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## Review Article

### The Compatibility Issue: Marxism and Christianity

BRENDAN LOVETT

A MATTER OF HOPE. By N. Lash. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981.

MARXISM AND CHRISTIANITY. By D. Turner. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983.

March the fourteenth, 1983 marked the one hundredth anniversary of the death of Karl Marx. To judge by media reports of the event, it was an exceedingly low-key, wreath-laying affair attended by hundreds rather than thousands. A perhaps more fitting tribute to the memory of the man's life and work may be found in the attempt of Cambridge theologian Nicholas Lash to produce a specifically theological reflection on the thought of Marx. Above all, his concern has been to follow the advice of Czech theologian, Josef Hromadka "to take Marxism seriously" (p. 5). A rather similar concern has manifested itself in the philosophical writings of Denys Turner over the past decade, culminating in the publication of *Marxism and Christianity*. Compared to the ongoing stream of publications by those who would see themselves as standing within the Marxist tradition, the suggestion that these two books by men who identify themselves as Christian could constitute a 'fitting celebration' of the Marx centenary may seem unbalanced. But the truth is that these publications do constitute a significant milestone in the relationship of Christian thought and Marxism. They establish a new standard of seriousness and excellence in the attempt to come to grips with the work of Marx from a Christian point of view.

I consider both of these books to be of first rate importance. The critical reviews of Lash's work that I have come across have all been extremely favorable. It may be that philosophical works have a harder time getting reviewed. At any rate, I have come across only one review of Turner's book so far and it

has been by Lash.<sup>1</sup> At the end of his review Lash expressed the hope that Turner might return the compliment and "provide some equally critical comments on my own (very different) attempt to confront some of the same issues." This Turner did in a very detailed essay.<sup>2</sup>

Turner's book is the refinement and significant development of an argument which he initiated in a series of articles in the last decade.<sup>3</sup> This argument concerns the compatibility of Marxism and Christianity. And while there are many points of divergence between these two authors, the deepest disagreement is on the crucial question of the compatibility of Marxism and Christianity. I am concerned to trace the cause of such significant divergence in the work of two men who both agree on the necessity of taking Marx seriously. They cannot both be right, and the centrality of the opposed conclusions must point towards a major issue in the interpretation of historical materialism. My concern is exploratory. I have no great illusions of being able to resolve the issue.

I begin with a very brief indication of the arguments of the two books. I will then try to indicate where I think these men misunderstand each other in order to clear the ground for naming the substantive issue that unavoidably divides them.

#### THE ARGUMENTS OF THE BOOKS

Lash's title, *A Matter of Hope*, manages to incorporate both the strength (materialism) and the weakness (historical optimism in place of hope) which he sees as marking Marx's work. What Marx defined as historical materialism is foundational to the distinctively Marxist treatment of all other themes and issues. This point is taken by Lash and his book centers on the elucidation and evaluation of the historical materialist position. Following on a preliminary section which negotiates in masterly fashion the mine field of "Marxism" and "Marx's" late and early work, the main part of the book, comprising fourteen chapters, goes under the sectional heading of "Themes." In this section the first three chapters, i.e., 5, 6 and 7, have to do with epistemological questions. These are followed by five chapters on materialism,

1. See N. Lash, "All Shall Be Well," *New Blackfriars* 63 (October 1982):404-15; and idem, review of *Marxism and Christianity*, by D. Turner in *New Blackfriars* 64 (December 1983):538-40.

