, as described in his works, is deemed unnecessary and misleading, since it does not explain anything at all. All this, it should be emphasised, Herzen states without a hint of emotional engagement. Moreover, one would be hard pressed to find any signs of a heated reaction against theism. To the contrary, by ignoring the sphere of religion, considered nothing more than magic, he tried to answer the questions about man staying in the confines of natural sciences and reason-based, empirically informed, philosophy. Przebinda writes that the Russian opponents of God “looked for truth, beauty and

“the Ancients arrived at the notion of spirit from the notion of nature and *through* nature and that is why they did not end up with the Only Spirit” (ibid., p. 30); “the spirit that was raring to go to heavens from the spires of gothic churches was a complete opposite of the ancient one. Spiritualism and transcendence are the basis of romanticism. Spirit and matter exists there not in harmony but in constant struggle and dissonance. Nature is deemed false and a negation of truth; all that comes from nature must be rejected” (ibid., p. 31). Herzen’s argument goes as follows—if the transcendent is true, then the immanent (nature and culture) is false, or at most a step on the way to what is true.

²⁴ See A. Герцен, *Былое и думы*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 9, p. 209.

²⁵ A. Герцен, *Дневник 1842–1845*, p. 314.

²⁶ Wilhelm Goerdt argues that Herzen “negated all theology. There is no God-spirit creating man in his image” (W. Goerdt, *Historia filozofii rosyjskiej*, transl. J. Antkowiak, WAM, Kraków 2012, p. 396). Herzen’s anti-providentialism is emphasised by Walicki, see A. Walicki, *Osobowość a historia*, p. 168. Herzen in his *Diary* from 1842 noted that he views atheism as more consistent than deism, see A. Герцен, *Дневник 1842–1845*, p. 207.

²⁷ This Polish researcher is very strong in his phrasing, calling Herzen “the most consistent and heroic anti-theist;” “the biggest Russian anti-theist;” “rationalistic anti-theist” (G. Przebinda, op. cit., pp. 5, 44, 444).

good. The point is that they viewed these atemporal categories in a strictly historical way"²⁸—meaning that the analysis involved exclusively the sphere of the immanent. The way Przebinda interprets the writings does, however, raise some doubts. In my view, an anti-theist and an opponent of God must, by definition, believe in God's existence (or otherwise be convinced of this) in the first place. If that is not the case, we will not be dealing with a conscious rebel but with a madman fighting the chimaera. The fact that Herzen believed in "harmfulness of transcendent religions"²⁹ is not enough, I would argue, to call him an anti-theist. Any religion (not only the transcendent one) is harmfully reactionary: it provides excuses for not thinking independently, muddles things up and makes man into a slave of God. Man becomes a static figure (a puppet that is merely an element of a broader context) instead of a dynamic creature that he ought to become: a creative being, playing a role in its own formation.

As it has been said, Herzen's critique of religion is not limited to theism and transcendence, as he is equally strongly opposing any religion that is fundamentally ingrained in the immanent reality. In short, Herzen rebels against all dogma and all holiness. In this sense, as already mentioned, religion obtains a broader understanding, covering e.g. socialism or communism. Such ideas define their own sacrum against which an individual human being becomes either an unimportant moment in history or a tool used as a means to a much bigger end. Moreover, non-transcendent religions also make use of the notion of a heretic: the non-communists or any enemies of "the religion of progress". Herzen says that "the Christian mortification of the flesh is as inconsistent with nature as is following orders to kill others . . . , all this results from contempt for earth and temporal matters, from adoration of heaven and eternity, from disrespecting individuals and bowing to the state"³⁰—unmistakably emphasising that fanaticism and not holding back from sacrificing real human beings in order to reach the imagined goal are common features of both transcendent and immanent religions. Herzen's philosophical stance makes the question about the validity of a more universal nature meaningless. Setting such an aim that resides above those determined by subjective, individual existence is yet another example of the tyranny of religion and the resulting enslavement of men. He states with sadness and shame that "Christianity and Islam completely destroyed the Ancient world. The French Revolution destroyed sculptures, pictures, monuments—we should not play iconoclasts. I felt it strongly when, with deaf sadness and

²⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 444.

