

On Baseless Suspicion: Christianity and the Crisis of Socialism

John Milbank

In the western world, at least, socialism is in crisis as a political force. But it is also in crisis as an intellectual creed, and it is this crisis that concerns the present article. Nevertheless, the practical and the theoretical crises are very closely allied; the real political problem for contemporary socialism may be that, increasingly, people no longer know, or have forgotten, why one should be a socialist.

One might want to re-express this as 'people no longer see any *reasons* to be a socialist'. And the practical response might be to urge us, once again, to convince people that socialism is the truly *reasonable* path. And yet, I am going to argue that in certain crucial senses there simply are no 'reasons' for being socialist in the way that we have tended to imagine in the past. If, I shall suggest, we can overcome the lingering suggestion that socialism is a matter of science, of historical diagnosis, or of universally valid reason, then we shall actually be able to recover the most authentic core of the socialist tradition, and the Christian socialist tradition in particular. In the course of this argument I shall first of all establish a contrast between old-style Christian socialism and new-style Christian Marxism, and then go on to show that Christian socialism is in certain ways more in tune with a 'post Marxist' or 'post modernist' radicalism. Finally, I shall suggest how Christian socialism nonetheless moves beyond the ambiguity of the post-modern critique of capitalist society.

My thesis, stated in brief, is that socialism is not right because it is 'rational', but right because it is just. And the corollary here, to adapt Péguy, is that the critique of capitalism is a moral critique or else it is no critique at all.

In recent years Christian socialists have been seduced away from the priority of the moral critique in the course of an engagement with Marxism that has too often been naive and uncritical. It is a mistake to suppose that there is a clear continuity between past and present Christian socialism, and that the latter has just borrowed from Marxism elements of empirical rigour and of congenial humanism. On the contrary, it would be more accurate to distinguish sharply between an old 'Christian socialist' critique of capitalism and a new 'Christian Marxist' one'. The contrast can be set out in roughly the following way.

In the Christian socialist critique there is a distinct confrontation between Christian values and capitalist reality. The critique is seen as possible because of the *difference* from capitalism represented by Christianity, especially in its past history—the first Christian communities, the monasteries, the mediaeval towns, the guild associations. By contrast with this standard, capitalism appears as a kind of apostasy—according to John Ruskin the most remarkable ‘instance in history of a nation’s establishing a systematic disobedience to the principles of its own religion’². For Christian socialism, unlike Marxism, capitalism did not appear as a partial, contradictory development of freedom—instead it was denounced as a pseudo-progress, and a mere contingency, whose rise was the shame of Christendom. Capitalism was seen as the practice of a false knowledge which made self-interest moderate self-interest without the intervention of virtue, and secured public order without the architectonic of justice. Ruskin, again, saw the triumph of political economy (i.e. of a ‘value-free’ economics, dealing with wealth creation in abstraction from other considerations) as the promotion of certain quasi-virtues of busyness and frugality in place of true political *phronesis* and Christian charity. And the displacement of the ethical in the public sphere was held to be coterminous with the triumph of secularity. After the retreat of public religion a vacuum was created in which a merely ‘economic’ regime could ‘manage’ a society, even without a moral or religious consensus.

In certain respects, this critique was a *counter-Enlightenment* critique. It did not locate socialism as the next stage in a narrative of emancipation, or of the genesis of human autonomy. On the contrary, the Enlightened goal of the self-regulation of the will according to its own natural, finite desires and capacities was seen as of one piece with the operation of political economy. The rejection of the latter, then, did not rest, like Marxism, on a ‘dialectic of Enlightenment’, or an immanent critique of the present ideals of freedom.

The obvious objection to this would be that of Marx himself: Christian socialism was nothing but ‘the holy-water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat’.³ The implication here is that the only true socialism was that which freed itself from Tory-radicalism and mediaevalist romanticism. Yet nearly all nineteenth-century socialism, outside Marxism, contained counter-Enlightenment elements. The case of the French ‘republican’ socialists—like Cabet, Blanc, Barbès and Proudhon—is the most instructive.⁴ In these writers, one finds, typically, an attack on the idea that justice can be simply equated with the maximisation of freedom, and an identification of religion with harmonious, fraternal agreement, over against the inherent ‘antagonism’ of secular individualism. Their initial appeal to a past ideal was that of the ‘enlightened’ revolution itself—namely to the classical

republic. Yet this ideal was qualified in a more associationist, anarchist, pro-familial and pacific direction by reference to Christian tradition and to mediaeval exemplars. Where Rousseau's 'civil religion' took on a more Christian caste, there, precisely, 'socialism' was born. And the appeal back to *both* the antique *polis* and the mediaeval guilds is made because *only* these contrasts (and this remains true even for Marx) allow one to pin-point the new and unprecedented factor in capitalist oppression. The appeal had also another and unMarxian purpose. The republican socialists did not conceive socialism *negatively*, as the unravelling of present contradictions, but *positively*, as a contingent piece of human imagination. In this 'positive' and undialectical socialism, the future possibility has to be composed out of the fragments of past justice.

