

Marxism and Religion Today – A Survey

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All the straws in the wind indicate a re-invigoration of scholarly discussions concerning Marxism and religion. The reasons are many: the vagaries of scholarly publishing and translation; the return of religion as a major factor in geo-politics after the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York in September, 2001; the rise in mass anti-capitalist protests from the time of the Seattle World Trade Organisation Protests in 1999, protests in which a significant number of people from religious backgrounds took part. Many of those religiously-inspired protestors, in Seattle (1999), Washington (2000), Melbourne (2001), Genoa (2002) and elsewhere through-out the West began to seek a deeper understanding of what they had experienced and how their own religious traditions might have something to say. A significant feature of their search for understanding is an increased interest in Marx. Indeed, it is now common for students of philosophy and theology at universities to organise journals and conferences dealing with various aspects of the relations between Marxism and religion. And journals traditionally open to Marxist issues have begun accepting articles dealing with religion (such as *Historical Materialism*, *Critique*, *Rethinking Marxism* and *International Socialist Review*).

The Pauline Century?

If today I wish to retrace in a few pages the singularity of this connection in Paul, it is probably because there is currently a widespread search for a new militant figure ... called upon to succeed the one installed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks (Badiou 2003: 2).

Within this context, we may understand some of the key moments in recent debate. I begin by focusing on significant works that have become the centres of debates, before passing on to discuss the networks of scholars that deal with Marxism and religion. The first cluster of works is concerned none other than the Apostle Paul's letters in the New Testament of the Bible. In the English-speaking world, debate was sparked by the translation of Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Badiou 2003). Originally published in French six years earlier (Badiou 1997), it was one of the first works by Badiou translated into English and remains his most widely-read book. The English translation sparked a wide-ranging debate that has not

abated, turning attention to the Bible itself in political debate on the Left. Badiou, an atheist with Maoist leanings, argues that Paul provides a paradigm of what he calls the event: Paul's genius was to identify an event (the resurrection of Christ), form a militant group around that truth and urge fidelity to the event. For Badiou, Paul embodies the moment when truth as a universal is made available to all, thereby enabling a multiplicity of universals. However, in order to sidestep criticism that a Marxist atheist should have nothing to do with a claim such as the resurrection, Badiou argues that he is interested purely in the *form* of Paul's truth-event, not its *content*, which is nothing other than a fable. In other words, Paul's doctrine of grace (in which God unaccountably, unexpectedly and undeservedly intervenes), may be 'laicised' and thereby provide renewed insight into the process of revolution.

Needless to say, Badiou has been criticised for this argument, for his romanticism of the event (Critchley 2000), for abstraction and singularity remote from everyday reality (Surin 2009: 197-225), for focusing on resurrection in Paul's letters at the expense of crucifixion (Welborn 2009), for neglecting the power of the death drive (Žižek 1999), for seeing Paul in far too positive a light (Ojakangas 2009), for his equivocation over the role of religion in his work (Boer 2009b) and for his inability to deal with evil and the negative (Karlsen 2010). Yet he has generated a whole new debate over the relation between Marxist philosophy and religion (see Blanton and De Vries Forthcoming; Caputo and Alcoff 2009; Depoortere 2009). The two most comprehensive responses have come from Slavoj Žižek and Giorgio Agamben. Žižek may have been a fellow-traveller for a while (Žižek 2003), but he has increasingly sought to distance himself from Badiou's argument, stressing instead the feminine formula of sexuation¹ and the materialist core of Christianity in Christ's cry of dereliction on the cross in Mark 15:34: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Žižek 2003: 15; 2002: 180).

By contrast, Giorgio Agamben's challenge to Badiou is much more comprehensive. In *The Time That Remains* (2005), Agamben argues in the spirit of Walter Benjamin that Paul's key revolutionary message is not the multiple universalisms of the event, but the messianic 'time that is left us'. As the period between inauguration and completion, in which revolutionary potentiality rises to fever pitch, the 'messianic time' entails a thorough reconstitution of the law, in which the spark of a new era may be ascertained. Agamben's effort has occasioned less criticism, although his residual idealism and preference for ontological categories have been