³⁰ А. Герцен, *С того берега*, pp. 139-140.

almost with shame, I stood... in front of some museum-keeper who, while pointing to an empty wall, a broken sculpture and an derelict grave, repeated: *It has all been destroyed during the revolution*"³¹. In the context of Herzen's open philosophy and socialism, a label often connected to Herzen in the literature, let us just say that he does not present any idea, including socialism, as "holy." What can be said at most is that he leans at some point towards socialism, takes interest, but still remains an independent thinker. As Isaiah Berlin pointed out, the deification of abstraction has its logical conclusion in "a liberation of some only at the price of enslavement of others, and the replacing of an old tyranny with a new and sometimes far more hideous one—by the imposition of the slavery of universal socialism, for example, as a remedy for the slavery of the universal Roman Church"³². Realistic and harsh, Herzen's view on human ideas is devoid of any ornamental facade and pushes the conclusion that the fight for universal liberation (or salvation) brings an unimaginable amount of sorrow and that the universal happiness is a mirage. Liberation is almost by definition mired in contradictions: liberating "oneself and others [can be done—J.U.] only to a certain limit—to some kind of slavery, to the symbolic books"³³: *The Bible, The Quran, The Capital or Mein Kampf*. It should be noted that Herzen's contempt was greater for the immanent (sub-lunar) type of religion that is removed from the tears of joy and poetic raptures. This is clearly seen in his confrontation with Boris Chicherin, who put the state above God: "from the gloomy interiors of a cathedral, filled with frankincense you Sir move to a well-lit office, . . . divine hierarchies changed for you into state hierarchies, immersing individuality in God is replaced with immersing it in State. God is replaced by centralisation and an Orthodox priest by a district official. You view this metamorphosis as a success, we—however—view it as a new set of handcuffs. Your secular, civil and penal religion is the more scary as it is completely devoid of poetry, fantasy and any child-like aspects that are to be replaced in your approach by administrative rules and a divinity having tsar at the top and an executioner at the bottom"³⁴. In my opinion, the above quotation, presenting an argument by contradiction for a moderate value provided by transcendental (or supra-stellar) religion, shows clearly that Herzen's approach should not be claimed

³¹ А. Герцен, *К старому товарищу*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 20, кн. 2, Академия наук СССР, Москва 1960, p. 593.

³² I. Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, Penguin Books 1994, p. 193.

³³ А. Герцен, *С того берега*, p. 100. Isaiah Berlin agreed with Herzen, saying that "one cannot live in a totally clean, perfectly organised, and completely ordered world" (*Listy Isaiaha Berlina do Andrzeja Walickiego*. 1962–1996, p. 152).

³⁴ А. Герцен, *Былое и думы*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 9, pp. 252–253.

as anti-theistic. That being said, all religious systems, notwithstanding their origins, are by nature oppressive against an individual; such a system, deemed the only supplier of truth, by definition, serves to brand some as aliens for belonging to other systems (cultures) or for not getting involved in the institutionalised formations (the church or the state) and traditional forms of culture (custom, faith); all religions are incompatible with values that serve to bring individuals together, such as justice for all human beings, all-human solidarity and friendship. Within such a system that grew out either of immanence or transcendence, only a prison-like equality of all involved is an option.³⁵ Herzen is convinced that “an individual—the true, real monad of the society—has always been sacrificed for some general notion, some common term, some banner”³⁶. His disillusionment, however, makes Herzen neither a pessimist nor a jaded sceptic but, rather, strengthens his realistic outlook at what surrounds him. From this point of view, Herzen's critical approach to the universal teleology (he rejects all purposefulness in nature and history) and all theodicies can be better appreciated. He was not a proponent of “an optimistic theory of progress”³⁷, to the contrary—he completely rejects the “quasi-religion of progress that proposes no replacement for the belief in transcendental salvation”³⁸. He is not waiting for the Messiah, in fact, he is even apprehensive about the appearance of any “saviour,” which would inescapably turn out to be a false prophet never really changing anything for the benefit of humans. For that reason, Herzen arguing for moral independence of man was apprehensive about, as Halina Rarot put it, “the deep seated layers of Christianity, of their revolutionary and apocalyptic potential”³⁹.

