

Marx, Matter and Christianity: Turner responds to Lash

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When he reviewed my book *Marxism and Christianity* (Oxford 1983) in *New Blackfriars* last December, Professor Nicholas Lash said he would be grateful for comments on his own very different attempt to confront some of the same issues as I had dealt with. He was referring to his book *A Matter of Hope*, published in 1981 by Darton, Longman and Todd. Here I am complying with his request. After Lash on Turner, readers of *New Blackfriars* can now try Turner on Lash!

Lash “aims to take Marxism seriously” (p.5) from the standpoint of Christian theology. He certainly does take Marxism seriously, at least in the sense that he gives Marx’s ideas a fair crack of the whip. The substance of his work consists in detailed, patient, lucid and by and large at least plausible reconstructions of some central themes in Marx’s thought. These include epistemological and/or ontological themes concerning “appearance and reality”, “ideology”, “truth”, “science and theory”, themes in social and anthropological theory such as “revolution”, “utopianism” and “alienation”, and above all the controverted question of the nature of Marx’s ‘historical materialism’ which, rightly, in my view, Lash sees as being the foundation of all that is distinctively *Marxian* about the rest. The strength of Lash’s book is, first, that he sees this distinctiveness and pervasiveness of Marx’s materialism and, secondly, that the intellectual and scholarly weight of the book is dedicated to its exploration. Indeed, as an essay by a theologian in the exploration of this and other central Marxist themes, I do not think Professor Lash’s book is seriously rivalled by anything much in the English language.

Comparatively speaking, Christian theology—that is to say, the possibility of the project of Christian theology—is treated with a less thorough-going scepticism than might have been expected from a theologian who proposes to take Marx as seriously as Lash undoubtedly does. The conflict between Marxism and Christianity comes to a head in a major chapter towards the end on “Optimism, Eschatology and the Form of the Future”, and in the final Postface Christianity and Marxism are declared to be incompatible. About the grounds for this supposed incompatibility I will have something to say later. In the meantime, however, I would remark that the theologian’s “reflections” are allowed full scope in a discourse whose credentials are not fundamentally questioned. One has the suspicion that, in Lash’s view, theological work is

not altered much in its starting points or outcome, even if it is somewhat modified in its themes, by the encounter with Marx's materialism which Lash envisages for it.

Connected with this suspicion is the somewhat antiphonal (rather than dialectical) character of the debate which Lash conducts with Marx's writings. Marx's voice in that debate is given plenty of scope. His text is meticulously pieced together and built up into a series of powerful challenges to Christian theology. Each of these challenges calls forth a response from Lash the theologian who, on the contrary, seems always to have a pre-written theological text to refer back to, its construction seeming to have taken place elsewhere than within the conduct of the debate itself. It is this externality of the theological response to the arguments within which the Marxist case is constructed which leads one to raise some questions about the nature of the 'seriousness' with which Lash treats Marxism. For, to return to the former metaphor, if Lash conducts a very fair-minded debate with Marxism, there is no doubt whatever that it is a *theologian* who is in the chair.

I shall confine myself to one, central illustration of this. In one respect Lash's view of the general relationship of Marxism to Christianity is curiously old-fashioned. Having indicated the grounds on which the "religious dimension" to life and history might be thought to be "irreducible", Lash goes on to ask whether, if this were so, would it not follow that "Marx's use of the dialectic...is sustained by an absent theology. My description of the Marxian use of the dialectic as a *secularised doctrine of revelation* is intended to serve as a reminder of these possibilities" (p.55, my italics).

It is possible to take this point in conjunction with his later statement that, in the end, Marxism and Christianity are directly incompatible because of a deficient Marxist anthropology, according to which the "question of God" and the "question of man" are antithetical. (p. 288). From this it seems that it is Marx's secularisation of Christianity which is incompatible with it—not, that is, Marx's denial of the existence of God itself, but the fact that his view of man is mediated through that denial. But, if that is so, then Lash's position seems close to tautology, amounting to little else (as far as I can see) than the proposition that, being a secularised doctrine of revelation, Marxism would be perfectly compatible with Christianity were it not the secularisation of it.