'Christian socialism', in short, and even main-line 'republican socialism', was *not* a Whig discourse about emancipation. But this did not necessarily imply a Tory hankering after hierarchic order (though in many 'Christian socialists' like F.D. Maurice, it no doubt did). Even in Ruskin, who stresses the all-importance of parental and pastoral roles, there is a suggestion that these roles will *only* be secured if they are disseminated, and become, as far as possible, reciprocal—a kind of 'clerisy of all citizens' in fact.⁵ The real point of necessity for hierarchy in Ruskin is the transitive relationship of education, where an unavoidable non-reciprocity nonetheless works towards its own cancellation. Liberalism tends to disguise this necessity, because it makes normative the spatial relationships between adult, autonomous subjects, a habit which achieves its *reductio ad absurdum* in William Godwin's vision of a world of finite immortality, without sexual passion, without birth and without death.⁶ In this sense, then, if Christian socialism has an anti-liberal commitment to collective norms of justice which can only be handed down through time, it has a commitment to hierarchy. However, it *also* contends that an arbitrary hierarchy, of a non- self-cancelling kind, is partially responsible for the formation of the modern machine of abstract power. This is particularly true of later French ruminators on *trahison des clercs*. For Charles Péguy social hierarchies and especially the Church clergy themselves are most of all to blame for a 'reversal' of the divine pedagogic *mystique*, such that right from the Church's very foundation the energies of the many were recruited to maintain the securities of the few.⁷ Thus Christian socialism was able *both* to appeal to the fragmentary justice of the past *and* to connect present secular injustice with past social and ecclesial error.

By contrast a wholly different sort of critique of capitalism emerges from 'Christian Marxism' as discovered in recent 'political' and 'liberation' theology.⁸ This critique does not really have its origins in social theory at all, but rather in the problems of theological

epistemology. Following Karl Rahner, German theology sought a starting point in philosophical anthropology, in a theory of human nature and human subjectivity. Once Rahner's own transcendentalist anthropology had been rejected as too individualist, and too ahistorical, it was hoped that Marxism could supply an alternative foundationalist discourse. Just as Rahner's anthropology focussed on a subjective 'spirit' whose attention no finite object could finally detain, so J.B. Metz and others declared empirical history to be the growth of human autonomous freedom, albeit with dialectical hiccups on the way. Because political and liberation theology associates Marxism with a Christian coming-to-terms with Enlightenment freedom, it always connects it to a positive evaluation of the secular, and of the modern age. It is a consequence of this that these theologies do not permit a directly *Christian* critique of capitalism. On the contrary, 'Christian Marxism' is just another version of the liberal Christian's need to celebrate a marriage between Christianity and some body of supposedly objective empirical knowledge. The great appeal of this enterprise is that the vastly complex problems of being a Christian in the modern world can be nicely simplified if one baptises a particular social theory and accords to it a 'totalizing' application. Thus Marxism will tell one what stance to take, and will allow one to take it alongside other, well-meaning but non-Christian people.

For 'Christian Marxism', the critique of capitalism is indirect. Marxism is baptised, because it supposedly decodes human finitude and points to a universal movement of 'liberation' on which theology can build. It is Marxism itself, the baptised theory, which then provides the specific critique of capitalism. This leads to three further points of contrast with Christian socialism.

First of all, the emphasis of critique switches from capitalism's denial of justice to its inhibition of human freedom (see Hauerwas, note 1, above). As *both a science, and a humanism*, Marxism has to ground its critique in theoretical reason. Thus it has a preconceived and unjustified picture of the essence of human nature as unrestricted production, and unrestricted fulfilment of supposedly inherent human 'needs'. As Terry Eagleton has all too accurately said, Marxian morality can only open up at the point where the social relations of production are seen as inhibiting the further development of forces of production.⁹ Marxism sidesteps the question of justice both on the way to Utopia—where history is reduced to a dialectical means to an end, and for Utopia itself, where the removal of the last barriers to autonomous freedom and unlimited production is supposed to render the perennially renewed question of just distribution finally redundant. This is to subscribe to a myth of apocalyptic negativity, whereas many supposedly 'Utopian' socialists have been preoccupied with the detailed questions of justice: what *kinds* of

property are allowable, under what conditions; by what *standards* do we exchange one thing for another; how can we outlaw 'profits' in excess of just remuneration; how can we prevent money and credit from assuming a self-generating power, and how can we make monetary and market exchanges coterminous with exchanges of moral value. These questions all presuppose that genuine political freedom for the individual involves a sympathetic taking account of the endless demands of others, and that true equality assumes some fundamental agreements about cultural norms. As Aristotle and Aquinas taught, there are no set rules or criteria for sorting out the priority of demands, nor for establishing shared values, the civic 'good'. But Marxism avoids this crux of practical reason by telling a theoretical story in which history gradually unravels a condition of absolutely spontaneous peace and freedom.