How best to describe Herzen's stance?

It seems likely that the cautious approach and distrust towards various “priests” were implanted in Herzen, at that time a young philosopher, by

³⁵ See A. Герцен, *К старому товарищу*, p. 578. Somewhere else, Herzen bitterly states that “Christianity is a religion full of contradictions; it upheld the dignity of an individual as if only to triumphantly destroy it in the face of salvation, Church, the heavenly Father” (A. Герцен, *С того берега*, p. 125).

³⁶ Ibid., p. 126.

³⁷ N. Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, transl. R.M. French, Geoffrey Bles, The Centenary Press, London 1937, p. 35.

³⁸ A. Walicki, *Isaiah Berlin i dziewiętnastowieczni myśliciele rosyjscy*, [in:] I. Berlin, *Rosyjscy myśliciele*, transl. S. Kowalski, Prószyński i S-ka, Warszawa 2003, p. 342.

³⁹ H. Rarot, *Od nihilizmu do chrześcijaństwa. Historia i współczesność idei filozoficzno-religijnego przezwyciężenia nihilizmu*, UMCS, Lublin 2011, p. 134.

his cousin Jakovlev, known as the Chemist. Owing to the latter's efforts, the former was to better comprehend the meaning of natural sciences for philosophy, which would also serve to solidify his atheistic outlook.⁴⁰ A separate role was played, I believe, by Pyotr Chaadayev, whose *Philosophical Letter* awakened Herzen from a "metaphysical, dogmatic slumber"⁴¹. The following words, regarding the rejection of all religiousness, leave no doubt as to Herzen's intentions: "why believing in God is ridiculous and believing in humanity is not; why believing in heavenly kingdom is stupid; whereas believing in earthly utopias is wise? Rejecting all positive religion, we kept all our religious habits, letting go of the heavenly paradise, we hope for it to be built on Earth"⁴². The above remark does not strike one as bitter but rather as containing a healthy dose of realism: all faith stupefies and is quite frankly puzzling. No doubt, religion has the power to sublimate (to raise, ennoble) human existence, yet such a sublimation is always closely related to religion's illusory character.

From all the above, it seems that Herzen's approach can be best described as areligious. Perhaps, a point can be made that this areligiousness is heavily laced with irony. Therefore, it is the more surprising to find out that some of the religiously minded thinkers tried making Herzen into a man of faith. As representative of this group, let us focus on Sergei Bulgakov and Vasily Zenkovsky, who voiced controversial opinions championing an alternative image of Herzen, one that is lacking support in facts. By this I mean that I believe his approach to be quite clearly described in his works and not prone to be bent at will to serve particular goals. He says for example: "let us not think up God for ourselves—if he does not exist, we will not create him anyway;" "Christianity, dividing man into two parts, into the ideal and

⁴⁰ Berlin says that Herzen "is terrified of the oppressors, but he is terrified of the liberators too. He is terrified of them because for him they are the secular heirs of the religious bigots of the ages of faith; because anybody who has a cut and dried scheme, a straitjacket which he wishes to impose on humanity as the sole possible remedy for all human ills, is ultimately bound to create a situation intolerable for free human beings" (I. Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 199). Cf. also Berlin's suggestion to remain critical about the doctrinaires wishing to repair the world armed with "uncriticised and uncriticisable vision-metaphysical, religious, aesthetic, at any rate, unconcerned with the actual needs of actual persons—in the name of which the revolutionary leaders" (ibid., p. 89). Herzen himself clearly rejects not only the religion that "hands over children to a pension house in heavens" but also the religion of science, "of the universal, generic, transcendental reason, the religion of idealism" (А. Герцен, *С того берега*, p. 104).

