

The Marxist Interpretation of the Reformation*

By Abraham Friesen

It was the nineteenth-century Russian anarchist, Michael Bakunin, who first called Karl Marx a "modern Moses."¹ Perhaps "secular" Moses would have better expressed what Bakunin had in mind. In any case, Bakunin was apparently pointing to the astonishing similarities between certain Jewish Old Testament ideas and those of Karl Marx, though the latter were in a totally secularized and supra-national context. Ernst Bloch, the twentieth-century Jewish Marxist "philosopher of hope," undoubtedly had the same similarities in mind when he wrote in 1949: "An end to the tunnel is in sight, certainly not from Jerusalem, but from Moscow; – ubi Lenin, ibi Jerusalem."² It is these similarities that Arnold Künzli stressed in his 1966 "psychographie" of Karl Marx as well when he stated: "Our researches always led back ultimately to the realization that Marx, in his concepts concerning the classless communistic society – a society without a state, without political parties, without institutions, without coercive powers, and without conflicts or tensions of any kind – was determined by irrational forces of which he remained unconscious, but which held him in their grip like some inexorable numinous force. We postulated, and attempted to prove, the thesis that this irrational and numinous force, which determined the very essence of Karl Marx's being, probably originated [in a traumatic childhood experience] with his mother and resulted in a conscious hatred of the Jews and an unconscious hatred of himself as a Jew. Because of this hatred, he repressed his Jewish heritage – which, however, continued to live on in his subconscious – a heritage that consisted primarily in the message of the Bible, especially as it was expressed in the Old Testament."³

This repressed heritage surfaced again in Marx's thought. It is Künzli's thesis, therefore, that Marx's classless communistic society is nothing less than a secularization of the eschatological Jewish kingdom of God on earth; that the proletariat is the elect nation which will inaugurate this kingdom; that God's role in history is taken over by the dialectical forces of historical materialism; and that

* This essay is in essence a very radical condensation of a much larger study I am preparing for publication entitled *Reformation and Utopia: the Marxist Interpretation of the Reformation and its Antecedents*.

1. See Arnold Künzli: *Karl Marx, Eine Psychographie* (Wien, 1966), p. 198.

2. Ernst Bloch: *Freiheit und Ordnung* (Frankfurt a. M., 1969), p. 165. First published in 1949.

3. Künzli: *Karl Marx*, p. 798.