2. D. Turner, "Marx, Matter and Christianity: Turner Responds to Lash," *New Blackfriars* 65 (February 1984):69-77.

3. See D. Turner, "Morality is Marxism," *New Blackfriars* 54 (1973):57-66, 117-25; idem, "Can a Christian be a Marxist?" *New Blackfriars* 56 (1975):244-53; idem, "Moral Weakness, Self-Deception and Self-Knowledge," *New Blackfriars* 56:294-305; idem, "Marxism and Christianity and Morality," *New Blackfriars* 58(1977):181-99; idem, "The 'Subject' and the 'Self': A Note on Barker's Cartesianism," *New Blackfriars* 59 (1978):133-41.

culminating in a positive account of Christian materialism. The key point here is whether faith in God is compatible with the conviction "that all that occurs in nature and history, is explicable, in so far as it is explicable at all, without direct reference to the reality or agency of God" (p. 136). While Christians are and have been divided on the many issues involved here—issues concerning the meaning of 'divine action,' revelation, miracle, for example—it is at least arguable that, since divine agency is not to be conceived as an alternative to natural or human agency, it can be simply said that "it is human beings, products of their nature and history, and not anything else, who are the subjects of all action and consciousness" (p. 138). The care and nuance with which Lash develops his argument here defies summary. That Marx was an atheist is not to be questioned. The issue is whether his criticism of Christianity as necessarily idealist sufficiently conforms to his own criteria of materialist method. Lash concludes that it does not.

Whatever else remains to be said, the ground of any incompatibility between Christianity and Marxism is not to be found in materialism. The remaining chapters of the book take up what can be termed Marx's anthropology and the argument reaches its climax in treating of the displacement of hope by revolutionary optimism. In treating Marx's anthropology, Lash develops a charge which he had first articulated in chapter 5 which carried the heading "Revelation, Appearance and Reality." This charge is that Marx is working from a "secularized doctrine of revelation" (pp. 51, 55, 63), that his use of the dialectic is "sustained by an absent theology" (p. 55). In the later chapter, Lash finds further evidence for this charge in uncovering in Marx a "non-theological form of the conviction" that "our apprehension of ultimate hope is, in the last resort, given" (p. 63). Since Lash maintains that the content of the question of God is only "appropriately exhibited" when it is seen to be "the heart and center of the question of man" and, further, that for questions of human existence to be apprehended as aspects of the question of God "it is not necessary that they be given categorical, 'objective' expression in explicitly religious or theistic terms" (p. 287), it seems that the problem really lies in Marx's failure to do justice to the project of human existence in the world, in his displacement of hope with optimism (p. 270).

Were my purpose to indicate the full content of Lash's book, the preceding paragraphs would constitute a grievous injustice. I have only touched on those aspects having a bearing on 'the compatibility question.' The same caveat must attach to my brief resume of Turner's work. *Marxism and Christianity* is a somewhat misleading title. The scope of the work is quite narrow, what Turner calls a "severely restricted argument."<sup>4</sup> His goal is to define a problem about the possibility of morality. His substantive theses are twofold: an identity thesis—morality is Marxism—and what he calls the 'strong com-

4. Turner, *Marxism and Christianity*, p. viii.

patibility' thesis—Marxism and Christianity are in 'asymmetrical relations of dependence' on one another.

The first nine chapters of his book are concerned with the identity thesis and involve an extended exploration in six chapters of the meaning of ideology; the final four chapters are devoted to the strong—compatibility thesis. It is the understanding of ideology (defined as "a praxis characterized by a form of contradictoriness, in which the modes of social perception and relationship which it routinizes misrepresent the social processes which generate them" [p. 127]) which gives rise to the problem about morality.

Turner argues that 1) morality is that form of knowledge which, in relation to a given form of society, can be called the science of it; and that 2) Marxism is the only form of social knowledge which, under capitalism, can be said to satisfy the necessary conditions of scientific knowledge. This leads to the conclusion that, under capitalism, morality is Marxism.

