

# Ideology—the *New Blackfriars* Debate 1973 — 1984. A case study in Christian left thought<sup>1</sup>

Gethin Rhys

During the 1970s, there appeared in *New Blackfriars* a series of articles on the theme of the relationship between Christianity and Marxism. The inspiration for this debate lay partly with those who had been involved with the journal *Slant*, which was published by Sheed and Ward between 1964 and 1970<sup>2</sup>, and notably Terry Eagleton and Brian Wicker.

Although not covering very many pages put together, the *New Blackfriars* debate covered an enormous range of issues. However, from Denys Turner's first article (1973) onwards, the concept of *ideology* was among the most prominent. This concept also played a major part in the more systematic argument developed by Turner in his subsequent book, *Marxism and Christianity* (1983b). My aim in this article is critically to defend Turner's account as one which is still useful and relevant.

I will avoid discussing the question as to whether the use made of this central concept by Turner was *really* Marxist or not. Turner deliberately eschewed the question of labelling in his contributions to the debate, and Herbert McCabe, the editor of *New Blackfriars*, decided not to publish an article whose main aim was to show that Turner was not a real Marxist. In so far as the question is of relevance to him, Turner views Marxism as a *tradition* to be lived out in the form of a revolutionary praxis.<sup>3</sup> Hence, therefore, an intellectual synthesis of Christianity and Marxism, even if it could be achieved, would be inadequate; what matters is that there should be a form of life which enables one to live out both traditions.

There was by 1973, when the first of Turner's articles appeared, much less optimism about the future of Christian-Marxist dialogue as it had been conceived in the 1960s. The heady optimism expressed by Paul Oestreicher, writing in 1968, had already dissipated:

Words backed by commitment are the stuff of revolution.  
Christians and Communists have more than their humanity in  
common. They are both committed to building a new  
world....



the overlap of the two parts of the sentence (see diagram). In the first part it means moral superiors, in the second, social superiors.

So, concludes Turner:

'Your betters' works its ideological magic by ambiguously denoting both a social class and a set of virtues, thereby prohibiting the description of anyone as a member of that class without the simultaneous ascription to him of those virtues and at the same time prohibiting the ascription of those virtues to any non-member of the class. And yet, ... by holding them apart just enough that the one can be traded off against the other, such sentences as Mrs Holt's survive the threat to their apparent sense posed by too explicit an exposure of their contradictoriness.

(Turner 1983b, p. 45)

Turner argues that ideological language constrains the ability to criticize reality and also obscures what is going on. By the same token, as the dominant class dominates, among other things, the media of communication and, hence, the development of language, this property of language systematically tends to serve its interests.

John B. Thompson has independently argued a position very similar to that of Turner on this issue. Thompson in effect summarizes what is going on here as follows:

Relations of domination are sustained by a *mobilization of meaning*<sup>3</sup> which legitimates, dissimulates or reifies an existing state of affairs.

(Thompson 1984, p. 132)

Turner argues that this 'mobilization of meaning' is necessary for capitalism's own persistence. Capitalism requires the promulgation of the moral ideals of freedom and equality to buttress the market mechanism, but that same market generates class inequalities which make the living out of those ideals in other aspects of life impossible. Therefore, capitalism can continue to gain popular support only for so long as it is able to perpetuate the systematic misperception that capitalism adequately realizes those ideals.

The phenomenon of the 'mobilization of meaning' is not found only in language. There may also be 'performative contradictions' caused by ideological uses of language in particular situations. Turner takes as an example an egalitarian sermon delivered from an 'authoritarian pulpit', for

the pulpit itself is part of the materiality of the preacher's act of saying—it both internalizes and exhibits the character of his relationship with his congregation.

(Turner 1983a, p. 176)

The congregation is socialized into this contradiction, just as Mrs Holt was socialized into the contradiction of linguistic usage.

Now, Turner is not proposing here a conspiracy theory along the lines of Orwellian 'Newspeak'. He is simply pointing to the fact that society is structured in such a way that language itself can work in the interests of the dominant class in society. Turner goes on to analyse the concept of *power*, and its relation to ideology. This is an important step in his argument, as it provides the framework for explaining how the ruling class can non-conspiratorially dominate linguistic usage. I therefore intend now to give an account of that concept and how it fits in to Turner's analysis.