When the stress is on justice, as with Christian socialism, then one will recognize the importance of certain already-existing communities which are able to generate sets of distributive priorities and to project common goals. Such agreements do not necessarily imply equality, nonetheless a truly *social*, or socialist, equality does presuppose this kind of non-theoretically prescribable consensus. It is natural, then that Christian socialism (supremely, with Charles Péguy) has often been a mode of *ecclesiology*—interpreting the mystical body of Christ as itself the incumbus of a more just society.

But Christian Marxism finds it hard to place ecclesiology. And herein lies a second point of contrast with Christian socialism. For in its theological conception of *Christianity*, Christian Marxism can be curiously unhistorical. It tends to fall back on the idea that the individual believer is in touch with certain universal values and motivations, but must apply to Marxism to be told how these are to be 'objectively' instantiated in the present. There is a problem here, which does not exist for Christian socialism, about how to relate the 'history of salvation' to 'the history of emancipation'. Whereas, for Christian socialism, the narrative of salvation is one source for the very *conception* of a socialist possibility, for Christian Marxism the historical contingency of this narrative (the departure of Abraham, the Exodus, the life and death of Jesus, Pentecost) must be subordinated to a fated immanence of human development; a story that can be told (as in Segundo) with as many Teilhardist as Marxist overtones.

The subordination of salvation to liberation means that salvation is conceived either purely transcendently—as a going beyond all finite limits: or else as the secular process of the setting free of the human finite essence. In either case Christian Marxists have fallen prey to what Michel Foucault calls 'the analytic of finitude'.¹⁰ By this he means a historicism in which it is supposed that one can somehow round upon finitude and 'represent' the human subject in terms of its supposed

intrinsic limits as what truly 'underlies' history and paradoxically permits a continuing development. Thus one can define humanity in terms of the priority of 'basic' economic needs, like Marx, or in terms of a universal oedipal economy of desire, like Freud, or in terms of a 'being towards death', like Heidegger. These are all variants of 'the analytic of finitude', and they are all notably beloved by modern theology, which is almost universally confined within an anthropological *episteme* and the illusion of a once and for all 'representation' of the finite human subject.

In Christian Marxism, then, unlike Christian socialism, freedom displaces justice, and anthropology displaces ecclesiology. But from these displacements flows another which forms the third point of contrast. This is the displacement of ethics by dialectics.

In the realm of modern natural-law theory, which is also the realm of the secular, an attempt is made to ground the ethical in the pre-ethical, in some theoretically knowable principle like utilitarian benefit or abstract individual right.¹¹ For Marxism, the theoretical principle is the coming-to-be of human self-possession without heteronomous dependence, through the unravelling of a dialectical logic. But to accept this new natural law is to displace the immediacy of ethical judgement. From a Marxist perspective it is inescapable that capitalist abstraction is fine and necessary in its own day, and so in a certain sense 'moral'. It is no good pretending that Marxist morality has a certain affinity with Aristotelian refusal of the is/ought distinction.¹² For the Marxian question, 'How are we to act, given the facts?' betrays at root a positivist attitude to the facts and permits a dualism of means and ends, whereas the 'moral facts' of Aristotelian ethics are only read as facts in terms of their inherent value and teleology, a teleology for which means are only ends 'in embryo'. The means/end dualism in Marxism perpetuates the Machiavellian indirectness of political economy, the manipulation of vices towards goals of mere coexistence, which are, as it were, false *simulacra* of political community. Dialectics remains caught in the political economy paradigm which always embraces two different versions of means/end dualism; sometimes, the manipulator was the Machiavellian sovereign, or the mercantile state, while at other times the manipulator was providence, or the force of nature. And it little matters whether the logic of nature is considered more 'ideal' or more 'material'.

Recent French writers, and most notably Gilles Deleuze, have exposed the metaphysical illusions of dialectical reason.¹³ It is an attempt to subordinate, in the long run, all difference to identity and totality. This is inevitable if one sees difference as emerging through determinate negation—but this is a logicist myth; in reality differences are pure, creative positings, unpredictable 'superadditions', in the gift of the plenitude of future time. Likewise, there is no such thing as 'immanent critique', where one is led to a deepening apprehension of an already

given idea through an unravelling of the contradictions in its present manifestations. 'Immanent critique' suggests that although critique takes time, and can only be realised in specific times and places, it remains the *self-critique* of autonomous reason, which gradually achieves greater clarity and self-consistency. But there is no justification for belief in the gradual disclosure of a standard whose validity will be obvious to an undeceived reason. Instead, critique is always in the gift of the alien, of the other—of differences which are not immanent to the given but always stand 'over against it'. This means that contradictions within any given social system or ideology are never merely objective or inevitable, but only emerge where difference takes the form of a positive challenge. It is true that there are *always* differences which can never be totally suppressed, and that there are always tensions between them, but there is simply no limit to the possible functional management of these tensions by any particular system. Tensions have to be politically exploited before they can be accounted as conflicts with the system itself. For example, the struggles of workers for higher pay and better conditions may be just part of capitalist functioning, and need involve no real challenge to the system. It is not *even* the case, as Marxists would claim, that the interests of the workers are 'objectively' antagonistic to capital. For this presupposes that workers have an 'essential' identity as human beings which is not fully absorbed by their roles as workers, consumers and seduced admirers of the spectacle of capitalist wealth and glamour.

