

# The Morality of Knowledge and the Disappearance of God

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It is with a certain circumspection that a Marxist enters the kind of debate represented by the articles of Denys Turner, Brian Wicker and Terry Eagleton on the problems of morality, Marxism and Christianity.<sup>1</sup> This is not because he any longer fears that guilt by association which was once so characteristic a feature of (Stalinist) ultra-leftism by which anyone who even passed the time of day with a 'petit-bourgeois idealist' was automatically suspect and probably a class traitor, but rather because, in entering such a discussion, the Marxist simultaneously acknowledges that there is a discussion to be had—something real is at stake—and also his relative inadequacy to participate in it. This sounds like conceding defeat immediately but is intended to echo Terry Eagleton's schematic but accurate map of the Marxist tradition—on the one hand a neo-Hegelian idealism stemming from the work of Lukács, fully equipped with a humanist ideology, and on the other the structural-scientific work of Althusser, programmatically anti-humanist—and thus to indicate right from the start that the English Marxist at least is bound to be caught wrong-footed. He is bound to look back and see that a Christian-Marxist dialogue was easier all round under the old socialist humanist régime, but equally the Marxist is newly aware of the inadequacies of that theoretical past, the errors which led to irrationality in theory and defeat in practice and the correction of which are, for him, the primary theoretical concern. Marxism is now establishing for itself a new rigour the central thrust of which is towards the purging of eclecticism from itself and the preclusion of united fronts with other discourses at the level of theory. Or to be more precise again, Marxism is now placing itself within a certain paradigm of discourses<sup>2</sup> distinguished by their scientificity and their command of their own proper objects—Althusser's 'continents' and 'regions' of knowledge—and resolutely opposing itself to the ideological from which it breaks epistemologically. If, like Denys Turner to state my conclusion in advance of my argument, Christianity is an ideology—not 'just an ideology', but an ideology nonetheless—inevitably there will be a certain asymmetry in

<sup>1</sup>Denys Turner, 'Morality is Marxism', *New Blackfriars*, February and March 1973; 'Can a Christian be a Marxist?', *New Blackfriars*, June 1975; Brian Wicker, 'Marxists and Christians: Questions for Denys Turner', *New Blackfriars*, October 1975; Terry Eagleton, 'Marxists and Christians: Answers for Brian Wicker', *ibid.* Also relevant is Alan Wall's 'Slant and the Language of Revolution', *New Blackfriars*, November 1975.

<sup>2</sup>More properly 'a hierarchy of sciences'.

any debate which it might have with Marxism, a certain difference of level, a talking at crossed purposes. After all one doesn't ask the science of geomorphology to debate with the ideology of liberalism, not only because there is no overlap in their 'contents' but because they are different orders of discourse with different kinds of relation to their respective 'objects'. But, the assumption is, as Marxism is a 'human science' it contains more or less explicitly a 'vision' of 'man' or of 'the world', and as Christianity also has some such vision there is a real possibility of debate if not actually of total agreement. But this assumption must be scrutinised. It harks back to the old idealist Marxism which drew its inspiration—as Eagleton says—from the 1844 *Manuscripts* with their notions of man's alienation from his (transhistorical) species-being. This was indeed a vision of man and, compared with various Christian perspectives, an inferior and meagre vision at that. But the recent developments in scientific Marxism have not substituted a new vision for the old one but have decisively rejected that problematic. Marxism strives towards *knowledge* of social formations, but it has no *vision* of anything. On the contrary, Marxism points out that 'man', 'the world' and 'visions' of either are the *objects* of knowledge and not its content. There is thus something radically problematical about the idea of a science *debating* with what is potentially its object *as if* it were an epistemological equal. This is one of the reasons why this debate is perennial and *as a debate* cannot be resolved.

Of course, the remark that Marxism can 'explain' Christianity but that the converse is impossible is by now commonplace. Denys Turner confronts a version of it in his 'Can a Christian be a Marxist?':

From the fact that you can explain *why* a certain belief is held by a group of people in terms of the material conditions of their social relationships, it does not at all follow that the proposition they believe in is *false*. It does not follow that  $1 + 1 = 2$  is a false proposition just because some people seem to believe it is true for all the wrong reasons . . . (p. 248).

