

# Marxism, Christianity and Morality

## Replies to Francis Barker and Brian Wicker

Denys Turner

So very great is the range and complexity of the issues now raised by the *New Blackfriars* debate that it is impossible even to state, never mind argue, a position in relation to all of them. Nonetheless, since two main contributors, Barker<sup>1</sup> and Wicker<sup>2</sup> make some serious criticisms of my views, at least some of them on the strength of equally serious misunderstandings of what they are, some reply is, even if insufficient, also necessary. So I shall concentrate a lot on clarification.

First of all, then, I shall try to be clearer about what my basic contentions are, for they obviously cannot be clear from what I wrote. Barker, for example, purports to agree with my thesis about Marxism and morality.<sup>3</sup> This thesis was, in short, that they are historically, and therefore *contingently*, identical. But he then accuses me of lapsing from this thesis and offers a reason which can only show that he does not, after all, understand the nature of the identity I was maintaining there is between Marxism and morality. So I must first of all clear this up.

Having done that I propose, secondly, to challenge the conception of Marxist science and of its relationship to ideologies which underpins Barker's main criticisms of the Marxism and Christianity "strong compatibility" thesis.

The clarification of this thesis is the third, and most obviously necessary task. Wicker, at least, has badly misconstrued it. This is, perhaps, unsurprising, for in the "Can a Christian be a Marxist?"<sup>4</sup> paper I only mentioned, but did not formally spell out, what the "strong compatibility" thesis holds you to maintaining. Barker acknowledges, correctly, that at least it does not entail that Marx-

<sup>1</sup> Francis Barker's *The Morality of Knowledge and the Disappearance of God*, *New Blackfriars*, September 1976.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Wicker, *Marxists and Christians: Questions for Denys Turner*, *New Blackfriars*, October 1975 referred to in the text as Wicker (1). *Sincerity, Authenticity and God*, *New Blackfriars*, May 1976, referred to as Wicker (2). See also Terry Eagleton, *Marxists and Christians: Answers for Brian Wicker*, *New Blackfriars*, October 1975 (Eagleton (1)) *Decentring God*, *New Blackfriars*, April 1976 (Eagleton (2)).

<sup>3</sup> *Morality is Marxism*, *New Blackfriars*, February and March 1973.

<sup>4</sup> *Can a Christian be a Marxist?* *New Blackfriars*, June 1975.

ism and Christianity are identical. But Wicker appears to be unsure even about this, indeed, in the space of six lines in his first reply to that paper he has me holding no less than four distinct positions: (1) that Marxism and Christianity are “compatible”; (2) that they are “virtually identical”; (3) that they are “at one”; and (4) that they “are one”. Though Wicker might be understandably unclear which of these positions *I* hold, it is a bit much that he should also be unclear that these are distinct positions and that he should saddle me uncritically with all of them. Some of them I do hold, others not; which should emerge in what follows.

## I

### *Marxism is Morality: Not a “timeless” truth.*

First, then, what is the Marxism and morality thesis? It is that, under the social and economic conditions which make Marxism to be the science of society, Marxism is morality; and these very same conditions make morality Marxism, for to fulfil the conditions for scientific knowledge of society is to fulfil the conditions for moral knowledge.

I should hasten to add, however, that it does not follow, as a consequence of this identity’s *now* holding, that it somehow timelessly holds, as if Marxism were the timeless definition of morality. For, on that version of the identity thesis it would follow that at no time prior to Marxism was there any such knowledge as moral knowledge. This is clearly absurd. It would, moreover, have the further consequence that, prior to the emergence of scientific socialism, morality was not even possible. At any rate it would have this consequence for any consistent Marxist who recognised that Marxism itself was not a possibility under any other conditions than those historically contingent conditions which we call “capitalism”: Morality may *be* marxism under those conditions. But in no way can Marxism be said to have invented morality unconditionally.

It should have been clear from “Morality is Marxism” that no such absurd identity thesis was in question. For as much as a third of that paper was given over to the argument that Plato’s account of scientific social knowledge was better qualified than those of either Aristotle or the Sophists to stand as an account of morality. That is to say, I held that there was at least one approximation to an adequate account of morality prior to Marxism. But though I did argue that Plato’s meta-ethical and meta-scientific theories were in this way better qualified, it was no necessary part of my thesis that Plato gave an adequate account of moral know-

ledge even for his epoch. And it isn't any thesis of mine either that if, in certain crucial respects, Plato's account of moral knowledge was inadequate, as it was, then it was by reference to a conception of morality which Marxism defines that it was inadequate. For that is not just a laughably unhistorical view, it is also a seriously un-Marxist view. If Marxism has a theory of history on which Greek morality can be explained, it is to depart from the principles of just that theory of history to set up Marxist science as some sort of "idealistic" standard by which, truistically, all forms of Greek morality necessarily fail.