¹ In contrast to the masculine formula of sexuation – all X are submitted to the phallic function, but there exists an X that is not submitted to the phallic function – the feminine formula states: there does not exist any X that is exempt from the phallic function but not-all X are submitted to the phallic function. In other words, the masculine formula holds to the constitutive exception, in which the exception outside the system confirms the rule, while the feminine formula observes that there is nothing outside the system but that the system itself is inconsistent, the non-All (Karlsen 2010: 114-15; Žižek 2006: 168; Žižek and Milbank 2009: 100)

noted (Sharpe 2009), as has his liking for speculative searches for origins based on nineteenth-century styles of linguistic analysis (Boer 2009b). Indeed, both Žižek and Agamben are less thinkers in the historical materialist tradition than inheritors of the tradition of German idealism (Karlsen 2010). Allow me to ask one final question: why Paul? I would suggest that the interest in Paul is best reflected in Badiou's reason for turning to that biblical apostle: he seeks a renewed source of inspiration akin to Lenin, for in the same way that Lenin was Marx's great organiser, so also was Paul in relation to Christ.

Job's Challenge to Divine Powers

As you see, I am as tormented as Job, though not as god-fearing (Marx 1861 [1985]: 247; 1861 [1973]: 144).

A lesser current in today's engagement between Marxism and religion comes from an unexpected but fruitful corner – the figure of Job in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). In 2009 the long-awaited translation of Antonio Negri's *The Labor of Job* appeared (Negri 2009). In offering a detailed philosophical exegesis of the 'marvellous' biblical book of Job, Negri sought to deal with the chronic disappointment of the failure of his radical political agitation of the 1970s. He began writing the original work when in prison – along with other members of the Autonomy Movement – awaiting trial in Italy and completed it after escaping to Paris in 1983. Through an analysis of Job's own suffering, Negri deploys the key opposition of measure and immeasure. Rather than valorise one over against the other, such as measured retribution over against immeasurable love, Negri offers a more complex argument. Initially, measure may mark all that is wrong with the world, in terms of law, labour, time and ethics (a position espoused by Job's 'friends'), but then immeasure too becomes problematic, for now we find immeasurable pain and evil. What is the answer? From immeasurable suffering and pain comes first an immeasurable creativity, the creativity of labour, which in its turn leads to a new measure, a new order qualitatively different from the old. In sum: negative measure \Rightarrow negative immeasure \Rightarrow positive immeasure \Rightarrow positive measure.

Much more may be said on Negri's reading of Job (see Boer 2010), but let me comment on a phrase I used earlier, philosophical exegesis. Negri's book is not conventional biblical interpretation, although he engages with biblical scholars; instead, he reads it as a Marxist philosopher, focusing on underlying philosophical themes that have suffering – a major theme of Job – as their basis.

A less engaging deployment of Job appears with Žižek. In this case, Job emerges in a longer discussion of Žižek's effort to explain the unique, revolutionary potential of Judaism (Žižek 2003: 124-9; 2009). For Žižek, the key to Job is that he reveals the impotence of divine power but refuses to divulge this final truth. Job never desists from his relentless questioning, pushing God to make an appearance at the end of the book – the voice in the whirlwind – to answer Job's accusations concerning his own meaningless suffering. The catch is that God does not actually say anything, does not answer Job at all, but merely resorts to bluster and boasting. And this God ultimately declares that every word Job said was true, that all the words of Job's 'friends' were false. The twist here is that Job, presented with this startling truth, refuses to say openly that God is indeed powerless, that he has failed this ultimate test miserably. Not only is this the first instance of ideological criticism, not only is it the key to the Jewish approach to the Law, but Job is, according to Žižek, also the forerunner of Christ: in the same way that Job shows that the power of this unknowable Big Other is a sham, so also does Christ's cry of dereliction on the cross – 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34) – indicate that God himself has died, that he does not actually exist any longer. However, the difference between Job and Christ is that whereas the former maintained the contradictory stance of the 'subject supposed to believe', Christ made this deeper truth plain for all to see and hear (see further Kotsko 2008: 90-7; Karlsen 2010: 219-33).

The problem with this 'atheism' at the heart of Christianity is that it is not particularly new. On this matter Žižek has been misled by his fascination with the conservative G.K. Chesterton, who opined that on the cross, 'God seemed for an instant to be an atheist' (Chesterton 2009 [1909]: 286). Had he taken time to read Ernst Bloch's *Atheism in Christianity*, he would have found a much richer analysis of the Bible from a Marxist perspective. First published in 1968 and first translated in 1972, it was reissued by Verso in 2009 (Bloch 1968, 1972, 2009). In that work Job appears as the climax to a long line of rebellious figures in the Bible, those who give voice to innate protest atheism, to an 'exodus out of Yahweh', out of the God of the rulers and oppressors – Adam and Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Cain after the murder of Abel, the rebellions of Korah and Miriam, the murmuring of the people in the desert, the Nazirites (radicals who take an ascetic vow and retreat to the desert), the prophets who rail against injustice, and then Job, who voices the most thorough and consistent challenge to a God who allows people to suffer (see further Boer 2007: 1-56).

