

'God' and Ideology

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Francis Barker's argument to prove that Christianity is always ideological, and never scientific, won't do.¹ Since the reason for this is of some general theoretical importance, it is perhaps worth pointing out what is wrong with it.

Barker's thesis is that being tautological is a mark of the ideological. ('all ideological discourse is ... strictly speaking tautological' p. 476). But he also wants to argue that not every utterance within an ideological discourse has to be tautological: some of them may be just false. Fair enough so far. So 'God exists' is not tautological after all, but just false. But this, he says, doesn't stop Christian discourse in general from being tautological—i.e. from being set within a framework of tautology. Barker's reason for saying this is that in Christian discourse, words like 'because' and 'therefore' are not used (as in science) in a diachronic way, but merely to 'conjugate' or 'spatialise' the optative paradigm. This dark saying is then illustrated by an argument that purports to show that 'God made the world' certainly *is* tautological. The reason for choosing this example is presumably that it is the fundamental case of a Christian discourse in which the use of 'because' is crucial. For 'God made the world' can be construed as equivalent to 'the world exists *because* God made it'; and presumably in this sentence, according to Barker, the 'because' is simply 'paradigmatic'. Now I think it is a fairly simple matter to show that this is quite wrong: *pace* Barker, 'because' in this sentence is used in just the same way as it is commonly used in 'science'.

Barker's argument is that in 'God made the world' an unnecessary assumption is being made: namely that *someone* must have made the world. Given this assumption, it must then be 'God' who did so, for only he could do it. But since the assumption is unnecessary Barker continues, the proposition itself is merely tautological: that is to say, it is valid only within a framework which takes this assumption for granted. But this whole line of argument rests on a mistake: the sentence 'God made the world' does not *assume* that the world was made by someone. It simply *states* that the world was made by someone. 'God' is just the term for the

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kind of being it must have taken to make it. Let me give a mundane, but parallel example. The sentence 'A carpenter made this table' could only be said to *assume* that somebody must have made it, if 'A Carpenter' is used as a proper name: i.e. if the sentence merely points to the particular individual who made it, namely 'A. Carpenter' (let's call him Alfred). But suppose 'A Carpenter' is not a proper name but just a term for the sort of person it needed to make the table: then the sentence does not make any previous *assumption* at all; it simply *says* that the table must have been made by a certain sort of person, namely a carpenter. Now it is in this latter way that 'scientific theology' always uses 'God' in the sentence 'God made the world'—as I pointed out in my previous article.² It is just a simple logical mistake to use 'God' as a proper name: and it is only when this mistake has been made that the argument which Barker uses even begins to look plausible.

To put the point in another way: the sentence 'God made the world' is a statement about the world, not a statement about God. 'The world' is the *logical subject* of the proposition, even though 'God' is the grammatical subject. 'God made the world' tells us something about the kind of world we are in, not anything about God; just as 'A carpenter made this table' tells us something about the kind of table it is—for example, it is not a table made by machinery. What the sentence 'God made the world' tells us about the world is that it was made by somebody, i.e. it cannot have begun to exist without being made. Of course, if in 'A carpenter made this table', 'A Carpenter' is the proper name of the individual man, Alfred Carpenter, then the sentence will tell us something about that man, namely that it was he, and not e.g. Joe Soap who made the table. But this is just what we cannot properly say in the case of 'God made the world': for there is no other person who might have made it. This is because, if you consider the kind of being that would be needed to make the world, you soon realise that there couldn't be more than one of them.

Once this point is firmly grasped, it becomes obvious that the logical difference between 'this table exists *because* a carpenter made it' and 'the world exists *because* God made it' does not lie in any difference of logical sense in 'because', but in a difference of logical sense in 'made'. Certainly there are problems about 'made' in the case of 'God made the world': but these are not germane to Barker's argument. For it is at the root of his thesis that, in Christian discourse, there is something tautological about the way terms like 'because' are used. *This* is what makes all Christian discourse ideological. In this respect, at least, Barker's thesis is plainly wrong. That being so, Barker's remarks about the way Marxism generates knowledge out of ideology, interesting though they are, have nothing to do with the case. He hasn't even begun to show that the tautologousness which is a *sine qua non* of ideological discourse is

present in Christian thinking: on the contrary, by systematically misunderstanding 'God' as a proper name, he has simply exemplified how Marxists regularly fall into a logical fallacy which, as I pointed out in my own article, is quite foreign to 'scientific theology'. The question then is, why does Marxist discourse so regularly reveal a *need* to use this fallacy in order to make its own case against Christianity? Is this not precisely a proof of its ideological character? What Barker's argument really shows is that there is an ideological element in Marxism itself which can *only* be corrected (especially if, as Althusser insists, the religious question lies at the very heart of the problem of ideology) by recognising the exemption of scientific Christian theology from the realm of the ideological.

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in the McKinnon judgment, where it was held that the comment, "One down—a million to go", made on the murder of an Indian youth in Southall, was not incitement. The Greater Manchester police spent £250,000 to protect Martin Webster carrying a National Front banner along the street: racial abuse on Front posters and in periodicals produced by a wide range of racist organisations can be uttered with impunity.

In such a situation, why should an obvious lurch by the Conservative leadership towards even more open racism than before appear like a gleam of hope? Because there is a chance now that The Problem will be identified by more and more British people as racism rather than as the presence of black people. Once that simple idea has been grasped, there is a chance that the road will start running in the right direction, even if the going is rough. A House of Commons Select Committee has just produced a report on immigration which is remarkable for its obtuseness, open racism, recommendation for vastly increased police powers and government snooping, and determination to keep Asian families apart as long as possible. Six months ago this document would probably have been greeted with judicious references to the good and bad in it, and to the need for strict immigration control in the cause of—yes, good race relations. But now even the British Press has found this report hard to stomach. There have been adverse comments. Not, of course, universally, not strong enough; still, a turning point has come. Thank you, Bull Thatcher.

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