When, however, Barker both assents to my version of the identity thesis and then promptly accuses me of lapsing from it, it is as if he believes me to hold, or at least that I should be holding, that Marxism is not just contingently, i.e. under presently obtaining historical conditions, identical with it, but also is defined by whatever it is that constitutes Marxism as a science. He accuses me, in brief, of trying to eat my moral cake (morality is Marxism) and have it (by re-introducing non-scientific morality at the methodological level in the form of the teleology of knowledge). This would, however, indicate a lapsing from my identity thesis only if the teleology of knowledge were not, as I argue it is, the fundamental constraint on scientificity. Suppose, though, that Barker is right about this—that teleology has no place in the account of what makes for science—then the thesis that morality and Marxism are identical collapses on any account of identity. Because if Marxist science eschews teleology, morality certainly does not. Barker cannot eat his cake and have it. Either the claim which Marxism makes to scientificity rests on its being the necessary form of knowledge for our age, in which case it is in that age teleologically identical with morality, or else it is in no way identical with morality. In that case we do not, as I argued in "Morality is Marxism", have any knowledge at all which can be called "moral",

On the other hand if Barker denies the relevance of the teleological constraint and still wants to go on maintaining the identity thesis (and he says he wants to do both of these) then his thesis becomes mere verbal legislation, registering an arbitrary decision to go on calling Marxism by the name "morality" in the teeth of all contrary evidence provided by the history of the word and of the conception. Would it not be better for Barker to come clean on this and admit that he holds no sort of identity thesis at all, but only the rather more straightforward and less misleading view that Marxism is non-moral *qua* science, that morality is one of the forms of ideology of which Marxism is the critique, that

morality is, as he then might find himself more happy to be putting it, a discourse on a terrain radically discontinuous with Marxist science, and so forth. At least then we would be clear what issue this debate is about. It is no thesis of mine that I can be accused of lapsing from, but only one of Barker's, one which, furthermore, it was the whole point of my "Morality is Marxism" article to contest.

*Marxism is Morality: Whatever is the necessary scientific social knowledge for a particular society is morality for that society. Marxism is the scientific social knowledge of capitalist society.*

What, then, was the identity thesis of that article? It could be called a "substitution-identity" thesis. I argued that "morality" is that form of knowledge which, in relation to any given social formation, can be called the "science" of it. I further held that there are no *a priori* standards which such knowledge has to fulfil in order to qualify as scientific and, rather more particularly, I argued against two widely canvassed views on which there are such *a priori* standards. First, I argued, on mainly Platonic grounds, that there are no abstract *methodological* features which are timelessly distinctive of scientific knowledge. Secondly, I argued against Plato that there is no *a priori* distinction between "reality" and "appearance" which could timelessly dictate the distinction between science and non-science.

Nevertheless, though there is no one set of methodological criteria, nor any one ontology which for all time defines science, any given knowledge which is scientific will have to be in *some* way methodologically distinctive and will be underpinned by some form of contrast between "reality" and "appearance". As Marx himself says (*Capital* III, p 797) "all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided" and again, "That in their appearance things often represent themselves in inverted form is pretty well known in every science except Political Economy" (*Capital*, I, p 537). Of course it is not enough to recognise this general fact in its general form, for the important question about science is the following: Just what determines, for a given epoch, the distinctive methodology and the distinctive ontology?

The answer which I gave to this question was, simply, that a given "epoch"—or better, a given social formation—is characterised by the needs which that social formation typically generates—whether or not it is capable of satisfying them. The teleology of

knowledge comes in here because in the satisfaction of human needs there is, as elsewhere, a division of labour. If human beings have any socially generated needs at all, then they have at least one socially necessary meta-need: the need, that is, to know what they are. The need to know what our needs are is simply a corollary, for human beings at least, of our having any needs at all. But, and this is the point which I borrowed from Plato, scientific knowledge of society is whatever form of knowledge it is that is capable of distinguishing between true and false need. For that is the kind of knowledge which we need to have, given that we have any needs at all.

Nonetheless, and this is where I parted company with Plato, there is no one set of needs which is, for all men and all time, the set of true human needs. Consequently, there is no one form of the contrast between true and false needs which is, for all men and all time, the adequate contrast. Any given form of this contrast is, of course, a social ontology, or is part of one. But to say of any given form of it that this contrast is “ontological” is not to say, as Plato holds, that it is timelessly true. For as needs are socially generated, so too is the contrast between their true and their false versions. The contrast, then, between what is a true and what is a false need is itself historically contingent, and a given form of society is structurally defined by the kind of mechanism typical of it by which the contrast between true and false needs specific to it is generated.

If, therefore, I am committed to any form of social ontology—i.e. to an account, in general terms, of “social reality”—it is to one on which that reality consists neither in the ideological surface of mystified perceptions of need; nor just in some “deeper” reality of human needs hidden from us by the surface; nor certainly in any absolute contrast between “surface” and “reality”. Rather, social reality consists in the *mechanism itself* whereby a social formation generates both a set of human needs and their false or ideological transformations. Specifically, capitalist society is (really) the process whereby it produces its own ideologies. And generally, scientific knowledge of ‘society’ is that form of knowledge which, for any given kind of society is required for the dissection of the contrast between reality and appearance which it generates. There is no timeless knowledge because the “object” which determines what is knowledge is not a timeless object.