In any case I am sure that Lash is wrong about the relation between Marx's 'anthropology' and his atheism. Marx abandoned a 'secularist' anthropology at exactly the point at which he abandoned not just theism, which he had never espoused, but also atheism. Very early on (in the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical MSS*) he concluded that what was wrong with a secularist anthropology was but the mirror image of what was wrong with theism. Just as he abandoned theology because it ('antithetically') denied man in the name of the affirmation of God, so

he abandoned atheistic anthropologies which could affirm their humanism only via the denial of God. In other words Marx did not suppose an antithesis between God and man and so reject God in the name of man. He argued rather that an anthropology adequate to the socialist case could be worked out only *via the rejection of the antithesis* 'Either God or man'. Since, as he understood them, both Christianity and classical atheism (including, in the latter case, Feuerbach's) implied this antithesis, both had to be rejected in the name of a socialist humanism unmediated by any trace of the traditional theological debate.

For this reason it seems to me to be possible to maintain Lash's interpretation of the theological significance of Marxism only on an account of it which shows, contrary to Marx's explicit disavowals, that it is a "secularised doctrine of revelation". I do not think it is possible to show this: to do so would be to show that Marx got no further in his criticism of religion than did Feuerbach—which in turn would be to show that Marx never got beyond what he openly criticises Feuerbach for defending, namely a philosophical materialism engaged in within an idealistic practice. Since, as we shall see, Lash is himself all too aware of how easily Christians are seduced by this combination, I find it a little surprising that he is unable to see how little Marx's criticism of religion owes to it.

In fact, of course, Marx's criticism of religion consists hardly at all in the confutation of its theoretical errors. Marx thought Christianity was 'ideological'. Among other things, this was to think that Christianity was an idealistic practice even when at its most concretely political; even, as Engels purports to show in *The Peasant War in Germany*, when overtly committed to an early socialist politics in the way that Thomas Münzer was, or, perhaps nowadays, in the way that some Liberation theologians are. The charge of 'ideology' is one which can be understood only against the background of Marx's materialism. A materialistic reading of Christianity treats it neither as a set of beliefs considered independently of the practices within which those beliefs are embedded, nor as a set of practices considered independently of the beliefs in terms of which social agents engage in them, but as *the practice of a relationship between beliefs and practices*. To move from this methodological assumption of materialism to the substantive charge that Christianity is 'ideological' is to make at least three claims. First, that, in a way whose complexities I tried to sort out in my own book, within the typically Christian practice of the relationships between its beliefs and its practices there is a certain kind of 'deviance', a kind of 'lived contradictoriness' whose effect is that the Christian relationship with the real world is a kind of 'lived unreality'. Secondly, that the capacity Christianity has to sustain its contemporary forms of unreal relationship with the world is derived from the fact that it is in turn sustained in them by pressures from the class interests of bourgeois society. Thirdly, that those unreal but lived relation

ships of ideology are functional for a class society and in their turn they serve to sustain the structures of class by mediating them into invisibility. Ideology is the 'invisibility' of the class struggle.

Now, Marx was certainly right that whenever theologically and in practice Christianity has presupposed an antithesis between God and man, Christianity has also been ideologically functional for the class interests which sustain it, as the witness is of the Normans, Powells, Thatchers, Scrutons and probably the vast majority of believing Christians in Britain today. But Marx was as wrong as they are in supposing that Christianity either entails this antithesis or presupposes it. Where Lash is wrong is in supposing that *Marx himself* accepts it, that in the name of 'man' Marx denies God and that the resultant anthropology is "sustained by an absent theology."

In any case, wrong as Marx is about Christianity's theological commitments, the ascription to Christianity of an ideological character is not refuted by demonstrating Marx's error of interpretation. For a Christianity purged of any taint of antithetical theologising, set up (if it can be) within the purest of theoretical materialisms, will be ideological insofar as the practice of materialism is still governed by a refusal to accept the primary thesis of that materialism as *historical*, insofar, that is to say, as it refuses to accept that in capitalist society all theorising and practice registers the effects upon it of the objective constraints and pressures generated by the class character of that society. Certainly, the antithetical theologising of so much Christianity, with its consequent bifurcations of 'transcendence' and 'immanence' and, more immediately, of 'religion' and 'politics', leaves Christianity particularly vulnerable to those pressures. But Christianity is not ideological because of theological error, nor is it rendered invulnerable to ideology by the correction of its theological errors.