⁴¹ In *My Past and Thoughts* we read that Chaadayev's *Philosophical Letter* "was like a shot heard in complete darkness; ... one had to awake" (А. Герцен, *Былое и думы*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 9, p. 139).

⁴² А. Герцен, *С того берега*, p. 104.

the beast, corrupted this notion,” “Jesus Christ is concerned only with the salvation of the soul. He tramples over body, stifles corporeality”⁴³. Yet, despite such clearly made points to be found in his works and the many religiously distanced remarks scattered elsewhere, aimed for both his friends and his foes, Herzen was often depicted as a desperate being suffering from spiritual void. This view is pushed forward in *Herzen's spiritual drama*, authored by Bulgakov, where “he created a curious picture of Herzen—that of a ‘religious thinker,’ a truth-seeker, with his personal drama stemming from his materialistic approach. . . . This treatise—distorting Herzen's biographical facts and his core ideas in a seemingly obvious manner—turned out to be surprisingly long-lasting”⁴⁴. Despite, in a sense, being able to understand the reaction of the religiously-minded readers of his works, after Wiktorja Śliwowska, I do consider it groundless or even absurd. Bulgakov, trying to view Herzen's ideas through the lens of his own approach, notices a fundamental “gap” in the intellectual quests launched by the author of *Letters on the Study of Nature*, namely the lack of a living God and, therefore, the absence of meaning in the world. Herzen would have agreed that life has no objective meaning, but he would have rejected, as ungrounded, the suggestion that there is no meaning whatsoever. The meaning of life, as Herzen would put it, is to be found within the confines of an individual human existence. In that sense, Herzen's predicaments are similar to that of Sartre's, who was forced to defend himself from the attacks launched by the French Catholics that erroneously concluded that the atheistic existentialism leads to quietism and apathy “while ignoring beauty and the brighter side of human nature”⁴⁵. Herzen's atheist searches for beauty within the immanent, whereas for Bulgakov beauty goes beyond this horizon. These thinkers simply function on different, incompatible levels. Bulgakov represents dualism, whereas Herzen—an open-ended monism. Therefore, I believe that this manipulation⁴⁶ of Herzen's views makes Bulgakov a usurper.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 101, 127; and A. Герцен, *Дуализм — это монархия*, p. 231.

⁴⁴ W. Śliwowska, *Polemiki wokół Hercena*, “Slavia Orientalis” 1971, no. 1, p. 24. Ruslan Chestanow emphasises that Bulgakov presents Herzen as a religious seeker who, however, remained an atheist till the end of his life, see Р. Хестанов, *Александр Герцен: импровизация против доктрины*, Дом интеллектуальной книги, Москва 2001, p. 36. Zenkovsky, not surprisingly, tries to argue that Bulgakov was right in describing Herzen this way, see В. Зеньковский, *История русской философии*, Академический Проект, Москва 2001, p. 288.

⁴⁵ J.-P. Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, transl. C. Macomber, Yale University Press, New Haven & London 2007, p. 17.

⁴⁶ The use of this word is justified not only by Herzen's own work, which provides no basis for such an interpretation of his views that is so contradictory with what he actually claimed, but also by the voices of other researchers clearly stating the opposite, as witnessed by the

A similar distortion is also evident in the interpretation of Herzen's views by Vasily Zenkovsky, as notably pointed out by Ludmiła Łucewicz. She says that "religion did not play an important role in shaping Herzen's personality, whereas Zenkovsky interpreted his artistic exaltation, poetic imagination and stylistic expressions—as religiousness. In Zenkovsky's opinions on Herzen I clearly see the need to emphasise the 'inner religiousness' of Herzen. This is achieved by a selective choice of opinions supposedly supporting the argument for Herzen's religiousness and by turning a blind eye to many a critical notes on faith, religion and the church found in his writings"⁴⁷. Zenkovsky, as so many other religious thinkers, unjustifiably pushes the views of his ideological opponents to fit in a specific mould. Despite Herzen's emphasis on the lack of faith and his indifference towards the transcendent sphere, Zenkovsky and Bulgakov obstinately view this as, at most, a tragic atheism,⁴⁸ defined by them as a dramatic call for God. Note that this strategy is applied unilaterally, meaning that it is hard to find anyone claiming that the declarations of faith are in essence a hidden atheism, a call for man free