Turner (1983b, ch. 5) begins his discussion of power by accepting the core of Steven Lukes's three-dimensional view (Lukes, 1974). On this view, power may consist in:

1. A's exercising power over B in an overt, observable way;
2. A's exercising power over B by means of 'agenda setting' or organising issues out of political debate;
3. A's exercising power over B in preventing B from perceiving that his interests conflict with those of A in the first place.

Turner suggests that this typology is incomplete. He draws attention to the close link between the first two dimensions of power. This may be seen by analogy with a committee meeting: A exercises power over B by winning the vote on an issue (on the first dimension) or by keeping an issue B wishes to discuss off the agenda (on the second dimension). In fact, the exercises of power of the second sort are a necessary condition of exercises of power of the first sort—no meeting will get very far unless someone decides on the agenda. What Lukes misses, according to Turner, is a similar link between his third dimension of power and the 'ideology' of a society, which may be seen as a sort of 'fourth dimension' of power.<sup>6</sup> For it remains altogether mysterious on Lukes's account how dominant social groups so often succeed in masking conflicts of interest within society. The answer, says Turner, lies in ideology:

a spontaneous bias in the social system which no social agency could be capable of producing.

(Turner 1983b, p. 65)

This last formulation needs some qualification. The word 'spontaneous' is too strong, as it implies that 'the social system' is somehow biased independently of *all* human agency. The same stricture applies to the use of the phrase 'which no social agency could be capable of producing'. While it is true that no individual, or even a set of individuals acting in concert, could produce this bias as a conscious policy, to deny 'social agency' of all descriptions a role in the creation of this bias seems to leave the process to the gods. Turner's definition would perhaps be better phrased:

an unconscious bias in the social system which no social agents could be capable of deliberately producing.

The crucial point is that if the social system did not work in such a way that the idea of an exploiting class came to be accepted by the exploited, then exercises of Lukes's third dimension of power would be impossible. Ideology is thus a necessary condition of the exercise of third-dimensional power.<sup>7</sup>

Turner's analysis is restricted to the use of ideology by the dominant class in society. This corresponds with Lukes's own linking of the notion of 'power' to A's persuading of B of something against his 'real interests'. But this leaves out of the analysis the point that a counter-ideology that persuades the oppressed class of its 'true' interests must itself be powerful in some sense. In the Turner/Lukes analysis the use of power is always asymmetrical—used by the oppressing class against the oppressed class, and never the other way round. They therefore miss the point that if this is the only sense of power there is, any counter-ideology is necessarily doomed to failure.

We may see how Turner's structural conception of ideology helps us to understand society by comparing it briefly with Anthony Giddens's discussion of social power (1981, ch. 7). He distinguishes between two kinds of power:

1. 'Collective power', by which the structure of society sets limits to what can happen within that society. This is very similar to Turner's 'ideology'; and
2. 'Distributive power', by which some groups can exert their will at the expense of others.

Using this framework, Giddens argues that class relations are best understood as the 'structuration' of relations between classes, which cashes out in particular cases as class inequality. What Giddens argues for society as a whole, Turner argues for social uses of language in particular. In the language of capitalism,

Class conflict becomes represented within that language as legitimate pluralism, so that ... the perception of the society as being constructed upon ... 'class conflict' is dissolved into the perception of the abstract solidarity in liberal-democratic freedom to dissent. ... What bourgeois ideology may admit to is inequality. It may even admit to class inequality, and sometimes does. What bourgeois ideology systematically denies is the systemic character, within capitalism, of class oppression.

(Turner 1983b, p. 80)

In defending his claim that capitalism is inherently ideological, Turner (1977) cites in support Marx's account of commodity fetishism in *Capital* (1867, ch. 1 sect. 4). Marx argues here that under capitalism,

merchandise has both a tangible and an intangible appearance. Tangibly, an item of merchandise is an object intended for use. But intangibly, it is a social relationship with exchange value. It reflects back to men the social character of labour in the objective product of their own labour. The producers have a relationship with one another only through the exchange of merchandise *as merchandise*, as mere things (rather than as products of their labour). Therefore, the relationships which lie behind this merchandise appear in the market-place not as labour relationships but as purely 'objective' relationships among themselves as producers. Furthermore, the material relationships among the items acquire the character of quasi-personal relationships between self-acting mercantile units in a market which obeys laws of its own. Thus, people relate only through things, rather than directly with each other. This produces a devaluation of the human world, reducing most of mankind to the abstract status of 'labour'. Under capitalist property relations, man becomes incapable of entering into any self-actualizing or self-enjoying relations to objects except when he directly possesses or uses them.

