

particular interpretative stances, I do think that we have made some important advances in our quest for the historical Jesus over the last hundred years. If Sanders' study manages to put Christianity's eschatological and millenarian inheritance on the map once again, then it will have not only illuminated one of the most important events in history but rehabilitated the images of Jewish and early Christian eschatology, whose power is much needed in a civilisation where hope for radical change is very much on the agenda. I, for one, am grateful for the wisdom and clarity which make this a major contribution to the study of Christian origins and contemporary use of Christianity's foundation documents.

* E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*. SCM Press, London, 1985. Pp. xiv + 444. £15.00

A Relationship of a New Kind: Marxism as a Transcendental Atheism*

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The atheistic character of Marxism has often been regarded as an obstruction to dialogue and debate between Marxists and Christians. A recent contributor to this discussion suggests that if Marx has anything to offer Christians, it is 'in spite of his atheism', while others have pressed for a *modus vivendi* between science and faith; materialism and religion.¹ Yet the atheism of the Marxist tradition is, I want to argue, an atheism which 'transcends'. It is an atheism which translates the preoccupations of world religions into the language of a dialectical science and in this way offers a way out of the conceptual rigidities in which conventional materialists and believers alike find themselves increasingly trapped. It is an atheism which is far more positive and liberating than is commonly assumed.

I shall begin by presenting the Marxist case for atheism both in historical terms and as I believe it stands in logic. Once this is done, it

will become clearer why Marxism has an essentially affirmative attitude to the religious heritage which it transcends.

The Case for Aetheism : An Historical Consideration

The young Marx was steeped in the traditions of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. He consciously identified with what he called the 'ever new philosophy of reason' and his early writings are suffused with the humanism of a 'Deity' who 'speaks softly but with certainty' and 'never leaves mortal man wholly without a guide'.² By 1843, however, Marx had broken with this Deist heritage and become an atheist.

Why? The reasons are as much political as they are philosophical. Politically, Marx, in working through his critique of Hegel, has become a radical democrat who looks towards a participatory future in which state and society have become fused, and philosophically, Marx has followed Feuerbach in arguing that humanity must be emancipated from religion. The positive character of this atheism becomes particularly evident when we link the two, pausing briefly to consider the relationship between philosophical atheism and social freedom.

The figure who towers over the French Enlightenment is undoubtedly Rousseau. Marx's youthful concern with uniting the 'welfare of mankind and our own perfection' echoes the project of *The Social Contract*: to see whether 'legitimate government' is possible, 'taking men as they are and laws as they might be'.³ Rousseau's response to this challenge appears somewhat pessimistic. It is not merely that bringing the will of the individual into harmony with the community—the General Will—presupposes the coercion of the state 'which means nothing other than that he shall be forced to be free'. It is also that legitimate government can never be more than a fleeting moment within a cyclical movement of birth and decay. The body politic begins to die as soon as it is born and 'bears within itself the causes of its own destruction'.⁴

What makes a momentary realisation of good government possible is, however, the role of religion. In the concluding chapter of *The Social Contract* Rousseau argues that 'no state has ever been founded without religion as its base'. A 'civil religion' is essential to reinforce 'sentiments of sociability' and the 'sanctity' of the social contract. Although, as Rousseau puts it, 'all religions which themselves tolerate others must be tolerated', those who reject the 'simple dogmas' of this religion must be banished—not for impiety but as anti-social beings.⁵

It is this analysis which shapes Marx's response. Religion, he declares in 1843, is not merely an instrument of the state. The state *itself* is a 'theological concept', an 'illusory community' which

mystically sublimates conflicts of interest in social reality. The 'unreal universality' with which the citizen is endowed simply confirms the egoistic nature of daily life. 'The relation of the political state to civil society is just as spiritual as the relation of heaven and earth': it is because people remain as they are in a world where 'circumstances' aggravate inequalities and the public and the private 'naturally' conflict that no real emancipation is possible. The 'real man' is recognised only in the shape of the egoistic individual; the 'true man' only in the shape of the abstract *citoyen*⁶ and it is just at this point in the *Jewish Question* that Marx quotes Rousseau. 'Whoever ventures on the enterprise of setting up a people must be ready, shall we say, to change human nature, to transform each individual, who by himself is entirely complete and solitary, into a part of a much greater whole'. The 'physical and independent existence' received from nature must be replaced with a 'moral and communal existence'.⁷ But is such a transformation possible?

Alas, Rousseau has told us, 'men must be taken as they are'. 'Gods would be needed to give men laws'; 'if there were a nation of Gods, it would govern itself democratically'; the state requires religion as its base. Rousseau, Marx says in a marvellously transcendental comment, 'correctly describes the abstract idea of political man'.⁸ He has pointed to the necessity of what, in terms of his own argument, cannot be: a real social emancipation which changes human nature, eliminates the inherent conflict between the individual and the communal and makes sociability something more than an otherworldly aspiration.