Turner is convinced that both Marxism and Christianity supply concepts and categories which are indispensable "if we are to make sense of the social world in which we live" while they constitute "incommensurate" kinds of discourse. He is under no illusion regarding the possibility of some "Christian/Marxist synthesis." The strong compatibility thesis means only that "we may be able to recover some sense of the moral demands which our place in the modern world makes on us within the practice of living out the tensions and conflicts between the Marxist and Christian perspectives" (p. x). It should be clear that Turner has no time for those who imagine that some facile synthesis is possible, whether it be on the basis of misapplied Althusserian ideas of the ideological, or a consistent use of such ideas.<sup>5</sup>

#### THE MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Moving on to the areas of misunderstanding between the two authors, the prime issue seems to be that of the relation between science and knowledge. Since both authors agree in rejecting Althusser's epistemological polarization of science knowledge ideology, it is puzzling to find Lash accusing Turner of "standing foursquare" within this tradition. The mere fact that Turner rejects so totally the Althusserian understanding of ideology renders improbable the idea that he subscribes to the scientific reduction of knowledge which is the other side of the polarization. I tend to think that Lash's critical struggles with the position of Althusser have made him overly sensitive to the danger of reductionism in the epistemological field.<sup>6</sup> He misreads the manner in which Turner uses 'scientific,' and this is all the more strange because of the

5. On the ideological, for example J-M Gonzales-Ruiz, *The New Creation: Marxist and Christian?* (New York: Orbis Books, 1976). On the consistent use, see A. Fierro, *The Militant Gospel* (New York: Orbis Books, 1977).

6. Lash, *A Matter of Hope*, pp. 14-23, 60-63.

care with which Turner articulates his understanding of 'scientia' as meaning simply 'knowledge.'<sup>7</sup>

A second, more complex source of misunderstanding, again for Lash, is the meaning Turner gives to Marxism. Turner begins by admitting that his reading of Marxism is "contentious" and that his interpretation of the ideological character of religion and morality "present some hypotheses, but not the only possible ones. . . which are consistent with general Marxist criteria for the criticism of such phenomena."<sup>8</sup> In the light of such tentative beginnings, it comes as surprising to read the ease with which Turner refers to "true" or "authentic" Marxism, meaning what he has himself defined as such.<sup>9</sup> There is a big difference of emphasis between Turner and Lash here which could be expressed by saying that Turner tends more towards stressing what Marxism should be if it is logically self-consistent and Lash deals more with what it historically has been in the writing of Marx. Since both writers are presenting critical reflections on Marxism, I stress that the difference is only one of emphasis.

Turner's difficulty with Lash, on the other hand, is not due to misunderstanding, and this brings us to the main point of this article, determining what exactly is involved in 'taking Marx seriously.'

The problems, according to both men, is how to determine the circumstances in which contemporary Christian speech and action can hope to be other than 'ideological.'<sup>10</sup> This follows from the fact that they both agree in reading historical materialism as foundational to Marx's work and accept the consequence of the charge of ideology. At least, both say they accept this. But Turner is convinced that Lash is less than consistent in thinking through the Marxist materialism which he professes. And it is their difference on this point which gives rise eventually to two divergent senses of what is involved in the compatibility issue. If the Marxist position is identified with historical materialism, and if the basic validity of this position be granted, then the meaning of compatibility turns on establishing that non-ideological patterns of Christian faith are possible. Showing this is all that is meant by the compatibility claim. Turner characterizes his position as 'strong compatibility,' but all that this means is that Christianity is not compatible with anything else except Marxism at this particular point of history. Lash concludes his exploration by judging Christianity and Marxism incompatible because the latter is based on an anthropology according to which the question of man and the question of God are antithetical (p. 288). Clearly, 'compatibility' is being conceived within quite different frameworks.

7. Turner, *Marxism and Christianity*, pp. 82-101, 103.

8. *Ibid.*, p. viii.

9. See for example, *ibid.*, pp. 224, 236-37, 246.

10. Lash, *A Matter of Hope*, p. 539, p. 74.

Turner has two arguments against Lash's position. The first concerns the interpretation of Marx's anthropology. Lash is right in saying that Marx assumed that Christianity entails an antithesis between God and man. Many of today's Christians assume the same thing.<sup>11</sup> Lash would further agree with Marx in seeing such an antithesis as functional ideologically for class interests. But Marx and many of today's Christians are simply wrong in assuming that the antithetical account expresses the truth of Christianity. It seems that Lash moves from this to the conclusion that Marx bases his whole position on a denial of God in the name of 'man.' He thus sees the resultant anthropology as 'sustained by an absent theology.'