In principle Lash sees this well enough, and a good deal of the strength of his case concerning Marxist and Christian materialism derives from his recognition that "Christianity is especially vulnerable to the emergence of contradictions between the 'materialism' of its theoretical insistence on the primacy of experience and the 'idealism' of the use to which such theory is put" (p.149). However, I am not convinced that he is thoroughly consistent in thinking through the implications of the Marxist materialism which he professes. For he is unsympathetic to the view which accords to class relations in society a primacy (admittedly of a much debated kind) in the determination of ideological possibilities, and, while rightly rejecting a crude 'base/superstructure' model of that determination, he falls backwards into precisely that error of a 'materialism practised idealistically' to which, on his own account, Christianity is so prone.

For while no *mono-causal, intransitive* model of the constraints and pressures of class on ideological thinking is a tolerable reading of

Marx, nonetheless you cannot on the one hand espouse the 'materialist conception of history' in any plausibly Marxian version and on the other deny the socially *objective* character of those constraints and pressures and/or deny that the empirical effects of those pressures register systematically upon consciousness in a class society. Now Lash allows full measure to the *effects* on theology and Christian practice of ideology and rightly identifies them as the making invisible within theory and practice of those class relations. But where I think Lash is less than wholehearted in his espousal of Marx's materialism is in his ambiguity about the *mode of production* of this ideological effect, about, in other words, the modes of production and reproduction of the invisibility of class relations in capitalist society. For he fails to see (or else refuses to accept—it is difficult to tell which) the proposition, central to Marx's materialism, that it is *the class relations themselves* which produce and reproduce their own forms of invisibility.

Hence the curiously 'idealistic' nature of such suggestions as that the "invisibility (of the class struggle) is the result of the effective dissemination, as the accepted language and *weltanschauung* of a society, of the ideas and beliefs of whatever group wields economic power in that society" (p.129) or that this invisibility results from our tendency "to be 'forgetful' of the limits to which our knowledge is subject" (p.133). Neither a conspiracy theory of the origins of ideology, nor a psychological theory of our inclination to conform to it, will adequately explain in turn the social aetiology of ideology or its persistence. In any case, Marx's materialism asks us to believe that ideology is but the living out in consciousness (not the conscious living out) of the structural pressures of class itself. If it is true that we still lack the account of social causality and social agency within which that belief can be more adequately theorised (more adequately, that is, than within the defective metaphor of 'base and superstructure') then that is a task to be undertaken before we are on good grounds to reject Marx's materialism. At least if our aim is to "take Marx seriously".

Which brings me back to the question of the relative 'externality' of Lash's theological position, relative, that is to the Marxism he expounds. In Lash's account theology, indeed Christianity, seems to come under pressure from Marxism at a point in its formation at which its very possibility as a language and practice has already been established somewhere else. Of course, historically Christianity preexisted Marxism. But, if Marx is right, it did not precede class. That raises enough questions of an historico-interpretative sort for those who wish to take historical materialism seriously. But more to the point, if, in its present task of self-construction, Christianity proposes to take Marx seriously, then it is incumbent to ask a more radical question than any which Lash ever seems to answer, concerning whether *any* possibilities of primary religious language and secondary theological language can be won from

within the crushing ideological pressures of a class society. Methodologically everything *begins*, for the Marxist, from the recognition of those ideological pressures. Science, an adequate politics, our sense of moral demand, *if possible* the sense it can make to worship God—none of these are given to us in advance but are responses extracted from consciousness by the pressure of ideological contradictions. In the theoretical self-constitution of theology and in the practical self-constitution of Christianity, therefore, the starting-point, (again, *if* one is ‘taking Marx seriously’) has to be the question: are the conditions of possibility of Christian belief and practice to be found within a late-capitalist society such as ours, and, if so, in what strategies and dispositions towards that society? I do not say that Lash should accept that starting point for Christianity *a priori* and without argument. He might, after all, reject it. But I do say that Lash should not claim common ground with Marx’s materialism if he does not accept that starting point together with all that it implies for the construction of a theological position in relation to Marxism.