For Marx, therefore, people cannot be taken simply as they are. The social agent which can only win its freedom by changing human nature is the proletariat, the class in but not of civil society. Unlike Rousseau's individuals, proletarians are not 'born free'. Without independent property to fall back upon, they are merely 'everywhere in chains'. A challenge to property relationships can only imply a challenge to every theological justification of a class-divided *status quo*. Rousseau 'takes men as they are' because he believes that 'all justice comes from God'.⁹ A 'moral and communal existence'—Marx's classless and stateless society—implies that humans can change their possessive individualistic nature into a communist and sociable one. Their nature is not timeless because humans are not the 'entirely complete and solitary' products of a creator beyond them. To control their own destinies, people must be free from subjection to their own alienated creativity: they must be able to rationally plan their lives. This is why Marx's *Capital* is a critique of the 'theological niceties and metaphysical subtleties' of commodity production which reach mature form in the crisis-ridden accumulation of capital. *Capital* is as much a critique of theology as it

is of economics for if the 'practical relations of everyday life' are to become intelligible and reasonable, the 'religious reflex' which mystifies human creativity, must finally vanish.¹⁰

In historical terms, Marx's transcendence of the Enlightenment required a communistic atheism.

The Logical Argument

Changing human nature is only possible if we can find a different way of conceptualising the relations between humans *and* nature. Logically this points to an exchange with nature which is mutually transformative, and in practical terms this must mean an emphasis upon production. Humans of course also consume, but consumption, Marx argues, is only intelligible as 'an intrinsic moment of productive activity'.¹¹ If humans are producers, it follows therefore that human nature itself can be nothing more than a microcosmic expression of the particular relationships which humans have with nature at any given time. Humans will be as mystical or scientific, as acquisitive or socialistic as their relationships happen to be with the world of nature, and therefore, on this argument, it follows:

- (a) Nature is not simply external to humans, but constitutes their 'inorganic body' which they alter and develop through production;
- (b) in this way, human nature itself is transformed since human activity is both subjectively as well as objectively creative.

This analysis of humans as creators contrasts dramatically with the account of Genesis in the Judaeo-Christian tradition but in a way which is highly revealing.

In *Genesis*, as in Marx, it is the relationship between humans and nature which provides the key to an understanding of our 'condition'. The Fall occurs through an exchange with nature but one in which the agent is 'naturally' a man; the act is one of consumption (plucking an apple) from a nature which is deemed static and external. Unlike Marx's cherry trees, which have been transplanted through commerce,¹² Adam's apple tree is simply *there*. Moreover, the exchange which occurs with nature is not a regular, on-going activity which constitutes the human identity: it is an arbitrary act of will. As a consequence, abstract harmony dissolves and there is now permanent division. Between men and women; man and nature; humans and their own creative freedom. Humans are to be punished and henceforth there is to be scarcity and antagonism; thorns and thistles and oppressive social relationships. Labour itself is coercive and unpleasant: 'in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat thy bread' (*Genesis* 3:19).

The Genesis story brilliantly captures the development of human self-alienation in a class-divided society where an enforced division of

labour is underpinned by the violence of the state. But it requires a Marxist account to reveal its own real profundity, for the Genesis fable does not simply confirm human alienation: it points beyond it. As with Rousseau's changing human nature—which must, yet cannot be—so with *Genesis*, the logic is unstable. Adam defies God through an act of imitation and yet if, through a defiant exchange with nature, 'your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil' (*Genesis* 3:5), what remains of the God whose creativity has been so rudely usurped?

It is the bible itself through its own contradictory logic which challenges us to pursue a genesis of Genesis and to find the origins of Original Sin in material production as the fundamental condition of human life. Nor can we stop here. The logic of humans as producers obliges us not merely to characterise humans as the creators of their social relations on an *historical* time-scale. Such a logic also compels us to conceptualise humans as self-creators on an *evolutionary* time-scale in terms of which humans began slowly to differentiate themselves from other primates and gradually acquire the capacity to think, speak and use their hands in a dextrous way. In examining the 'history of Nature's Technology', Marx said of Darwin, he has stimulated interest in the 'history of the productive organs of man'.¹³ Humans, in other words, not only produce their tools of production; through a protracted evolutionary process they also create their *capacities* for production. The unique attributes separating humans from the rest of nature, traditionally and correctly emphasised by theology, can now be rationally accounted for in what might be called a more scientifically speculative manner. The old teleology, as Engels put it a trifle harshly, has gone to the devil.¹⁴

It follows therefore from this logical case for atheism that the need for an external creator fashioning order out of chaos and instilling morality into turbulent instinct falls away. Humans cease to be the 'beasts with red cheeks': a contradictory amalgam of fleshless spirit and spiritless flesh which makes them incorrigible dualists whose spiritual creativity is eternally at war with their animal appetites. The much maligned human senses are 'practising theoreticians', for all human needs, though rooted in nature, are socialised through production. Even human bestiality—witness the nuclear holocaust or the concentration camp—is dramatically distinct from any animal counterpart.