Now, according to Turner, Marx here claims at least:

1. that the basic categories of bourgeois economics ('exchange', 'consumption', etc.) are not abolished by his analysis, but restored to their right relationship with one another, i.e. freed of ideology; and
2. that the effect of the fetishistic use of these economic categories on individual ideological utterances is that it becomes unclear whether these utterances are meaningful at all, and, if they are, whether they are really true or false.

Only an external science—Marxism—can, in Turner's view, show this. The application of such a science enables one to 'rescue' the truth (or falsity) of these sentences by de-mystifying the categories of the ideology. Turner takes as a concrete example of this method Marx's claim that in commodity fetishism we have 'a relation between persons expressed as a relation between things'. This breaks down, on Turner's analysis, to the following three claims:

1. The fetishistic appearance is not *false* with respect to some underlying reality, for relationships appear in their fetishized form as what they really are (i.e. under capitalism relations between persons really are, in an important sense, relations between things—just ask any worker who has been treated like so much machinery).
2. The fetishized appearance, however, does not express the full two-sided reality of commodity production, because commodity production is (really) the whole process or mechanism whereby direct social relations appear in the form of relations between things.
3. Scientific discourse is that discourse which is capable of analysing the process of commodity production as also the process of fetish production.

In this sense, therefore, Marxism is the 'rescued truth' of capitalism, or, to be more precise, of capitalist ideology.

What form of Christian belief, then, is possible under such circumstances? Turner believes that Christ, love and community are present in a capitalist society only sacramentally, i.e. in the form of their absence. Turner is here drawing on an earlier formulation of Herbert McCabe's, that the sacraments are

our way of trying to reach out to a man who is absent.

(McCabe 1964, p. xiii)

Turner lists five characteristics of such sacramental presence:

1. Christ, love and community can be made really present by means of materially available specific actions in the bourgeois world, in the class struggle.
2. No action is loving if it betrays the revolutionary struggle. Hence we need to have knowledge of the material social conditions in which we live.
3. Christ, love and community are not materializable within the structures of bourgeois society in the way that they will be in a fully socialist society, or in the Kingdom of God.
4. The Marxist Christian is not, therefore, committed to the reified spirituality' of his bourgeois co-religionists.
5. The demand to love is itself ideological. Capitalist exploitation creates the need for love and also makes it impossible. The 'reality' of love, therefore, consists in the form of the criticism of the conditions which make love impossible.

(Turner 1977, p. 198)

Turner justifies his stance further in his reply to Nicholas Lash's review of his book. Given Marx's analysis, he says, the crucial question for a Christian is:

are the conditions of possibility of Christian belief and practice to be found within a late-capitalist society such as ours, and, if so, in what strategies and dispositions towards that society?

(Turner 1984, p. 74)

For Turner, Christianity has no cognitive credentials until it can show that it satisfies the material conditions of its own possibility as a way of life. In other words, in Turner's opinion you cannot know that you are talking about God until you know that you are not talking ideologically.

### *The New Blackfriars debate*

As I observed at the beginning of this article, many of Turner's ideas were first introduced in articles in *New Blackfriars* in the ten years preceding the publication of his book. They led to a debate involving Terry Eagleton, Brian Wicker and Francis Barker, the last being an atheist Marxist. It was,

in fact, Barker who wrote at greatest length about Turner's use of the concept of ideology, and it is therefore on Barker that I will concentrate in what follows.

In his article 'Science and Ideology' (1977), Barker introduces two principal arguments against the account of ideology proposed by Turner and outlined above. I will discuss them in turn.

### *1. Appearance and reality.*

Barker points out that Turner's account of ideology rests on a distinction being drawn between appearance and reality—ideology makes things appear to be different from how they are. Barker puts up two arguments against this.

Firstly, Turner's own exegesis of Marx's account of commodity fetishism belies this distinction, because Turner says there that the fetishistic appearance is not false with respect to some underlying reality, for relationships appear in their fetishized form as they really are (see point 1 of my account of Turner's exegesis of Marx above). Barker, following Althusser, says that:

ideology does not represent, in mystified form, men's real conditions of existence in class society. What it represents is the imaginary *relation* of men to the real conditions, i.e. ideology is a representation of the imaginary relationship of men to the relations of production....