following selection: "Herzen was not and did not want to be a religious thinker" (A. Walicki, *Rosja, katolicyzm i sprawa polska*, Prószyński i S-ka, Warszawa 2002, p. 411; "the axiological system of [Herzen—J.U.] there was no place for any religious basis of respect for both the spiritual and material historical culture of humankind. ... He rejects the transcendent God, [he becomes convinced that others believe in God—J.U.] as they are still in their immature period" (G. Przebinda, op. cit., p. 460). Let me add the following to the above: Herzen rejects any kind of God, which—as a consequence of his divinity—forces man to devote and sacrifice himself—as a critic of any religiousness, he "challenges all, also the secular, religions, and all types of religious alienation" (A. Walicki, *Cieszkowski a Herzen*, [in:] *Polskie spory o Hegla. 1830–1860*, PWN, Warszawa 1966, p. 197). Finally, in order to provide further support for my argument, let me quote a fragment where Herzen is clearly critical of socialism, which, as all deified notions, "will go through all its phases and develop into extreme forms, becoming absurd" (A. Герцен, *С того берега*, p. 110).

⁴⁷ L. Łucewicz, *Wasilij Zienkowski o Aleksandrze Hercenie i jego filozofii*, "Przegląd Filozoficzny" 2013, no. 3, p. 160. In his *Diary* from 1842, one notes ecstasy in the words of Herzen: "Christianity or philosophy!", which are uttered as a reaction to the article in "Deutsche Jahrbücher" (A. Герцен, *Дневник 1842–1845*, p. 224). A year later, with similar enthusiasm, he emphasises: "Schelling dealt a deadly blow to Christianity, his philosophy laid bare the absurdities of Christian philosophy" (ibid., p. 305). Also, in his *My Past and Thoughts*, written near the end of his life, Herzen wrote about irritating religiousness of Stanisław Worcell, who believed in "some vague, unnecessary and impossible spiritual world, which is nevertheless separated from the material world" (A. Герцен, *Былое и думы*, [in:] id., *Собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, vol. 11, Академия наук СССР, Москва 1957, p. 148).

⁴⁸ In a similar way the German Catholic personalist Paul Landsberg described Bakunin, arguing, against the latter's intentions, that "Bakunin requires God in order to keep on renewing the power of his personality, to not let it fade into sleep" (P. Landsberg, *Anarchista przeciw Bogu*, transl. Samozwańca Sotnia Instygatorów Buntu, "Nowa Krytyka" 2006, no. 19, p. 74).

from God. The difference between Herzen, the atheist, on the one hand, and Bulgakov and Zenkovsky, the theists, on the other, lies in that the former did not live to proselytise and does not see himself as someone with the access to the only truth.

This trait of manipulating Herzen's views about the condition of humanity is symptomatic in those thinkers who emphasise the existence of the transcendent sphere. The same is seen in the critique by Nikolai Berdyaev, who wrote that the source of Herzen's apparent scepticism and pessimism towards humanism lies in his alienation to religious beliefs.⁴⁹ Berdyaev's claims are categorical despite the fact that Herzen's words do not allow much of a leeway in terms of interpretation, for the latter clearly states: "I am neither an optimist, nor a pessimist, I watch, observe without any agenda, without any prior assumptions and I am not in rush to proclaim judgements"⁵⁰. For Herzen, it is reason that is the judge of truth, whereas for the religious thinkers this role is played by God. Grzegorz Przebinda noted that "comparing Greeks with Jews (or, using Shestov's words, Athens with Jerusalem), Herzen consistently stated that the Greeks were 'humans to a greater degree' since they never allowed gods to enslave them"⁵¹. This statement is the source of my utmost confusion when faced with the realisation that Jerusalem symbolises faith; whereas Athens are a symbol of reason. Lev Shestov, together with other religious thinkers, becomes a supporter of irrationalism and yet another opponent of Herzen, who can be described as a rational realist. Understandably, Shestov, a supporter of transcendence, cannot be at the same time supporting immanence and yet he is viewed—next to Herzen—as a representative of the so-called immanent subjectivism. This can be found for example in the works of Ivanov-Razumnik. Walicki writes about him that "he had reasons to present Herzen and Shestov as the two great representatives of 'immanent subjectivism,' a philosophical stance that consistently rejected all versions of the despotic 'objectivism,' such as an 'objective reason,' 'objective laws of history,' or an 'objective sense of life.' Herzen represented the secular version