This, in turn, brings me to the sharpest point of difference between Lash’s book and my own. It was central to my argument that Christian theology has no *cognitive* credentials until it has shown that it is entitled to them at the least by satisfying the material conditions of its own possibility, conditions which, in my view, Marx correctly identifies as necessary for anything that is to count as knowledge in a capitalist society. These conditions having been met, theological language can begin to make the case for its being a ‘scientific’ language. To put it a bit more concretely, you cannot know that you are talking about God at least until you know that you are not talking ideologically. This is not the reductionist thesis which, in his review of my book, Lash takes it to be, nor does it a place for metaphorical and narrative language within a ‘scientific’ theological discourse. It is a pity that, either *in propria persona* or in his reading of my view, scientific and metaphorical language should be set at odds, for, that antithesis apart, I should have liked to have agreed with Lash’s excellent chapter on “Theory and Symbolism”. But if Lash persists in the antithesis we shall be distracted into an unnecessary and purely diversionary disagreement.

There is no need for this disagreement. I do not, as Lash thinks, scorn metaphor, either in my own name or in the name of Marxism, whether as a literary device or as a theological necessity. I happen to think that metaphors are of crucial importance in the construction of even *natural* science and in theology *nothing* can be done without them—though, where they have this central role in theology, I believe metaphors take the form of analogies which have a rather different logical status. So far as I can see, Lash gets the impression he has of my literalist, ‘scientific’ epistemology from an almost complete misreading of my argument, a misreading so complete that I suppose I will have to

accept responsibility for it. I accept some responsibility at the terminological level for having insisted upon describing Marxism as 'scientific', since to ears trained in Anglo-Saxon cultures this word invariably rings loud bells in physics labs but never a tinkle in departments of history or literature, still less in schools of divinity. I suppose I regret having done so, but not very much, for I gave plenty of warning signals which should have been explicit enough. I made it quite clear that my use of the word was set in that tradition of 'scientificity' which begins with Plato's *episteme* (and continues in subsequent translations as 'scientia'). I denied explicitly that 'scientificity' was to be defined in terms of methodological rules. I asserted that, negatively, 'science' was to be defined by contrast with 'ideology' and, positively, in terms of the historically contingent distinctions between "appearance" and "reality" which it is capable of disclosing. And when once I came close to giving an actual definition of 'science' I said but two things: first, that we have science when we know something and, secondly, the relevant account of 'knowledge' is such that we know something only when we have grasped an object in reflexive awareness of the conditions, including material conditions, of the possibility of grasping it. Well, what is there in all this to exclude the claims to scientificity of all but bad poetry and how does the prayer of St. John of the Cross fall by this standard? Or, does it not stand up very well by it, by contrast, for example, with the claims of evangelical theisms or, for that matter, of Friedmanite economics?

I am truly at a loss to know where Lash gets his impression of my 'scientism', an impression so strong that he is sustained in it by my explicit disavowals. Somehow he can quote my statement that "science in the sense in which Marxism claims to be scientific is nothing more than knowledge" (*MC*, p.103) as evidence that I mean the opposite, namely that I understand by the word 'knowledge' what is meant by the word 'science'. Lash does not like my tendency to stipulative definitions (although my definition of 'science' was not stipulative but an attempt to reconnect with a more satisfactory classical and medieval meaning). Fair enough. But when one stipulates one is saying what one means. It is a bit much, having stipulated, to be read as meaning the opposite of what one says.