When, therefore, I introduce teleological considerations as conditions simultaneously on scientificity and on morality, I am not introducing by the back door a timeless ontology, nor, by means of one, a disguised version of the “morality-as-imperative”

which I had rejected as non-scientific. What I call the “substitution” version of the identity thesis merely maintains that whatever form of social knowledge can be substituted, for a given society, as the value for the variable “scientific”, *is* morality for just that society.

Barker may protest at this point. Perhaps he will say that if I do not hold his identity thesis—that Marxist science is, first, criterial for morality and then, truistically, uniquely satisfies it—then I must be maintaining the un-Marxian thesis that there is some timeless definition of morality which, in the capitalist epoch, Marxism *luckily happens* to satisfy. This, he may say, is un-Marxian, because on the Marxian account of knowledge, there are no non-historical standards either of scientificity or of moral knowledge for Marxism to satisfy. Well, this very familiar point is ambiguous, in one sense true and in another sense false. In the sense of “standards” in which they are abstract, non-historical, methodological or ontological strictures, I accept that there are none which Marxism can be said to satisfy and certainly that there are none which it is equally incumbent both upon Marx and upon Plato to satisfy. I have already made clear my reasons for rejecting this view. Furthermore, I can reject this view without being forced into Barker’s equally non-Marxian version of the identity thesis. For there is a teleological constraint which knowledge of society has to meet if it is to be scientific. But this is the sort of constraint which, as a result of their both fulfilling it, makes Platonic and Marxist science necessarily to *differ* from one another methodologically and in the ontology to which they are committed. Just because, to be scientific, both Marxism and Platonism had to fulfil the same teleological requirement they had to differ in their methodological and ontological standards of scientificity. In this second sense of the word “standards” therefore, the word denotes a respect in which forms of science in different historical epochs necessarily differ, not a respect in which they are always the same. The teleology of knowledge, therefore, far from being a covert absolute definition of science, on the contrary, is what systematically, and with reference to differing historical conditions, generates the differences between “sciences” under those different historical conditions. The teleology of knowledge is, in short nothing more nor less than a special case of the materialist conception of history itself.

## II

*Science and Ideology: Ideological statements are neither wholly false nor tautological but may contain "rescuable" truths in pre-scientific form.*

The substance of my disagreement with Barker, lies in our differing accounts of Marxist science and in particular of its relationship to ideologies. The issue arises because of Barker's relentless denial that there can be genuine theoretical debate between Christians and Marxists, since, being "ideological", the Christian's discourse of belief is on a different sort of cognitive level from the Marxist science—or rather, it is not a properly cognitive discourse at all.

Barker nowhere provides us with a formal account of what it is to say of an ideological discourse that it is "ideological". Fair enough, his was not a paper about that topic. But there are the following clues to a general theory of ideologies: (i) that there is a radical epistemological break between science and ideology; (ii) that science and ideology are epistemologically unequal, because ideology is potentially the object of science, but never vice-versa; (iii) that as an ideology, Christianity is distinct from some other forms in that while it appears to make substantive truth-claims about something or other, these claims are spurious, since Christian discourse is tautological, truistically spun out of a basic, non-cognitive paradigm; and that (iv) the relation of science to ideology is not just that science explains the origin of ideological belief but presents a substantive criticism of the content of ideologies.

What consequences this schematic theory of ideology has for Christian belief can be seen most clearly in connection with what Barker, quite wrongly as I shall argue, regards as the paradigmatic form of Christian utterance, the utterance, namely, "God exists". On the question why a Marxist cannot consistently hold that God exists—consistently, that is to say with the materialism of Marxist science—Barker is quite unclear. Not that the individual things which he says about it are severally unclear, but rather that he says two sorts of things about theism both of which cannot be true of it. He says, first of all, that Christian discourse, being tautological, can only appear to make substantive assertions, but in fact fails to do so. It should follow from this that the statement "God exists" is not a genuine assertion. But, familiarly, if this statement is not a genuine assertion then it is neither true nor false. Naturally, if it is neither true nor false, then the denial of it makes no more sense than its espousal, and any form of ontological materialism which



does make sense of the denial must share absurdity with the statement itself. But Barker supposes that “If Marxism ‘involves’ an ontology it will be a materialist one by definition of scientificity...” (p 405). Well, if the utterance “God exists” is not an assertion at all because it is ideological it cannot also be a false assertion because a materialist ontology shows there to be no God.