In the course of making a powerful point—that it is no more difficult for Christians to accept that Marxism can explain their beliefs than it is for Marxists to accept the same of Marxism—Turner reveals a deep confusion about the differences between discourses. That  $1 + 1 = 2$  is not a proposition which can be either true or false in the same sense as Marxists might speak of Christianity as false. Arithmetic is a conventional, self-referential sign-system which allows of certain operations within itself but ultimately speaks only of itself. Similarly it would be absurd to speak of literature being 'true' or 'false' even though it has a greater degree of reference to an external signified than arithmetic. Christianity, however, makes claims to be substantial rather than conventional, to speak *of* something rather than merely to speak *in relation to* something. It is possible to believe in the Christian truths in a way which is impossible of the 'truths' of literature or arithmetic. And as for the Marxist scientific discourse, the

Marxist does not have a relationship of belief with his science, but rather his science allows and formulates knowledge of its object.

The problem of Marxism having to explain its own genesis according to its own self-understanding thus disappears as a problem. Marxism, establishing itself as a science, is then able to think its own ideological pre-history. The problem of its own genesis would only really be problematical if Marxism had remained an ideology with an epistemological status analogous to that of Christianity, and only in that case would Turner's at first sight convincing parallel between Christian belief and Marxist 'belief' retain its force. And in any case the seeming conviction of Turner's point hinges entirely on the rather curious suggestion that Marxism can *only* account (and only strives to account) for the genetic circumstances of Christian belief, that it can only explain why certain people have these beliefs at certain times according to their material social conditions (and for Turner to admit even this possibility, it should be noted, does give Christianity the status of an ideology in the Marxist understanding of the word) and has nothing to say about the substance of the beliefs themselves. This misrepresents Marxism which says firmly that there is no God. A refreshingly provocative remark such as 'So far as I can see Marxism, represented in the materialist conception of history, involves no *ontology* of a materialist sort whatever' (*ibid.*, p. 247) is in any case really only a verbal opportunism. If Marxism 'involves' an ontology it will be a materialist one by definition of scientificity, and if it does not this is no licence for simply importing an immaterialist, theistic ontology into it. Again the misunderstanding of the breaks and differentiations between discourses enforces on Turner's argument a purely rhetorical syncretism.

If all this talk of discourses seems to be avoiding the substantive issues, I can only stress the necessity of attempting to place a debate such as this within, if not a material and social, at least a theoretical context, for the dangers of proceeding in a spirit of well-meaning vagueness are almost as great as the irreponsibility of not having the debate at all. Such a 'placing' also indicates that any 'contribution' which a scientific Marxist might make will inevitably not so much treat the 'issues' as offer a symptomatic reading of the text of the debate (in this case the articles of Turner, Wicker and Eagleton) for it is there, 'in' those texts, that the debate is really going on. In the tension and absences of those texts which a materialist reading could expose will appear the Marxist's substantive answer to the question of Christianity and Marxism.

With Denys Turner's first article ('Morality is Marxism') it is possible to recognise at once an area of extensive agreement. Turner properly rejects 'morality' (to adopt the inverted commas of Eagleton's denotation) and substitutes for it morality. He retrieves a classical notion of morality as 'a scientific investigation of the social order which can generate norms for action' and rejects that prescriptive moralism which has been passed off as morality 'by philosophers