(Barker 1977, p. 481)

It is not entirely clear that Barker here hits the correct target. It would seem, if my exegesis of Turner is correct, that the sort of appearance/reality distinction that Turner needs for his account to go through is not the sort criticized by Althusser, but the more straightforward sort neatly summed up by Nicholas Lash, in his own account of ideology, as follows:

Legal or political systems ... may, while *appearing* to represent the general interest, in *fact* only represent the interests of a particular group ...

(Lash 1981, p. 132)

This seems incontestable, and is not touched by Barker's criticism.

Secondly, the appearance/reality distinction, says Barker, presupposes the notion of a subject *for whom* the appearance is a mystified expression of reality. But Barker argues that this assumption is itself ideological, and that Christianity is the central ideology in capitalist society in its use of the category of the subject. Barker notes the appropriateness of the two meanings of the word 'subject', viz. (1) free subjectivity, and (2) a subjected being. For Barker, the sort of ideology that has to be overcome is exemplified by the phrase 'it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you' (Matthew

10.20, RSV). This clearly exemplifies the second meaning of 'subject'—the persecuted disciples are not to be free agents, but rather subject to God.

Turner, too, is critical of the ideology of 'the Subject' which permeates Christian theology. This is not to say, however, that he rejects *all* uses of the concept of 'subject', as Barker appears to do. On the contrary, he criticizes and rejects a number of Althusserian arguments against the concept of the 'subject' (Turner 1983b, pp. 195—208). In particular, Althusser has argued that it is ideological to transform the concept of *individuals*, i.e. simple bearers of structures, into that of *subjects*, who live as if they themselves were the *autonomous principle* of determination of their relation with their conditions of existence. In opposition to this rejection of the notion of 'subject', Turner points out that the important Marxist notion of *praxis* requires some concept of agency, which in turn requires some notion of 'subject'. The Marxist, therefore, seems to need a definition which includes at least this:

Subjects are individual parcels of highly organised matter (bodies) of which it can be said that:

- (a) their individuation is that by which occurrent sets of psychological phenomena are individuated; and
- (b) they are the agents (i.e. efficient causes) of such individuated psychological phenomena.

Althusser, Turner says, seems to think that subjects are (Cartesian) psychological selves. But Turner's notion of a subject is that of the source of the individuation of experiences, whereas Cartesian selves are individuated by their experiences. Being 'inserted into language' (to use Terry Eagleton's phrase), they are capable of self-reflection and they are self-conscious, but they are not defined or constituted by their self-consciousness. This self-consciousness may be constituted by conditions which lie, repressed, outside the range of that consciousness itself, i.e. it may be ideological.

Only when self-consciousness is constituted ideologically in this way, argues Turner, will the subject have a false notion of his or her identity. This misrecognition is brought about by the sort of process described earlier, when certain false or ambiguous modes of expression are seen as 'obviously true'—just as it was obvious to Mrs Holt that Mr Transome was one of her 'betters':

What is ideological is that (the subject) recognizes himself only in those 'obviously true' ideological descriptions.

(Turner 1978, p. 138)

## 2. *The science of an ideology.*

Turner seems implicitly to assume that each ideology has its own science. This assumption was made explicit in the debate by Wicker, who argued that there could be a science of theology, which would draw the line between the true and the false in Christianity. Barker denies this. While he agrees that it is true that Marxism's main knowledge has been achieved by engagement with an ideology, viz. bourgeois political economy, that is not because it was simply one ideology among others, but because the economic is *in fact* fundamental.... Having constructed its concept of the social formation, Marxism then is able to read back from *this* its knowledge of other ideologies. And it attends to them not because they all have a truth to be rescued, but because they all have a similar social function: the maintenance of the hegemony of the ruling class....

(Barker 1977, p. 480)

Barker, then, argues that Turner can hold on to his position with respect to ideology only by abandoning his adherence to Marxism.

Nicholas Lash (1983) makes another criticism of this part of Turner's argument. Turner, argues Lash, sees everything that is not 'science' as 'ideology'. Turner (1984) denies Lash's charge by 'half-defining' science as knowing something, where the relevant account of 'knowledge' is grasping an object in reflexive awareness of the conditions (including material conditions) of the possibility of grasping it. His point is not that everything that is not science, so defined, is ideology, but that the non-ideological character of theological language cannot be demonstrated from *within* theological language. In a capitalist society, the capacity to show this exists only within Marxism.