I take it that Barker is not really very serious about showing on ontological materialist grounds that there is no Christian God, but rather more with showing that belief in the existence of God is “ideological”. One indication of this is provided by the passage which immediately follows the last quoted. He goes on: “If Marxism (does not involve an ontology) this is no licence for importing an immaterialist theistic ontology into it.” (p 405) Why? Because, he goes on to say, in curious harmony with the Wittgensteinian fideists, “Religious language, like all ideological discourse, is... strictly speaking tautological; it never utters anything which is not in the paradigm right from the start.” (p 408, n 5)

This, as I shall argue shortly, is, in one of the simpler ways, untrue about Christianity and is in any case untrue at least on Marx’s own view of the matter, about any ideology, whether economic, political, legal or whatever. But, to get clear on this it is necessary as a first step to ask, again, just what it is that one is saying about a “discourse” when one is saying that it is “ideological”, but more particularly, what is entailed for the particular utterances of an ideology by the fact that they are its component parts.

For a start, then, it is at least false that Marx ever regarded social and economic ideologies in the way in which Barker explicitly treats religious discourse and implicitly all other forms of ideology. Marx never held that e.g. economic ideologies are all nothing but systems of mutually supporting, factually empty tautologies. Indeed his view about what logical and epistemic properties individual fragments of ideological discourses could have was revealingly elastic. Thus, while regarding Ricardian economics as ideological he was quite happy to allow that some individual Ricardian hypotheses and laws were truth-functional with empirical truth conditions, and of at least some of them he held that they were actually true empirical assertions. Others he held to be false, indeed he claimed to have refuted them. Yet others he did regard, in the way in which Barker suggests that we should read all assertions within ideologies, as being pseudo-factual assertions which are but covert tautologies—as he does, for example, with some of J S Mill’s economic assumptions in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*. (General Introduction, 1) In other words, it is pretty clear that for Marx at least some individual components of some



ideological discourses had the unambiguously ordinary empirical truth-conditions which they purport to have; and that the satisfaction of or failure to satisfy these truth-conditions by any given utterance could be established by conventionally inductive methods of verification or else by conventionally deductive methods of refutation.

But that not all ideological utterances could have these unambiguously ordinary truth-conditions is shown by the centrality of the role within an ideology which Marx ascribes to, among other non-logical properties, that of “fetishism”.<sup>5</sup> This property, along with others such as “reification”, “de-historicisation” and “naturalisation” are, as is well known, deeply puzzling from the point of view of the epistemology which they entail. And I cannot hope to do justice to Marx’s treatment of them. But at least the following can be said with relative clarity.

First that though the Marxist science of economics does not abolish the basic categories of bourgeois economics – the categories of “exchange”, “consumption”, “production” and “distribution”, for example, nonetheless, in their fetishised bourgeois form, these categories are expressed in distorted relationships to one another, relationships which, therefore, Marxian economics is forced to revise. This I tried to show towards the end of “Morality is Marxism”.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, leaving the categorial level for that of individual ideological assertions, the effect of the fetishistic use of these economic categories on individual ideological utterances is that their truth-values become opaque and indecipherable from the point of view of the ideology itself. Think, for example, of the assertion, which Marx came to see was “ideological” that the value of labour is exactly represented by its price in the form of wages. What Marx came to say about this statement was not that it was false, nor

<sup>5</sup> The best source for Marx’s account of “fetishism” is, of course, *Capital* I, i, iv, *On the Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof*, the following few paragraphs are based on that text. Typically Marx develops the notion of fetishism not a priori, but out of the analysis of the structure of commodity production. The “commodity form” is the appearance of the processes and relationships between processes in the form of objects and properties of objects: the production of commodities is therefore itself a process whereby the appearance of processes as things is produced. Consequently the processes of capitalist accumulation of wealth are simultaneously processes whereby the nature of those processes is disguised. Capitalist production is, in this sense, *inherently* ideological.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.* pp 122-3 But cf also Grundrisse, General Introduction, “In bringing things which are organically related into an accidental relation, into merely reflective connexion, they display their crudity and lack of conceptual understanding” p 88 (Pelican Ed.)

even that it was tautological, for it is synthetic, but that it involved a special kind of category mistake such that its truth or falsity is undecidable. The category mistake in question lies in this, that the category of “labour” is a fetishised version of the decoded category of “labour-power”. Once this is recognised, i.e. once “labour-power” is substituted for “labour” in the statement, the statement *becomes* false, for it is false within the Marxist science which can decode the fetishism.

Now what holds for opaquely false ideological utterances holds also for opaquely true ones. In general, therefore, what true assertions and what false assertions are made within ideological discourse cannot be known from within it, but only within the science—Marxism—which has the key to their ideological character. Thus we can say both that many ideological statements have genuinely empirical truth-conditions and that only from the point of view of Marxism can we know which assertions have them and of any given assertion whether or not it satisfies them. On this fact rests the claim of Marxism to be the science of capitalism.