But Marx, in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, rejects a 'secularist' position from a very early stage in his career. He came to see that a secularist anthropology was but a mirror image of theism and was flawed in the same way. Theology (as he understood it) denied man in affirming God and atheistic anthropologies can only affirm their humanism through the denial of God. Marx believed that an anthropology adequate to the socialist case could only be worked out through rejecting totally the antithesis 'Either God or man.' So, not just Christianity, but also Feuerbach's atheism, have to be rejected in the name of a socialist humanism unmediated by any trace of the traditional debate. Marx has no time for an anthropology which can only affirm its humanism via the denial of God.<sup>12</sup> So it is necessary to say that Marx was wrong about the theologically and practically true Christian understanding of God-in-relation-to-people while still insisting that his work does not derive from this wrong idea.

I am not at all sure that the issue can be solved as simply as this. After all, Lash is fully aware of 'Marx's explicit avowals' and his critique of Marx's revolutionary optimism consists in showing that such optimism does not follow from the premises of historical materialism. But Turner's deepest concern is with the manner in which Lash makes Marx's anthropology the basis of incompatibility with the Christian faith. Turner's second argument against Lash's position is that he fails to meet the charge of ideology presented to religion by historical materialism.

Marx's criticism of religion consists hardly at all in the confutation of its theoretical errors. He was apparently convinced that Feuerbach had said all that needed to be said on such issues. He himself thought that Christianity was invariably "ideological." What this means can only be elucidated by reference to Marx's materialism. At the present time, we are being inundated with a minor flood of books which purport to give a materialist reading of the Bible, in whole or in part.<sup>13</sup> A materialist reading of Christianity is one

11. See E. Norman, *Christianity and the World Order* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979).

12. Turner, "Marx, Matter and Christianity," p. 70-71.

13. See F. Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (New York: Orbis Books, 1981, trans. from 1975 French ed., du Cerf. Paris); M. Clevenot, *Materialist Ap-*

which treats it as the practice of a relationship between beliefs and practices. Such a reading refuses to treat it as a set of beliefs considered independently of the practices within which those beliefs are embedded. It also refuses to treat it as a set of practices considered independently of the belief in terms of which Christians engage in them. Within this methodological framework, to make the charge of Christianity being always ideological is to deny the possibility of a materialist reading. It is to claim three things:

1. that there is a systematic lived contradictoriness in the lives of Christians which gives rise to a sort of 'lived unreality';
2. that the capacity to sustain such lived unreality is due to its being sustained by class interests of society;
3. that these unreal but lived relationships of ideology are functional for a class society and sustain the structures of class by mediating them into invisibility. Ideology is the 'invisibility' of the class struggle.<sup>14</sup>

Now there is no way that the charge of being ideological can be refuted by appealing to the theoretical truth of Christianity. To put it in Turner's terms, "you cannot know that you are talking about God at least until you know that you are not talking ideologically" (p. 74). You cannot claim to take Marx seriously and refuse to accept that in capitalist society all theorizing and practice registers the effects upon it of the objective constraints and pressures generated by the class character of that society.

What has to be said at this point is that Lash is very much alive to the danger of ideology and its effects on Christian practice. I would even recommend his book solely for the manner in which it illuminates such dangers. And he rightly identifies these effects as the making invisible in theory and practice of class relations. But he never undertakes, or sees it as necessary, to demonstrate the conditions of possibility of Christian belief and practice within class-structured society. Thus it is that the structure of his argument is, in Turner's phrase, 'antiphonal'. Each thesis of Marx's work is carefully built up into a powerful challenge to Christian belief and self understanding but then the answer is given in a strangely nondialectical, 'external' fashion. Not all the theses together add up to the demand that Christianity establish the material conditions of the possibility of its own truth in a world understood in a historical materialist way. But to take historical materialism seriously is to accept that science, creative politics, morality and authentic religion, are

*proaches to the Bible* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984, trans. from 1976 French ed., du Cerf, Paris); N. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979) and *The Bible and Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1983); W.A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); G. Pixley, *God's Kingdom* (New York: Orbis Books, 1981); C. Rowland, "Theology of Liberation and Its Gift of Exegesis," *New Blackfriars* 66 (1985):157-72; G. Theissen, *The First Followers of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1978) and *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982).