To many socialists, and to Christian Marxists, these anti-dialectical and anti-humanist conclusions appear to threaten the very 'reasons for socialism' themselves. Post-modernists like Deleuze seem to underwrite capitalism as an infinitely expanding antagonistic game which permits one no real critical purchase. Yet there is another way of looking at this. It is notable that Proudhon, as a representative of 'republican' socialism, rejected all theological and secular theodicies which justified short-term ills in terms of long-term benefits.¹⁴ Proudhon's passion against the ingrained evil of history even assumes a Manichean complexion at times. Likewise he came to half-reject Hegelian dialectics, because he saw that this subordinated the just balancing of the demands of different subjects to the self-becoming of subjective freedom which is at once the will of the isolated individual and the will of the sovereign state (or of the revolutionary proletariat for Marx). Proudhon realised that by insisting on the priority of mutual justice one could actually grasp freedom more radically than Hegel as respect for specific and endlessly different choices. For paradoxically such choices can only flourish in *peace* where they are constantly co-ordinated with each other through a developing consensus.¹⁵ Thus Proudhon saw the task of justice not as the bringing about of final synthesis, but rather the replacement of tension as antagonism with tension as equilibrium. For this reason he accords to

justice a certain Platonic stature of transcendental unity which equalises the unequal, but eludes the formal mechanisms of the dialectic.¹⁶ In contrast to Hegel and Marx, this 'Platonism' still permits history its open-ended indetermination. Certainly the republic is *in* history, and justice is not discovered prior to particular acts of adjudication; but it is also timeless—the republic *is*, where there is justice.

By breaking with dialectics, one breaks with another version of the modern paradigm which de-ethicises the public realm. By contrast, Christian Marxism dangerously qualifies moral responsibility in history. The Canadian theologian, Gregory Baum, declares that while Christians are ethically obliged to side with those who are victims of oppressive social structures, nonetheless these structures themselves are to be thought of in objective, sociological terms, and not to be seen as the avoidable product of human injustice.¹⁷ Paradoxically, this is to subscribe to a very individualist notion of 'responsibility'. It colludes with political economy's version of the 'heterogenesis of ends', where individual decisions are like windowless nomads, having in their self-consciousness no connection with the long-term social upshot. For while no-one deliberately 'planned' capitalism, it is also true that we *never* discover what precisely we have done, even what we really 'intend', until our actions are articulated within public discourse. Our bad intentions seem to 'overtake us' and have the character of something 'always already begun'. A bad system is the incremental sedimentation of lots of minor social articulations of selfishness and self-delusion.¹⁸

In the light of the Post-modernist critique of Marxism one can re-read (for example) Ruskin's strictly moral critique of capitalism not as a blindness to history, but instead as a penetration to the real level where capitalist assumptions are generated, both in theory and in practice. Christian Marxism does not reach this level because it ascribes to a metaphysical 'priority of practice' and reduces theory to 'a second step'.¹⁹ This tends to accord a kind of mystifying rational validity to 'action as such' and precludes the realisation that no area of human discourse (thought/activity) is inherently more 'fundamental' than any other. The critical task is not to identify a material or activist 'base', but to reconstruct what Cornelius Castoriadis calls 'the social imaginary' or the fluid level at which societies 'imagine' the very things that get most taken for granted.²⁰ The 'imaginary', and so the 'theoretic', is discovered *much more* at the level of socio-economic processes than at the level of ideas and writings. Theoretical books can be thought of as intense abridgments of the real theoretical text, which is social practice itself.

So when, in *Unto this Last*, Ruskin declares that Political Economy substitutes 'balance of expediency' for 'balance of justice', he is arguably making a historical diagnosis more profound than that which seeks 'fundamental' causes in the shape of an always presupposed, and

therefore ahistorical, 'material base'. Just as historically penetrating is his contention that political economy is the first generally accepted 'nescience' in human history, because it aims not to promote, directly, a maximum excellence, but advocates the deliberate exploitation of differences of ability and of knowledge.²¹ Relative failure, weak ability, bad craftsmanship and stupidity have a definite function for political economy in the reducing of production costs and the extension of abstract 'wealth'. One could add, here, that the promotion of 'stupidity' has become infinitely more important within an information-dominated economy where it is essential that knowledge be parcelled out, and possessed in an independent way by no-one in particular. Although Ruskin did not anticipate this development, he realised that right from the outset capitalism was as much to do with a redefinition of knowledge as with a redefinition of political flourishing. As a nescience political economy broke with the idea that all knowledge should promote wisdom and virtue. It was inextricably accompanied by a new *moral* economy which, as in Hume and Smith, made a sharp division between the private and consumerist sphere of 'natural' sympathies based on universal feeling, and the 'artificial' sympathies which arise in relation to the positive facts of property, possession and political power.²³ The Scots economists certainly wanted to connect *homo economicus* with public virtue, but they deliberately promoted a new economic *virtù* as an equivalent of the Machiavellian version of political prudence, with its stress on heroic strength, and the functional value of class-struggle for the strong community.²⁴