An Atheism Which Transcends

Historically and logically, I have argued, Marxism points to a 'radical rupture' with conventional theology and its conception of God as an external creator, nature as a timeless chaos and humans as a paradoxical combination of the two. But what of religion *as such*? Is

the very notion of God redundant or merely the conventional conception of a Patriarchal Creator?

The answer to this question is delightfully anticipated in Heindrich Heine's fairy-story about the philosophical lizard whom Heine confronts while climbing among the rocks in the Apennines. 'Nothing in the world retrogresses', the lizard tells Heine. 'Everything struggles forward, and in the end Nature will have made great progress. Stones will have become plants, plants animals, animals men, and men will have become gods'. 'But what', cries Heine in some consternation, 'will then become of those good fellows—the poor old gods?' 'That will be taken care of', the lizard replies, 'In all probability they will be pensioned or retire in some honourable way'.¹⁵

Honourable retirement hardly implies a simple disappearance of God, still less, as the existentialists argue, that God is dead. On the contrary. Marxist atheism implies a relationship of *transcendence*—a continuity through change—in which religion is not impoverished through Marxist analysis, but enriched. As a transcendental atheism, Marxism does not diminish or belittle our conception of God. Precisely because Marxists emphasise the self-generating nature of the universe and the self-creating nature of humans, God becomes *supernatural* in a much more comprehensive and dynamic sense than conventional theology allows. As Nature becoming ever more itself—a nature not just in motion but a nature whose development comprehends all processes in the universe 'from mere change right up to thinking',¹⁶ our conception of God is dramatically enhanced. Thus God is no longer merely

- (a) a 'He': God existed long before patriarchy developed;
- (b) a moral teacher, for God existed long before moral codes were created and will exist long after the morality say of the Ten Commandments has become the customary behaviour of a classless society;
- (c) an abstract spirit problematically juxtaposed to lifeless matter, for, as the absolute infinity of the supernatural, God was present long before the evolution of a conscious realm;
- (d) an inexplicable mystery to be worshipped, for, if personal metaphors are preferred, a transcendental attitude conceives of God as a comrade who inspires critical respect; a friend to be understood.

The very universality of God's presence means that the language of conventional religion ceases to be appropriate, for through Marxism religion has transcended itself into atheism of a new kind. The point is eloquently made by one who describes himself as 'consciously seeking

to re-establish the relevance and legitimacy of the moral teachings of Jesus'. Tony Benn makes the case for a transcendental atheism precisely when he argues that 'Unless we are prepared to translate the religious vocabulary which served as a vehicle for political ideas for so many centuries into a modern vocabulary that recognises the validity of a scientific analysis both of nature, society and its economic interests, we shall cut ourselves off from all those centuries of human struggle and experience and deny ourselves the richness of our own inheritance'.¹⁷

God, it might be said, becomes ever more God when the heritage of our world religions is translated into the categories and concepts of a dialectical science.

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- 1 See Michael Langford, 'Marxism and Atheism', *After Marx: The Jubilee Lent Lectures for 1983*. Ed. Kenneth Leech (London: The Jubilee Group, 1984), p. 13; Irene Brennan, 'Marxism, Scientific Method and Religious Belief', Polytechnic of Central London Seminar, 1980.
- 2 Marx Engels, *Collected Works* (hereafter *MECW*), Volume I, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), p. 3.
- 3 Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (hereafter *SC*) (London: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 49.
- 4 *SC*, p. 124.
- 5 *SC*, pp.186—87.
- 6 *MECW* 3, p. 154; p. 167.
- 7 *SC*, p. 84—85.
- 8 *MECW* 3, p. 167. *SC*, p. 49; p. 84; p. 114.
- 9 *SC*, p. 80.
- 10 *Capital*, Volume I, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p. 71; p. 79.
- 11 *Grundrisse*, (London: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 92.
- 12 *MECW* 5, p. 39.
- 13 *Capital* I, p. 372.
- 14 *Dialectics of Nature* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), p. 198.
- 15 *The Poetry and Prose of Heindrich Heine* Ed. F. Ewen, (New York: The Citadel Press, 1948), pp. 540—41.
- 16 Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, p. 70.
- 17 'Democracy and Marxism : A Mutual Challenge', *Marxism Today* May 1982, p. 9.