14. Turner, "Marx, Matter and Christianity," pp. 71-72.



not given to us in advance but are the results of creative responses to the pressures of ideological contradictions. As Turner succinctly puts it,

One cannot accept the 'materialist conception of history' in any plausibly Marxian sense and deny the socially objective character of the constraints and pressures of social class on ideological thinking and/or deny that the empirical effects of those pressures register systematically upon consciousness in a class society. (p. 73)

Reading carefully the passages where Lash talks about the manner in which the ideological effect is produced, what emerges is a seeming reluctance to accept what is central to Marx's position—that it is the class relations themselves that produce the effect of their own social invisibility. We read instead that "invisibility 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," or that this invisibility is due to our tendency "to be 'forgetful' of the limits to which our knowledge is subject."<sup>15</sup> But neither a conspiracy theory of the origin of ideology nor a psychological theory of why we conform to it can explain either the social source or the persistence of ideology. Historical materialism challenges us to accept that ideology is but the living out in consciousness as opposed to the conscious living out of the structural pressure of class itself.

One must agree with Lash in holding that no mono-causal, deterministic, intransitive model of the constraints and pressures of class on ideological thinking is a tolerable reading of Marx. One may further argue that, up to the present time, we still lack a truly adequate account of social causality and social agency within which to theorize the structural pressure of class, i.e. an account at least more adequate than the notoriously defective metaphor of 'base and superstructure.' But what one may not argue—at least while claiming to take Marx seriously—is that the determination of consciousness is solely a matter of conspiracy (misinformation) or mental laziness.

Take the following quotation from the late Bernard Lonergan:

Things have slipped beyond the human scale and the average man tends to find it incomprehensible. He speaks about 'they are doing this, they are doing that.' But who are 'they'? Nobody knows. That leads to frustration. It is very hard to form small groups of men who will work for particular purposes at the present time because they know it is no use trying. 'You cannot beat the machine.' You can't get anywhere. There is no significance to it. Control power is too centralized. There is no room for personal decision, personal achievement, personal taste, personal significance. It is a case of economic determination resulting from a lack of the existence of individuals who know their own minds and live their own lives. In other words, economic determination as affirmed by Marx, as something neces-

sary, is a mistake; but economic determinism as resulting from people not having minds of their own, not insisting that human intelligence and reason and free choice are to be the ultimate determinants of what human life is to be—if that breaks down, then human life becomes mechanical.<sup>16</sup>

Leaving aside the possible inadequacy of the above as an interpretation of what Marx wrote, I invite the reader to focus on the date. Lonergan was to spend the rest of his life trying to thematize what was involved in people coming to have minds of their own. His whole later emphasis on the centrality of conversion in authentic human living implies that a person cannot simply think his way out of inauthenticity. Solidarity with the poor, the preferential option for the poor by the Church, remain empty words unless their reality is seen as contingent on abandoning our particular perspective, an abandonment which is real only in an alternative patterning of social relationships. I would argue that the Church's insistence on the preferential option for the poor, or on solidarity with the poor, as the Vatican prefers to name it, is a recognition of the present day material conditions of possibility for authentic Christian living. As such, it takes seriously the main challenge of Marxism to Christianity. The danger with Lash's manner of placing the issue of compatibility is that, quite contrary to his own wishes, it may lead some people to fail to advert to the danger of ideology in their Christian living.

15. Lash, *A Matter of Hope*, pp. 129, 133.

16. B. Lonergan, "Lectures in the Philosophy of Education," Lonergan Center, Regis College, Toronto, 1959, p. 201.