⁴⁹ See N. Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, p. 36. Cf. also the fragments from *The Russian Idea*, where Berdyaev suggests that the pessimistic element found in Herzen's views comes from his lack of faith in that life has a higher purpose, with this "height" entailing the acceptance of a transcendent reality, which is something that Herzen refuses to do, see N. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, The Macmillan Company, New York 1948, p. 61. To this, Herzen could have replied by using a quote from Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*: "It does not follow that goodness, justice, wisdom, are chimaeras because the existence of God is a chimaera, nor truths because this is a truth" (L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. G. Eliot, Prometheus Books, New York 1989, p. 21).

⁵⁰ А. Герцен, *С того берега*, p. 89.

⁵¹ G. Przebinda, op. cit., p. 460.

of this approach, whereas Shestov was a supporter of its religious version when fighting with theological rationalism in the name of the irrational God of the Old Testament, who resided beyond the laws of logic and causality”⁵². Contrary to Walicki and Ivanov-Razumnik, I do not find a common ground between the views of Herzen and Shestov. The author of *Apotheosis of Groundlessness* does, however, support a version of that despotic objectivism, symbolised by God. I view that as a consequence of the above statement, as God is after all considered in his interpretation as having universal and transcendent, rather than immanent and subjective, validity: Shestov’s God is not an individual but a universal truth. On the other hand, for Herzen no divinity at all (not only the transcendent one) can exist.⁵³ The conclusion of all the arguments provided in this article is that there is a clear tension in Herzen’s writings when it comes to the notion of religion. He was able to tease out both its positive and negative features, all the while remaining a proponent of an open atheism that actively searches for answers and can in no way, against the claims made by some religious thinkers, be boxed in as a pessimistic and sceptical approach of a misanthrope.

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⁵² A. Walicki, *Rosyjscy inspiratorzy koncepcji wolności Isaiaha Berlina*, “Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia” 2008, no. 2, p. 36. See also P. Иванов-Разумник, *Философия истории Герцена*, [in:] K. Исупов [ed.], *А. И. Герцен: pro et contra*, pp. 355-363.

⁵³ There is yet another difference between Shestov and Herzen: the former’s work leaves no place for ethics, he is not “convinced that rejecting ethical moderation (“golden mean”) and the principle of non-contradiction leads to bloody revolts, the bloodiest of which was the Bolshevik one” (G. Przebinda, *Herling, Hercen, Szestow...*, “Znak” 1997, no. 8, p. 89). Religious thinkers did try, in one way or another, to discredit immanent humanism, a stance represented by Herzen. One of such theoretic constructs (that negates the idea that the ethics of humanism is higher than the faith, which transcends ethics) was put forward by Berdyaev: “an inner existential dialectic by the force of which humanism passes into anti-humanism. The self-assertion of man leads to the denial of man. In Russia the last word in this dialectic of humanism was communism. That also had humanitarian sources; it desired to fight for the liberation of man from slavery. ... Having made its escape from the power of the ‘common,’ personality is again subjected to the power of a new ‘common,’ that is of the social organizing of life. For the sake of the triumph of social organization, violence may be done upon human personalities, any sort: of means becomes permissible in order to realize the highest end” (N. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, p. 94). Herzen, I believe, would have agreed to the last part of the above, relating the “common.” Yet, these two thinkers are divided by a fundamental issue. Whereas Herzen rejects all kinds of despotic universality, the religious thinkers aim to retain at least one such universality, which they equate with a higher aim—God.

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