To denote both these facts about fetishistic discourse I shall use the notion of “rescuable truth”. A “rescuable truth” is a true assertion whose truth or falsity cannot be decided within the ideological discourse it belongs to but is known to be true when appropriated within the scientific discourse which de-mystifies the categories of the ideology. Rescuable truths, therefore, are, in their pre-scientific, ideological form, neither true nor false, but fetishised truths, or de-historicised truths, or whatever. This notion offers a plausible restatement of Marx’s general account of fetishism according to which it is a “relation between persons expressed as a relation between things.”<sup>7</sup>

The key to the epistemology of this statement lies in the interpretation of the phrase “expressed as”—or of that other common phrase of Marx’s, “appearing as”. First, then, what the direct social relations between men appear *as* is not some false or illusory version of the reality. The fetishistic appearance of these relationships is not, that is to say, *false* with respect to some underlying reality. For, as Marx elsewhere puts it, these relationships appear in their fetishised form as *what they really are*.

Nonetheless, secondly, the fetishised appearance, though real, does not express the full two-sided reality of commodity production, because commodity production is (really) the whole process or mechanism whereby direct social relations appear in the form of relations between things. Consequently the fetishistic appear-

<sup>7</sup> *Capital I*, p 74

ance of these relations in the form of commodities, while not false appearance, is not true representation either. It is, as I have put it, a form of representation which is, as such, ambiguous as to truth-value.

Thirdly, then, that discourse is scientific which is capable of dissecting the process whereby the process of the production of commodities is simultaneously the production of the fetishistic, ideological appearance of that process. If I am right about this, it follows that the heart of any ideology consists in its rescuably true or false assertions and the heart of any science consists in its capacity to rescue just those true and false assertions. In this sense, therefore, Marxism is the rescued truth of capitalism.

The claim to scientificity, then, which Marxism makes is one which rests on perfectly standard considerations of greater fundamentality. Relative to any given ideology Marxism is more scientific because more fundamental. And it is more fundamental because (i) it can explain all that the ideology can explain; (ii) it can explain all that the ideology fails to explain; and (iii) it can explain why it is that the ideology cannot explain what it fails to explain.

Barker, however, objects to this essentially exoteric Marxism. I happily concede that I was wrong to speak of Marxism as a “teleological and dialectical hermeneutic of the everyday ideologies of capitalist society...” (“Morality is Marxism”, p 122) but this is not really the nub of the matter. I can very well do without the word “hermeneutic” to which Barker takes exception. But the substantive difference between us emerges from the following passage from Barker’s reply: “It is precisely not to see itself as a hermeneutic, especially as a hermeneutic of ideology, towards which Marxism is currently struggling. It does not try to discover the normative truth which ideology falsifies *as if that truth were somehow in the ideology* needing only to be released—like Ariel from the tree—in order to work wonders, but establishes itself...on a quite different terrain from ideology, generating ‘truth’ (knowledge) through its scientific practice.” (p 407)

The difference between us seems to lie in this, then, that for Barker, Marxist science is autonomous not merely with respect to its own methods but also, and more startlingly, with respect to its own “object”. As he puts it earlier, Marxism is one of a hierarchy of discourses “marked out by their scientificity and by their command over their proper objects.” (p 403) By comparison with my account of Marxist science, this one is extraordinarily esoteric, not to say gnostic in character. As I understand it Marxism is simply the science of whatever bourgeois ideology is the ideology of,

namely capitalist society. Marxism is the science it is because of its adequacy to its own object, but this object is given to it in the structures of capitalist ideology-production, the mechanism whereby the capitalist production of commodities is simultaneously the fetishisation of the process of production *by means of* commodities. In a word, Marxism is the only valid knowledge of capitalism, though for that very reason it can never become the *self-knowledge* of capitalism. For capitalism cannot do without its ideology. It is structured on its ideological processes. Were Marxism to become the self-knowledge of the capitalist world it would destroy its own object, namely that very capitalist world. It is only in this sense that Marxism is not the true self-knowledge of capitalism. And it is just in this sense that it is a revolutionary praxis.

### III

*Christians in capitalist society can rescue their own truth only through their commitment to the revolutionary praxis of Marxism.*

How, then, do these divergences cash out for the debate about Marxism and Christianity? In “Can a Christian be a Marxist?” I argued that Marxism and Christianity are “strongly compatible” and any clarification of this thesis requires that it be distinguished from a “weak compatibility” thesis.

On a “weak compatibility” thesis it would be held that there are no formal inconsistencies between the doctrines of Marxism and Christianity. There are, that is to say, no propositions in either body of doctrines the assertion of which entails the denial of assertions held to be true in the other. Now I do not know how it could be shown that there are *no* such inconsistencies and nothing I have ever argued has pre-supposed that this can be shown. I did argue that *theism* is weakly compatible with Marxism, for it is consistent with the materialist conception of history and both are compatible with the denial of ontological materialism. I will return to this point shortly. In the meantime it is worth noting the obviously crucial nature of this issue, for even if complete weak compatibility cannot be demonstrated it can, of course, be refuted by any significant counter-instance. And theism is generally supposed to be the main one.