But what kind of atheism is this? Not the moral atheism of the Enlightenment in which the problem of theodicy led to the conclusion that God could not exist in the face of undeserved suffering, nor is it historical, psychological or poetic atheism that Bloch notes as possible answers

to the questions posed in the book of Job – for an unfeeling, cruel universe exists with or without God (Bloch 1972: 120-2). Instead, Bloch is interested in the utopian drive beyond inhumanity, embodied above all in Job.

Can there be no understanding of the harsh clash of misery and the drive to overcome it, no insight into exploitation and its progressive dialectics? And does not dialectical materialism itself need some justification for invoking such a dreary and repulsive process? Where does this realm of necessity come from, with all its long oppression? Why is the realm of freedom not suddenly there? Why must it work its way with so much bloodshed through necessity? Why the long delay? (Bloch 1972: 121)

What he decries are both the ‘unrealistic folly of optimism’ and the ‘equally unhistorical nihilism’ that are characteristic of so many forms of atheism. Rather, atheism protests not merely against a god who is responsible for these things but that they exist at all. For this reason, the religious revolutionaries draw Bloch in: prophets, mystics, religious founders, and the theological revolutionaries like Job and Müntzer.

Marxist Theology

‘Verlossing uit de slavernij’: deze woorden uit een lied van de arbeidersbeweging raken de kern van de Bijbel (‘Redemption from Slavery’: these words from a song of the labour movement go to the heart of the Bible) (Boer 2009a).

A rather similar approach to Bloch with very different results may be found in the work of the Dutch theologian, Dick Boer, who has also been a pastor in a Reformed Church in the GDR in the 1980s, with a small congregation of left-wing parishioners who sought to revitalise the GDR before it collapsed. Coming out of a ‘left Barthian’ tradition, Boer argues that the core messages of the Bible are in themselves radically revolutionary. But what is a ‘left Barthian’? Over against the tendency to interpret one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century in a ‘right’ or conservative direction, Boer emphasises Karl Barth’s religious socialism and his dialectical method (Boer 2002). That method leads one to one radical proposition after another in Barth’s work, not least of which was his sense that liberation lay at the heart of the Russian Revolution and that in one situation only is dictatorship acceptable, the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In his work on biblical theology, *Verlossing uit de Slavernij: Bijbelse Theologie in Dient van Bevrijding* (Redemption from Slavery: A Biblical Theology of Liberation), Boer also offers a

sustained Marxist reading of the Bible, with debts to liberation theology (Boer 2009a). However, in contrast to Bloch's search for a rebellious undercurrent in the biblical material, Boer argues that the central themes of the Bible are themselves revolutionary. Thus, the stories of creation in Genesis 1-2 become narratives of liberation from chaos and oppression, the Israelites in the wilderness become the model of militant group recently freed from servitude under the Pharaoh of Egypt, and the Apostle Paul offers a new model for collective living.

In many respects, Boer's work is a more thorough than the version of liberation theology that came out of Latin America and in which renewed interest is being paid today, now with mutations into areas such as Islam and indigenous liberation (Gutiérrez 2001 [1969]; Löwy 1996; Petrella 2006; Dabashi 2008). The problem with liberation theology was that it always limited its contact with Marxism. When economic and social analysis was needed, some liberation theologians drew on Marxist resources, but when questions of salvation arose, Marxism was quarantined and traditional theological resources were used. Elsewhere, I have called this the 'ontological reserve' (Boer 2010). Not so Dick Boer, for whom a thorough engagement between Marxism and theology is one of the best ways forward for liberating practice.

Networks in Marxism and Religion

Dick Boer has also been involved in a network of socialist theologians and pastors, which has met under the auspices of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (Germany) in 2009. The result is a volume of papers called *Kämpfe für eine solidarische Welt* (Fink and Hildebrandt 2010), in which papers from the conference are gathered. The key questions addressed by the participants are as follows:

- Kann Religionskritik konstruktiv weitergedacht werden, so dass sie nicht länger nur Konfrontation mit Religionen ist, sondern sich konkret herrschaftsstützenden Strukturen von Religionen auseinandersetzt?
- Gibt es Berührungspunkte, die es ermöglichen, dass sich religiöse Bewegungen von linker Kapitalismuskritik und Transformationsstrategien inspirieren lassen? Im Kontext gemeinsamer Herausforderung könnten dann auch beiderseits belastende Konflikte und Missverständnisse zur Sprache gebracht werden.
- Wie können sich angesichts der dramatischen Weltsituation von Wirtschaftskriegen und sozialer Ausplünderung linke Religionskritik und Theologie der Befreiung fruchtbar ergänzen?