In other words, to use the phrase introduced earlier, only Marxism can rescue the truth of Christianity, i.e. only Marxism can show us which bits of theology make sense, and of those bits which make sense, which bits are true. Now, there is a difference between the implications of rescuing the truth of Christianity and rescuing the truth of capitalism. In contemporary Western society, Christianity is voluntary in a sense in which capitalism is not. The rescuing of the truth of capitalism requires the transformation of all aspects of social life. The rescuing of the truth of Christianity would not have such all-pervasive effects on society as a whole, though it would on the church.

Where does this leave *us*, then? The debate it originally aroused eventually tailed off inconclusively. But it had raised issues which will not go away. If, as I have argued, Turner is right when he says that there is something deep in the structure of capitalism which skews our perception of what is going on, then theology is one of the aspects of life that is skewed. And, like the other ideologies which go to make up capitalist ideology, it is systematically skewed in favour of the rich and powerful and

against the poor and weak.

But there is good news for us in what Turner has to say too, for, with the aid of Marxism's criticism of the conditions which cause that misperception, we can start to right our view of the world and our theology, both in theory and in practice. Much liberation theology is overtly attempting to do this. So, less overtly, is the contemporary concern of many branches of the church for the *structural* causes of poverty and powerlessness worldwide and in Britain. While they may not think of their activities in quite this way, the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield, the Christian Socialist Movement and the World Development Movement, among others, are all in the process of rescuing the truth of Christianity.

- 1 This paper is based on research which is embodied in my thesis (Rhys, 1986). Earlier versions of it were read to the Political Theory Workshop of Nuffield College, Oxford, and to the Conference of the Sociology of Religion Group of the British Sociological Association. I am grateful to the participants on each occasion for their comments. I am also grateful to Prof. G.A. Cohen of All Souls' College, Oxford and to Dr Denys Turner, who both commented on earlier drafts of the relevant chapter of the thesis.
- 2 Cf. Wall (1975). Details of citations follow these notes.
- 3 Turner (1983b), chs 12 & 13. This is a concept borrowed from E.P. Thompson (1978).
- 4 See Rhys (1986), pp 64—66 for a fuller discussion.
- 5 Cf. E.E. Schattschneider's notion of 'the mobilization of bias', the perpetuation of relations of domination by 'organizing issues out' of politics (Schattschneider 1960, p. 33).
- 6 I am not, however, committed to the use of the term 'fourth dimension' here. The use of the word 'power' to refer to the concept I have hitherto called 'ideology' certainly does not conform to ordinary usage. Nothing hangs on to the use of the term here, and the only reason for using the terminology of a 'fourth dimension' is to emphasize the parallel between the first pair of dimensions and the second pair.
- 7 As far as I know, Lukes would not disagree with this analysis. However, he does not see the theoretical need for a fourth dimension of power, whereas he does see the need for a second dimension to accommodate the parallel analysis of first dimensional power.

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## Reviews

**THEOLOGY AFTER WITTGENSTEIN** by Fergus Kerr. *Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, 202 pp. £22.50.*

This book is a pleasure to read and well worth reading—scholarly, refreshingly clear and often droll. While particularly important to the philosophy of religion and the 'philosophy of theology', its implications fan more widely into dogmatics, ethics and spirituality. Those who already are familiar with Wittgenstein's writings will find much to interest them, and those who are not may soon be looking for a copy of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Fergus Kerr does not attempt an account of everything Wittgenstein said that might have bearing on religious belief but concentrates instead on a few central and related themes; the attack on Cartesianism in philosophy, the mentalist-individualist theories of knowledge to which that gives rise, and Wittgenstein's response in terms of his own particular version of 'Lebensphilosophie' (the bustle of life). These themes are developed in a leisurely, almost narrative way, interwoven with biographical comment, which is one of the attractions of the book. The reader is lured into seeing as puzzling that which previously seemed straightforward, and as straightforward that which previously puzzled. The result is a good introduction to how it *feels* to do philosophy with someone who could say, 'My aim is to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense'. (P. 1., §464)

The first chapter introduces us to the enemy; the modern conception of the self, the Cartesian 'ego' which, even when stripped of all previous beliefs, the senses, the body, confidence in the external world, is discovered as a pinpoint of consciousness. Although