It is worthwhile isolating the precise nature of the difference between us on the score of what is to count as 'knowledge' because on so much else about knowledge Lash and I agree even where Lash seems to think that we do not. Lash persistently refuses to regard theological knowledge as a given object, emphasises its provisional, heuristic "exploratory, interrogative, trustful" character (p.149) and so do I—so far at least as concerns *moral* knowledge, for I was writing about morality as scientific and hardly about theological language at all. I argued that the 'emancipatory interest' which is determinative of Marxist scientificity is 'heuristic' (*MC*, p.122) and I even described Marx's "fragments and

sketches” about communist society “as little more than provisional and perhaps even...*metaphorical*” (*MC*, p.154). But while there is no reason at all why we should argue about that, at any rate as a general proposition, and while I am happy to make any number of merely terminological concessions to Anglo-Saxon narrowness about ‘science’, I am not persuaded to give up the proposition on which I *think* Lash and I disagree. That proposition concerns the grounds on which the claim can be based that theological language, provisional, heuristic, interrogative and metaphorical as it may be, is shown to be cognitive—to be knowledge, science or whatever. You cannot, in my view, make the claim for the cognitive character of theological language until it is shown to be non-ideological. But the non-ideological character of theological language cannot be demonstrated *within* theological language. In a capitalist society the capacity to show that is, I argued, found only within Marxism. Hence, to generate theological knowledge theology has to be more than theology. That, historically, has always been the case, and I know that Lash thinks so too. But because of that we disagree today about Marxism, about the degree of penetration of the theological enterprise to be allowed to Marx’s materialism. In my view, Marx rightly predicted the dispersal under capitalism of the theological enterprise into a plethora of pluralistic individualisms and a degeneration of its language into a congeries of aspiration, quasi-moral exhortation, platitudinous tautology and mythology evacuated of empirical, historical content. It has happened. Theology has already been ‘deconstructed’ by class society. It is, therefore, *capitalism* which sets theology the problem. Marxism is merely indispensable in its identification and in its solution. But Marxism *is* indispensable, or else we run the risk in the meantime of being without resources to distinguish the ‘scientific’ attitude of interrogation of mystery from the platitudinous, ‘liberal’ attitude of prostration before mystification.

Lash and I therefore differ on some central issues, but not, I think, always on the ones he imagines. In any case, I had a different and more limited purpose in mind than he had, for I was writing about morality and Christianity strictly in that connection; and my aim was merely to work out some lines, sometimes of entailment, more often of a more general mutual interaction between Marxism, morality and Christianity, in a rather insensitively formal way. Now, a book like that is of not much use to anyone if its main arguments are faulty. Lash’s remains perceptibly of use *even* if it is wrong. For it is at the very least a thoroughgoing lesson, *in actu*, of how a theologian should conduct the argument with Marxism and, in any case, independently of the aims of the book, it succeeds in being a lucid, cogent and erudite introduction to some central philosophical themes in Marx. The ambitions of the book are, of course, somewhat higher than that and Lash invites the reader to decide not merely whether he is right about Marx but also whether Marx

is right about the world we live in, and therefore must do theology in. I happen to disagree with Lash's final judgment that Christianity and Marxism are incompatible mainly because I disagree with his interpretation of Marx. Hence we also disagree about the implications of Marxism for the theological enterprise. Nonetheless we clearly do agree that, for the theologian as for anyone else, there is no alternative to deciding whether Marx was right or not. Agreeing on that, it is a pleasure to disagree with Lash on almost anything else.

Church and Family II:

Church and Family in the Medieval and Reformation Periods

Rosemary Radford Ruether

In our first article (published in last month's issue of *New Blackfriars*) we discussed the tensions between the Christian Church as a model of a new kind of family and the traditional family in Greco-Roman society, and trends toward the resolution of this tension both by separating out the vision of the new community into an eschatological ascetic religious order, on the one hand, and the repatriarchalisation of the Church and the resacralization of the patriarchal family, on the other hand. It would be useful at this point to summarize the major features of the patriarchal family as that existed in Jewish and Greco-Roman society.

Patriarchy refers to a legal, social and economic system of society that validates and enforces the domination of male heads of families over the dependent persons in the household. In classical patriarchal systems, such as are found in Hebrew law, this included wives, dependent children and slaves. In this sense, various groups of males are also dependent persons in patriarchal systems. However, women are subjugated persons in patriarchal societies in a different sense than either male children or male slaves. The former could grow up and become themselves householders; the latter might become emancipated and become householders. Women, first as daughters, then as wives, and sometimes even as widows dependent on the eldest son, were defined generically as persons depen