As I formulated the “strong compatibility” thesis in “Can a

Christian be a Marxist?" it asserts that Christians are compelled to accept the basic claim of the Marxist critique of religion and are so compelled not only because of the valid claims of that critique to be scientific but also because the kind of claims which Christians themselves make become true only insofar as they accept the reduction of their beliefs to Marxist praxis. But Barker won't have this, because, again, he insists on his fideistic account of Christianity, according to which Christian belief is but a bundle of self-supporting, self-involving tautologies.

Now this is no more true of Christian discourse than it is of any other species of ideology. The view that Christian doctrines are only synchronically related to one another and have no substantive implications is merely to attitudinise, synchronically, about Christianity—it is to deny a priori that there is any proper history of Christian doctrines and praxis. But Barker anyway concedes my point that Christianity has, historically, always split over the question of social revolution—as indeed it seems very likely to do now. He therefore concedes that the doctrinal divergences in *terms* of which the schismatic parties expressed their social differences were more than could be explained on the view that the doctrines are just tautologies. For tautologies cannot generate substantive entailments. He concedes this, unless he denies that the doctrines had anything to do with the splitting.

Of course he may actually hold this view, as did Engels in *The Peasant War in Germany*. For Engels, the theological differences between Luther and Münzer could somehow be left out of the final explanation of their divergent social *praxes*, but, as John Maguire<sup>8</sup> has rightly argued, this sort of comment simply begs the question against Christianity and on non-empirical, a priori, grounds. Either, Engels holds (and it seems, Barker too) Christianity is empirically, socially, practically empty, a tissue of tautologies in an abstract "religious discourse" or else, if it becomes politically committed to socialist, (or in the case of Münzer, pre-socialist) revolutionary strategies, it ceases to be Christianity, becomes atheist. Now I can see how, as an empirical generalisation, derived from the historical evidence, this disjunction could serve as a very proper warning to Christians: they are in danger of either fetishising Christianity into the special religious language of a special religious community or else of rejecting just that Christianity in the name of its mirror-image, atheism. But to be a warning this has to be an empirical proposition. Barker buys his certainty about this at the price of evacuating it of content: he makes the

<sup>8</sup>John Maguire *Gospel or Religious Language?* *New Blackfriars* August 1973

empirical point *critical*. Hence for Barker you haven't got Christianity at all unless you have this fideism. And that is why in the end the Christian Marxist is for him, always a crypto-atheist: *is* because he *must* be.

This, of course, is where clarity about the "strong compatibility" thesis is most needed. It is a form of reductionism, a form according to which, as I have said, Christianity submits itself by the very necessities of its own thought and practice to the Marxist critique of itself. For Barker this is impossible, indeed for Wicker<sup>9</sup> too, because Christians cannot both accept that Christianity is explicable on the materialist conception of history and go on maintaining its immaterialist ontology. Barker is right to criticise the way of rebutting this charge which I employed in "Can a Christian be a Marxist?" It won't do to say, as I did there, that all the materialist conception of history explains is the reasons why people hold the ideological beliefs they do, leaving untouched the "content" of them or their truth-values.<sup>10</sup> For one thing which the materialist conception of history is not is psychologicistic. Nor is it proper to accuse the Marxist atheist of committing the genetic fallacy, which is pretty much what I did in that article.

But I do not need this unsatisfactory defence, for it is possible to answer the objection from within a strictly Marxian, even if it is not the Althusserian, position. To repeat: on my account of Marxism, the criticism of ideology is reductionist in the sense that it appropriates from ideologies the elements of rescuable truth which, in their ideological form, are beyond the pale of scientific knowledge. So too of Christianity, for short of the reduction of Christian belief to Marxist praxis, Christianity is left committed to just the idealist, tautological and fideistic religion with which Barker identifies Christianity. Christians, therefore, can rescue their own truth only through their commitment to the revolutionary praxis of Marxism. Any reducible belief *contents* which Christians fail to reduce to this praxis they are left committed to in the form of a reified and reactionary ontology of non-historical immaterial entities.

Typical of such fetishistic, reducible beliefs is one the denial of which makes Barker think he is an atheist. He thinks, when he is not holding it is a tautology, that the utterance "God exists" is false. For my part this utterance is neither true nor false, but ideological. That is to say, it is a fetishised, but rescuable truth, and one which, furthermore, only Christianity is capable of

<sup>9</sup> Wicker (2), pp 202-3

<sup>10</sup> *Can a Christian be a Marxist?* p 248.



rescuing; but then only on condition that it accepts the Marxist reduction of itself.