- Can the criticism of religion be constructively rethought so that it is no longer merely a matter of confrontation with religion, but of actually dealing with the dominating structures of religion?
- Are there points of contact which foster the inspiration of religious movements focused on the left-wing criticism of capitalism and on strategies of transformation? In the context of a joint challenge, damaging conflicts and misunderstandings may also be raised.
- Given the dramatic situation of global economic warfare and social plundering, how can the left-wing criticism of religion and liberation theology fruitfully complement each other? (Fink and Hildebrandt 2010: 2)

The participants in the seminar were largely older scholars from theological backgrounds – Jan Rehmann, Tom Veerkamp, Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, Enrique Dussel, Franz Hinkelammert, Dick Boer, Michael Ramminger, Franz Segbers, Ulrich Duchrow, Walter Baier, Bodo Ramelow, Katja Strobel, Jürgen Klute, Dieter Klein, Michael Brie, Brigitte Kahl, Charlene Sinclair and Rick Wolff (only the last is not a theologian).

The value of this initial seminar with the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung is that it lays the groundwork for future meetings of a new network called the ‘Marxism and Religion’ network. However, before discussing that network, allow me to mention two others that also feed into it. The first is the ‘Future of Religion’ seminar, which has been held annually for the past 35 years at the Inter-University Centre in Dubrovnik, Croatia. Under the auspices of Professor Rudolf Siebert (<http://www.rudolf siebert.org>), this seminar has always had a Marxist component, largely through Siebert’s own concern with the Frankfurt School (Siebert 2001, 2003), as well as strong interest by other participants in Jürgen Habermas (Ott 2001, 2006, 2007b, 2007a) and a study of the intersections between Marxism and Christianity throughout the world (Janz 1998). The ‘Future of Religion’ seminar has a history of drawing together scholars from North America, Western and Eastern Europe and, as I write, it plans to meet again in Dubrovnik over 2-7 May, 2010.

Another project that feeds into the ‘Marxism and Religion’ network is ‘Critical Theory of Religion’ (<http://www.criticaltheoryofreligion.org>). Inspired deeply by the Frankfurt School of Social Research, as well as the work of Max Weber, the ‘Critical Theory of Religion’ project is the result of much work by Warren Goldstein. It now has a book series published by Brill (in Leiden) called ‘Studies in the Critical Research on Religion’ (http://www.criticaltheoryofreligion.org/book_series.htm and <http://www.brill.nl/scrr>), of which the first volume has been published, *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*

(Amarasingam 2010). Not all the ‘Critical Theory of Religion’ project concerns Marxism directly, since its disciplinary focus is sociology, but many of those involved (including the author of this article) work with a Marxist perspective.

Each of these three streams feed in their own way into the ‘Marxism and Religion’ network, which is the result of a few years of discussion, planning, organisation, meetings (Copenhagen, Dubrovnik, Hong Kong, New Orleans, Amsterdam and London) and a conference (Copenhagen 2010). It gathers more than fifty, mostly younger, scholars from every inhabited continent on the globe. Apart from reading groups at the Universities of Newcastle (Australia) and KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg (South Africa), as well as online reading group that is focused on detailed readings of all that Marx and Engels wrote on religion, it also seeks to foster research and collaboration into all aspects of the interaction between Marxism and religion. We are planning a meeting under the auspices of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, along with a three-year seminar in Eastern Europe (based in St Petersburg) and possible research projects in China. The members of this network come from a variety of backgrounds and positions – atheists, agnostics and believers, and from varying traditions, such as philosophy, sociology, history, politics, studies in religion and theology. Already some of the more interesting work on Marxism and religion has been undertaken by those involved in the project, especially Alberto Toscano (Toscano 2010), Sara Farris (Farris in press), Jan Rehmann (Rehmann 2011) and John Roberts (Roberts 2008a, 2008b). Since the author of this article is the coordinator of this project, I hope to be able to provide an update in the next Yearbook.

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