Like the Scots, Ruskin's historical diagnosis assumes the inextricability of economic distribution and moral economy. But his mediaevalism suggests a different reconciliation of wealth with virtue. Ruskin notes that 'manly character' and 'production and exchange' are not easily reconciled.²⁵ Yet (one could add) this commonplace is specific to a classical legacy which subordinates the productive household to political relations in the city between property-owning males. Only the post-Christian tendency to merge the conceptions of *polis* and *oikos* (i.e. to make the household with its 'pastoral' oversight of material well-being a basic unit of government) permits Ruskin to demand that production and exchange discover within themselves immanent norms of virtue and *paideia*. The trouble is, he notes, that trade and manufacture have *never* been seen as included within a Socratic 'discipline of death'—it has not been recognised that there are here responsibilities for subordinates and for the quality of products which at the limit imply the same self-sacrifice which we see as involved in soldiering, teaching or medicine.²⁶ Likewise, Ruskin wants questions of the aesthetic quality of objects produced or exchanged to be co-ordinated with questions of ethical goals for social subjects. Economic value, he says, is properly 'the possession of the

12

valuable by the valiant'.²⁷ A just exchange of goods and labour presupposes a match between the ethical capacities of persons and the interpreted excellence of material objects.

Ruskin's moral diagnosis was, therefore, also a historical one. Not only did he see the new nescience as a Machiavellian filling of a moral and spiritual vacuum, but he also finds the opening of this vacuum in the failure of Christendom to perfectly realise its own implied integration of *polis* with *oikos*. The search of Hegel for a modern equivalent of the antique *polis* only allows him to try to keep civil society (in other words, the economic realm) 'in its place'. But Ruskin's appeal to the Christian *differentia*—namely, the integration of *polis* and *oikos*—permits a much more radical denial of political economy.

In the light of these reflections on morality, history and dialectics, one may question the assumption that Christian socialism is really less critical than Christian Marxism. It seems that the former may be in some ways more compatible with the post-modern metacritique of Marxism. This metacritique no longer permits the view that capitalism is to be opposed because it is irrational, or self-contradictory, or self-occluding. I have already indicated some of the many reasons for this, but I should like to add briefly the following three points.

First of all, *both* the 'scientific' *and* the 'humanist' versions of the theory of alienation disappear once one denies that man's (sic) labour, or the products of his labour, in any way 'belong' to him by nature. On the contrary, ideals of subjective 'self-expression' and norms of autonomous production only arise in the context of a set of culturally specific symbolic exchanges with nature and with other persons which go to make up 'liberal capitalism'. Hence the notion of self-possession in work is *itself* generated by the capitalist relations of production, so that it is not enough to claim, like Marxism, that this condition is not truly fulfilled by capitalism. For one cannot imagine self-possession as a 'natural' state which capitalism falsifies, nor unlimited, autonomous production as a 'natural' goal which capitalism is holding back. On the contrary, one can only ensure that people's work really 'belongs' to them if one not only brings them to fully share in its benefits but also creates a situation where they identify by habit and consent with its goals, in the context of a common culture.

With this a second point is linked—namely, that capitalism is not 'mystifying' because it makes an artificial 'exchange value' more basic than a natural 'use value'. As Jean Baudrillard has said, the notion of a 'pure' use value, and of sheerly 'natural' needs outside the processes of symbolic exchange, is as much an effect of the capitalist economy as the idea of 'abstract equivalence' in exchange values.²⁸ It is like Smith's and Hume's dualism of 'natural' and 'artificial' passions. Moreover, contemporary capitalism is dispensing with even this

duality—increasingly we know that our needs are both socially created and constantly fulfilled, but we still consent to this seduction, to the dizzying variegations of a pointless desire.

The third point is that the notion of ‘ideology’ is no longer always a useful one. This concept presupposes that there is a gap between real social pressures and their ideal representation. Sometimes this *is* the case—and myths like Margaret Thatcher’s ‘personal choice’ serve an important function in capitalist society. However, this society has no need for an *over-all* ideology in addition to the assumptions built into economic and bureaucratic relations—on the contrary, it requires only areas of local ignorance, where the spur of illusion can often be functionally useful.²⁹ And if delusion *is* more than local, then it does not lie only at the ‘superstructural’ level; on the contrary, it is more importantly located within the workings of the economy itself, as Marx brilliantly recognized in his theory of fetishisation and reification (this is why Marx *remains* the supreme analyst of capitalist economy, once established)³⁰. But Marx still saw fetishisation as concealing from view both the process of its own constitution and an innocent, ‘natural’ reality. Whereas, in a sense, fetishisation conceals nothing at all, either in society or in nature, but through its reduction of everything to equivalence it ‘prevents’ other equally unfounded social possibilities. In particular it occludes the possibility of a ‘just economy’ where things cannot all be measured on the same quantifiable scale, but are seen as symbolically representing each other in a fashion that cannot be translated into a univocal abstract language, whether of signs or of monetary tokens. Marx compared the operations of capitalist economy to those of a religion—but wrongly supposed that one can give a critique of this symbolic system by comparing it to a demystified ‘human nature’.³¹ Rather, critique is only possible by comparing it to ‘other religions’.