For the question "Does God exist?" is one which, for the Christian, has all the character of an *ignoratio elenchi*: both affirmative and negative answers would equally misconstrue the belief. Terry Eagleton seems to get this just about right in his "Decentring God" article: the unqualified assertion of God's existence seems to commit you to a pagan and ideological humanism according to which man affirms God who in turn affirms man—each centring and centred by the other. Whereas the Christian belief in the Incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus seems to undermine these centripetalities, to disperse and fragment the "meanings" attributable to "man" and so to subvert the possibilities either of man providing any autonomous, self-sufficient meaning for history, or God any fixed meaning for man.

On the other hand, as Eagleton adds, the Christian wants also to say that "The ceaseless decentring and deconstructing of Man...is part of that deeper movement or discourse of ceaseless decentration which is, for Christian faith, the triune God". (Eagleton (2) p 151) So the Christian can neither assert nor deny that God exists because, though ideological, the simple rejection of the utterance would involve the rejection of the rescuable truth it contains. As with all ideological utterances, therefore, the point is not to refute it but to subject it to the test to which Marx puts all ideological discourse—the test of practice.

It is just there, then, that the "strong compatibility" thesis is required. It is necessary to subject Christianity to the test of Marxist praxis because this is the only one available if Christians are to rescue their own truth. But again, this test is no litmus paper—there are no a priori criteria on which it is possible to discriminate the ideological from the rescuable, and certainly there are no demarcationist standards of scientificity of the sort which Barker proposes, for any such would rule out the *criticism* of ideologies as redundant. Marxist science is an *heuresis until* it has proved its own truth in practice: and when Christians have worked through their own doctrinal commitments via practical revolutionary struggles, then and only then will they have isolated their own rescuable, non-ideological truth from the shell of dispensable, unrescuably ideological elements. To this, extent, therefore, "strong compatibility" is an hypothesis rather than a thesis.

Hence, first, what is unrescuably ideological about Christianity cannot yet be decided, nor certainly can all that is rescuably revolutionary (which is not to say, of course, that we cannot tell when Christians are being simply reactionary, for we surely can).



But secondly, just because of the historical specificity of Marxism, it follows that the degree to which Christian belief is even *in principle* reducible to Marxist praxis is itself subject to historically specific limitations. There are no a priori grounds for holding that Christian-Marxist reduction exhausts the whole potential content of Christian belief even if it does exhaust all the content that can presently figure as scientifically based praxis. On the contrary, there are very good Marxist reasons for holding that since Marxism is, on its own account, an historically specific knowledge and praxis, it cannot exhaust the whole of this content. Both Wicker and Barker seem to think that this question is crucial to the whole debate, as indeed it is: if there is nothing else to Christianity than its historically contingent reduction, then the “strong compatibility” hypothesis collapses into an identity thesis which I have no interest in defending.

And so I first of all deny that the whole potential of the Incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus is reducible without remainder to the praxis of scientific Marxism. Any Christian is going to have to admit, moreover, that there is an ineliminably ontological dimension to Christian truth-claims which resists reduction and exactly demarcates the boundaries *not* between the scientific and the ideological but between the scientific and the non-scientific (the two distinctions not being identical, *pace* Barker). For where Marxist science ends, there ineliminable faith begins. I say “faith” and therefore not “knowledge”, but I say “ineliminable” faith and the *necessity* of faith can be known. Marxist science is essentially non-pretentious knowledge, for so long as it is true to its own account of the historical determinants of knowledge, it knows itself to be bounded by limitations which no present knowledge can transcend. Marxism, in other words, knows that knowledge is subject to the constraints of historical specificity and therefore does not pretentiously claim to exhaust all future possibilities of knowledge. Marxism does not know that there are future knowledges, but it must admit that they are possible. Marxist unpretentiousness, therefore, consists in the proved undecidability of the future which lies beyond its own knowledge. The Christian, however, believes that there are further possibilities of knowledge beyond those which can now be known, and that they will be actualised, *as knowledge*, under future and not presently realisable conditions.

But Wicker (Wicker (2) p 202) will take me to task for the excessively negative character of this admission. The “more” that Christianity consists in cannot lie, in its positive aspects, only in the future, nor in its present implications, only in the negative

rejection of Marxist pretentiousness. For if there are, as I have said, ontological commitments which Christians are bound to make, and Marxists not, then this is but to say that there are entities, events, possibilities which Christians are committed to saying are “real” and Marxists are not. Wicker quite rightly insists that the language of this ontology—i.e. the language describing the ontological status of these realities—is sacramental. And it is a misconstrual of this language to say, without qualification, that Christ is wholly absent from this world, or, for example, that love, or community are, simply, *impossible* within the structures of capitalism. But this is not what I said. I said, rather, that “Christ, love, community are present in the world, really present, in the form of their absence...” and if this is not entirely clear, it means at least the following:

First, that Christ, love and community can be made really present by means of specific actions materially available to social agents within the bourgeois world, actions such as those of real solidarity with all men, oppressor and oppressed alike, within (and not just at the successful resolution of) the class-struggle itself. The Christian believes in the reality of such actions because he believes in the reality of forgiveness—he believes that *all men have already been forgiven*, and that this is just a crucial description of the situation to which his action is the appropriate response.

Secondly, though the Christian does claim that such actions are, or can be, actions of real solidarity—he believes, therefore, that the description “loving action” is true of them—he is not in a position to decide for himself what *other* descriptions are true of them. For what other descriptions are true of them is a matter determined by the material social conditions which are the context of his performance. Consequently, his love is not criterionless, for he knows what *cannot* count as a loving action, namely one which, relative to those conditions, would constitute a betrayal of the revolutionary struggle.

Thirdly, then, Christ, love and community are not materialisable within the structures of bourgeois society in the way they will be either in a fully socialist society or in the Kingdom itself. The denial of this is pure ideology, for it is to pretend to a possibility of realisation for which the material conditions are absent.

Fourthly, it follows from the conjunction of the first three points that while clearly committed to some sort of irreducibility thesis of an immaterialist sort the Marxist Christian is not committed to the reified “spirituality” of his bourgeois co-religionists. This ontology is “immaterialist” only with respect to the material

conditions which determine Marxist praxis, since it cannot be reduced to *those* material conditions. Which is not to say that there is no possible praxis which would be its materialisation. In a word, Christianity will be fully reduced to the unambiguous materialism which it projects only under conditions of which Marxism can have no knowledge and which Christians themselves can characterise only in the most general terms as the coming of the Kingdom.

Fifthly, it follows that as far as moral values are concerned, there is, for the Christian, a radical ambiguity. Love is both necessary and impossible, which is only to say, in other words, that the demand to love is ideological. Love is necessary in the clear sense that to refuse to love is to refuse to recognise the revolutionary demands which “the facts” make on us; but impossible, because what love demands *in* the conditions of capitalist exploitation is made impossible *by* those conditions. The “reality” of love, therefore, consists in the self-critique of love by itself; real love is expressed in the form of the criticism of the conditions which make love impossible. And when we say that this love is mediated by Marxism, this is to define the “strong compatibility” hypothesis.

Finally, the conjunction of all five preceding points—the demonstration of their mutual consistency—is the definition of “sacramental” presence, and is the form of the ontology to which Christians are committed.

Of course the Christian cannot always justify his love historically. There are some actions which Christians will perform for which the Marxist can find no *rationale*.<sup>11</sup> But what Marxism cannot make sense of it does not thereby show to be nonsense, at any rate without making pretentiously scientific claims over and above its perfectly valid claims to scientific status. On the other hand I do readily grant that what Marxism can show to be “nonsense”—actually reactionary or ideological—no faith, or any claims to a “higher” authority of love can pretend to make sense of.

Besides, from the fact that Christians will sometimes be unable to justify their love historically it does not follow that this love cannot in principle be justified historically. The Christian can identify what will count as a truly loving action and even though he

<sup>11</sup> This does, genuinely qualify some remarks made in *Can a Christian be a Marxist?* such as: “... for every action we believe is an action of God within history we believe there is a sufficient explanation of a purely historical and material form” (p 249). While still holding this to be true, it is necessary to deny that for every case such explanations *can now be known*, the “historical necessity” of some actions can only be known from within the post-revolutionary situation which they create, as I argue in the next paragraph.

cannot now see how that love is historically realised he does believe that it is now a fragmentary, opaquely discerned constituent of the fully realised *Kingdom* (social order) of love which Jesus promises. Now he can only *believe that*, then he will be able to *see how*, his love is, and all the time was, an historically necessary anticipation of the Kingdom of which it subsequently becomes a constituent.

Why, though, should Barker take this faith of the Christian seriously at all? I know of no reason why he should do this, but only of a reason why he should resist the tendency to dichotomise as he does between faith and knowledge. For all true belief is possible knowledge, and at least the Christian spells out the conditions under which his claims to truth can be verified. For all that the coming of Christ cannot now be known, but only believed, if it happens, we will then know, and if it does not, then there will be none to care. In the meantime the test by means of which the *relative* truth of Christian beliefs can be known—their truth relative to the demands made by the contradictions of capitalism—is the solidarity they entail for Christians in the revolutionary struggle. As Barker says “Most Marxists and some Christians will find themselves in the struggle against capitalism and it is in the exigencies of that struggle that they will find their deepest commitment not only to the revolution but also to each other.” (p 414)

**NEITHER A BORROWER NOR A LENDER BE**

**“I was just reading this fascinating (infuriating\* provocative\* wrong headed\* brilliant\*) article in NEW BLACKFRIARS. I’m sure you’ll like it (and disagree with it\*) as much as I did.”**

**“Could I borrow it then?”**

**“Certainly not — I’d never see it again. But I tell you what I’ll do: I’ll send your name and address to the Manager and she’ll GIVE you a copy FREE. How about that?”**

*\*delete if absolutely necessary*

%%%%%%%%%

**Your annual subscription doesn’t just buy you your own copy every month — you can have copies for your friends as well!**