Furthermore, at certain strategic times and places, fetishisation may no longer conceal the process of its own constitution. People may come to recognize capitalism for what it is—namely, a nescience and a ‘lived illusion’—and yet *still* affirm it and promote it. And this is not irrational, nor ideological, nor unprogressive. While Margaret Thatcher is ideological in associating her market philosophy with ‘traditional’ values, one suspects that many Tory young Turks are out and out modernists who entertain no such illusions. The ideas that Thatcherism is ‘backward looking’, or that socialism can successfully appropriate the modernist discourse of ‘individual rights’, represent fatal misapprehensions. All the socialisms, including Marxism, which compromise with the Enlightenment, ultimately lose out to capitalism as a more virulent and purer form of liberalism. Socialism is not necessarily on the agenda of history, and its ‘future’ is always bound up in keeping

14

alive a sense of collective purpose linked to objective and transcendent norms. This is *not* to say that these norms are eternally 'present' to us in a constant fashion. On the contrary, our normative sense emerges through processes of 'tradition', the gradual development of a common cultural outlook, and collective purpose develops through seeing what is possible at specific historic junctures. But the transcendent reference of developing values is suggested just to the extent that such values are 'positively imagined' in the course of unpredictable superadditions to the tradition, rather than are 'negatively immanent' to an evolving dialectic.

It is because capitalism may be theoretically rational and indefinitely feasible, and yet not practically rational in the Aristotelian sense (in other words, not ethical), that the Marxist mode of suspicion will no longer do. Both Marxianism and Freudianism claim to investigate the suppression of something supposedly natural and fundamentally human: familially-generated sexual desire, autonomous freedom or material production.³² Instead of these modes of 'foundational' suspicion, only a Nietzschean 'baseless suspicion'— a suspicion not founded on an unquestioned starting point for 'truth'—remains possible. Here the contingency of a particular cultural formation is exposed through differential contrast. *Other* possibilities relativize our own actuality, expose to view its assumptions which it had taken to be universal norms. So what is 'unmasked' here is not the suppression of the universal but the (*sometimes* ideologically disguised) non-allowance of other, equally valid possibilities. Hence there is an exposure of the 'arbitrary', through a ceaseless imagining of other, equally 'arbitrary' possibilities.

And yet within secular socialism this Nietzschean post-modernism is rightly viewed as ambiguous. As has been seen, post-modernists are no longer able to reject abstract equivalence in exchange because it is 'irrational'. Instead, Baudrillard and others favour, over against capitalism, the 'symbolic exchange' of primitive societies—where there is a predominance of gift, sacrifice, mutuality and loss rather than cold accumulation, or totalising calculation—on ethical and aesthetic grounds alone. Yet what is in evidence here is not attachment to a *particular* cultural set of symbolic practices; instead the appeal to the 'primitive' is a surrogate for a nihilistic will to the promotion of difference, the ceaseless breaking of any totalizing claims to 'truth', as being the only justifiable goal that remains. Although foundational reason is rejected, the French post-modernists still cling to the formalism of an abstract 'difference' itself, as the one remaining source for discriminating judgement. As a value this is poised uneasily between, on the one hand, a continuing celebration of individual choice and autonomy, and, on the other, a re-appraisal of heteronomy, with the realisation that we are always defined with respect to 'the other'. This hesitation is best exemplified in Jean-François Lyotard, who deliberately foregrounds an

oscillation between Kantian respect for personal freedom, and a 'pagan' heteronomy where we possess our identity as a role within an inherited narrative.³³ He resolves this tension by proposing a paradoxical inversion of the categorical imperative—one is *always* to will the different, that which *cannot* be universalized.

In political terms, this means that for Lyotard, as for Baudrillard, there is an imperceptible point of transition at which capitalism is pushed to a logical extreme which makes it pass over into a neo-primitivism or neo-paganism. As more and more things are absorbed into the impermanence of capitalist exchange, the distinction between sign and reality, which an earlier capitalism promoted, is exposed as an illusion, and the prospect of a purely 'playful' 'de-territorialized' society, celebrating the limitless variety of possible 'truths', is open to view. In this society, the only universal practical truth according to the transformed categorical imperative, is the upholding of everyone's rights to compete in the potentially infinite number of different 'language-games'. Lyotard's residual Kantianism depends upon an upholding of a distinction between 'conflict', or legitimate competition within the rules of the various games, and 'terror', which is the prevention of people from playing or the exclusion of certain games altogether. But, as has been pointed out against Lyotard, this distinction depends upon the illusion that there are fixed boundaries between the different language games, as, for example, Lyotard believes, in still curiously Humean fashion, that there is a sharp cleavage between theoretical games about 'facts' and the ethical game about 'values'. Clearly, in a reality dominated by difference, and so by indetermination, 'legitimate victory' may be in terms of altering the rules or of shifting the demarcations between different competitive areas.³⁴

Lyotard's version of an 'agonistic' society cannot, consistently, be subject to any further moral qualifications which would rule out fascism or terror. And, as a result, post-modernism's notion of a capitalism 'going beyond its own bounds' just looks like political economy *in extremis*. After all, the stoics, the ancient precursors of the economic paradigm and modern natural law, *already* compared morality to an agonistic game where the point was not the outcome but 'playing well'. So it does not seem that post-modernism is a natural ally for socialism. Its version of difference reads difference as 'necessary conflict' or as 'ontological injustice'.

But if my contentions are correct, then the main traditions of socialism were always linked to another critique of Enlightenment—not so much a critique 'after' modernity, as rather 'alternative' to it, and in this (though *not* a reactionary) sense a 'counter-modernity'. After modernity lies a disappointment with scientific reason and natural law, leaving only a formalistic nihilism as their pale echo. But in the critique

which runs, as it were, ‘alongside’ modernity, classical and Christian exemplars help to promote a more hopeful metaphysic. One can trace connections (via Vico, De Bonald and Ballanche) between the French nineteenth-century radicals’ rejection of ontological antagonism (as discussed earlier in the article) and Augustine’s counter-historical reading of Roman history in the *City of God*, where he exposes and denies pagan myths of the primacy of conflict which he sees as ‘enacted’ in the lived narrative of the worldly city.³⁵ Such a ‘harmonistic’ vision provides not just a ‘baseless suspicion’ but also a ‘baseless critique’ of the narrative mode of nihilist suspicion itself—namely, the ‘polytheism’ of unavoidable pluralism, deception and conflict. For this Christian metaphysic—which in the doctrines of creation and Trinity posits an ‘original difference’ without usurpation or rivalry—justice is possible, and the harmonizing of tensions is possible, although there are no rational criteria for these things. Lyotard’s continuing attachment to a formalist regulation is superfluous if one is committed—though of course on no grounds separable from the logic of this commitment itself—to a specific sacred space, the Christian *ecclesia*, whose very specificity consists in the concrete actualising of a universal unity-in-difference. Only through this lived demonstration is such an ontological perspective and such a practical possibility maintained. The demonstration may be thin, yet there may be reasons to ask whether, at this particular historical juncture, only Christianity can restore the fortunes of socialism.

- 1 I am indebted here to Stanley Hauerwas, whose trenchant article ‘Some Theological Reflections on Gutierrez’s use of “Liberation” as a Theological Concept’ (*Modern Theology* 3:1, 1986, 67–76) first suggested to me the importance of this contrast. My thanks are due also to Rowan Williams, Adrian Cunningham, David Nicholls, Kenneth Surin, Timothy Radcliffe and John Orme Mills, who commented on earlier drafts of this paper. It must be stressed that, despite my invocation of Ruskin, for the sake of his critique of political economy, I am more sympathetic to the most radical Christian socialists—one could mention such diverse names as (the young) Coleridge, Péguy, Headlam, Noel, Mounier, Tawney.
- 2 John Ruskin, ‘Unto this Last’, Essay II, ‘The Veins of Wealth’ in *Sesame and Lilies: Unto This Last; The Political Economy of Art* (Cassell, London, 1907), p. 162.
- 3 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Penguin, London, 1967), p. 108.
- 4 See K. Steven Vincent, *Pierre Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* (OUP, 1984), pp. 33–78, 127–165.
- 5 Ruskin, Essay III, ‘*Qui Judicatis Terram*’, p. 150.
- 6 William Godwin, *Enquiry concerning political justice and its influence on Morals and Happiness*, ed. F.P.L. Priestley (Toronto, 1946), I, 86, II, 520, 527–29.
- 7 Charles Péguy, ‘Clio I’ in *Temporal and Eternal*, trans. Alexander Dru (London, The Harvill Press, 1958), pp. 101–108.
- 8 I have deliberately presented both Christian socialism and Christian Marxism as ‘ideal types’ for the sake of making my point in a brief space. However, my critique of Christian Marxism applies especially to the writings of J.B. Metz, Gustavo Gutierrez, and J.L. Segundo, and *a fortiori* to those of Alfredo Fierro. See, in particular, J.B. Metz, *Theology of the World*, trans. William Glen-Doepel (Burns

- and Oates, London 1969); Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (SCM, London, 1983); Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Orbis, Maryknoll, 1975), Alfredo Fierro, *The Militant Gospel* (S.C.M. London, 1977). J-B. Metz's more recent work, *Faith in History and Society; Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (Burns and Oates, London, 1980), does perhaps go some way towards the outlook I am advocating. However, an assessment of this work would require separate treatment, and it is left out of consideration here.
- 9 Terry Eagleton, 'Marxists and Christians: Answers for Brian Wicker', *New Blackfriars*, vol 56, no 665 (Oct 1975), 465—470.
- 10 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things; An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Tavistock, London, 1970), pp. 312—318.
- 11 See Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue* (Duckworth, London, 1983).
- 12 See Eagleton, 'Marxists and Christians'.
- 13 Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition* (P.U.F. Paris, 1968). And see Michel Foucault, 'Theatrum Philosophicum' in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1983), pp. 164—196.
- 14 Elizabeth Frazer ed. *Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (Macmillan, London, 1969), pp. 188—189.
- 15 While Christian socialism is committed to positive freedom of participation in the pursuit of commonly-accepted goals rather than negative freedom of choice, it also opposes unnecessary attacks on self-sufficiency which produce a coerced dependence. Areas of relative 'independence' for individuals and groups are vital precisely for the creative *re-imagining* of the public *telos*; this and *not* 'pluralism of values' is their real justification.
- 16 Frazer, pp. 223—235. See also Henri de Lubac, *The Un-Marxist Socialist*, trans. R.E. Scantlebury (London, Sheed and Ward, 1948), pp. 151—165.
- 17 Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation; A Theological Reading of Sociology* (Paulist Press, New York, 1975), pp. 193—227.
- 18 See Ruskin, Essay II, 'The Veins of Wealth', p. 141.
- 19 If 'priority of practice' means simply that theology begins as a reflection on a given discourse (a socio-linguistic complex of thought and action), then one could assent to it. But, too often, it seems to mean also either one or all of the following: (a) that a 'pure' decision of commitment precedes any theological articulation, (b) that the commitment is in terms of 'a material base' and implies a diagnosis of 'underlying' and inescapable historical processes which are 'prior' to thought, (c) that all theologies are subject to an instrumentally pragmatic test concerning their effect on this basic level.
- 20 Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'Institution Imaginaire de la Société* (Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1975).
- 21 Essay I, 'The Roots of Honour', p. 112.
- 22 Essay IV, 'Ad Valorem', p. 178.
- 23 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Scientia Verlag Aalan, 1964), Bk III, Pt II, Vol II p. 252 ff. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Augustus M. Kelley, New York, 1966), p. 116 ff.
- 24 See J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton U.P., New Jersey, 1975), pp. 462—506 and Albert O. Hirschman *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton U.P. New Jersey, 1977).
- 25 Essay IV, 'Ad Valorem', p. 175.
- 26 Essay I 'The Roots of Honour' p. 125: 'The Merchant—What is *his* 'due occasion of death?'
- 27 Essay IV, 'Ad Valorem' p. 171.
- 28 Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Foster (Telos, St Louis, 1975).
- 29 See John B. Thompson *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Polity, Cambridge, 1984), esp. pp. 73—148 and Bryan S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory* (Hutchinson, London, 1982). But Turner is wrong to reject the theory of fetishisation and the primary location of ideas in power-relations themselves.
- 30 See my article, 'The Body by Love Possessed: Christianity and Late Capitalism in
- 18

Britain', in *Modern Theology*, 3:1 (1986), 35—67. Although the present article stresses the limitations of Marxism, and the falsity of a hybrid 'Christian Marxism', I still stand behind most of what is said in the earlier piece about the importance of Marxist *economics*, and the Marxist analysis of the capitalist mode of production, especially in *Capital*, Chapter One. It should also be noted that the outlook I am advocating does not deny the validity of class struggle (however complex a matter that may be in practice). Indeed, social and ideological struggle of all kinds becomes more important once one abandons the notion that capitalist processes themselves will tend, in the long term, towards socialism.

31 See 'The Body by Love Possessed'. pp. 56—61.

32 See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus; Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (Athlone, London, 1984).

33 Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Manchester U.P. 1985).

34 See Samuel Weber, 'Afterward: Literature—just making it', in Lyotard and Thébaud, pp. 101—123.

35 See my article, 'An Essay Against Secular Order', *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Autumn, 1987.

God Above and God Below

Adrian Edwards C S Sp

Religious syncretism is a currently fashionable topic, both among anthropologists and theologians. To the anthropologist, syncretism offers not only fascinating field material, but also important theoretical questions. Supposing two or more world religions are present in the same culture, as is the case with the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka. Will the internal logic of the world religion oblige its adherents to reinterpret the culture? Or will the common culture eventually obliterate the boundaries between the religions?¹ For theologians the boundary between Christian and merely Christian-influenced is both extremely difficult to draw and extremely necessary. Whom do we admit to the local council of churches? Where does liturgical inculturation end and repaganization begin? What about the survival of pagan attitudes-devotion, for