from Kant to Hare' (*ibid.*, p. 59). I can see nothing wrong with this on its surface except to say that as I am one of those Marxists whom Turner characterises as seeing that 'The word "morality" has become attached to forms of thought which are quite incompatible with Marxist scientific methods, and if clarity is to be served it is best served by respecting dominant usage and by denying any connexion between Marxism and morality as construed by that usage' (*ibid.*, p. 59) I would rather have proceeded directly to the demystification of post-Kantian 'morality' rather than bothering with the re-establishment of the classical notion. The main line of Turner's article, as is indicated by its title, is to establish an identity between morality in the new (old) sense and Marxism and thus, effectively, to abolish morality as a separate entity. It is thus the record of a choice between post-Kantian moral ideology and Marxist scientific knowledge, and the retrieval of the classical model, except as an aid to exposition, is redundant. Or is it? Turner is vague here, according to my reading of his article significantly so. He hints that the identity between morality, in his sense, and Marxism is not quite complete, that Marxists 'might be more disposed to learn from those [classical] moralists truths which they nowadays seem disinclined to recognise they need to learn' (*ibid.*, p. 62, my italics). Now this is confusing. If morality is scientific knowledge of society and Marxism provides that knowledge and therefore 'is' morality, what are these 'truths' which it still has to learn from classical morality when the very purpose of retrieving the classical model was to establish the identity in the first place? Clearly they are not doctrines, substantive doctrinal truths (such as the absolute prohibition of torture that Wicker and Eagleton discuss) for this would fall back into the category of 'morality' in the sense that Turner rejects. No, he is thinking here rather of methodological concerns, a rejection of positivism and, he implies, the adoption of a teleology of knowledge. I can only say that it seems odd, and contrary to Turner's own sense of history that he should lump this kind of matter under the heading of 'truths' (a word with quite different connotations) and then suggest an appeal to Plato or Aristotle for the solution of methodological problems to do with the generation of scientific knowledge of capitalist society. This oddness is the index of an equivocation in Turner's position, a desire not quite articulate in his text, but near the surface, to eat his 'moral' cake and have it. The strategy of his argument is to step outside the conventional 'morality' versus positivistic science debate by redefining morality until it has become identical with scientific but not positivistic Marxism, but then finding that this has failed to absorb completely the force of 'moral' discourse (in the conventional sense, nearer to, say, the issue of torture) he attempts to rehabilitate morality-as-moral-imperative. But clearly unable to do this openly as doctrinal prescription (which his own—'Marxist'—analysis has adequately disposed of) it comes back in at the level of methodology where it is a pallid substance carrying less conviction than the blunt, if ideological, decision to say that

torturing people is wrong.

A more explicit case of the re-integration of 'morality' is Turner's attempt to make Marxism historically normative. He recounts Plato's notion of scientific knowledge as both knowledge of the good society and only possible within that society (which of course renders it impossible, or at best redundant since by then we shall have arrived at the place we need science precisely in order to reach), and concludes that, for Plato, science is 'the knowledge one would have of one's society if one's society were a just one' (*ibid.*, p. 119). Certainly Turner criticises Plato's dialectic for only allowing a 'two-term, one-way relationship' but himself retains, *essentially*, this comparativist, idealist notion of science as knowledge of the just society. This *tends* towards a fairly familiar brand of utopianism which makes Marxism the vision of a just society which enables by contrast a criticism of actual society. Turner makes his misunderstanding of Marxism clear when he speaks of 'Marx's works' (a corpus, note, not a science) as 'a teleological and dialectical hermeneutic of the structure of everyday ideologies of capitalist society. . . . They are the attempt to discover *the real significances* of the wants and interests which capitalism . . . generates . . .' (*ibid.*, p. 122, my italics). Thus, by a signal retreat into the old idealist problematic, science becomes once more the secret truth of ideology, the 'real significance' of false consciousness. Did I say something earlier about discourses? It is precisely not to see itself as a hermeneutic, especially not a hermeneutic of ideology, towards which Marxism is currently struggling. It does not try to discover the normative truth which ideology falsifies *as if that truth were somehow 'in the ideology* needing only to be released—like Ariel from the tree—in order to work wonders, but establishes itself, as I have already said, on a quite different terrain from ideology, generating 'truth' (knowledge) through its scientific practice. This connects with the strongest point Turner makes which is to abolish the conventional 'moral' problem of the distinction between 'what makes a moral anything *moral*, be it agent, judgement, motive, reason for acting or whatever, and what makes it good to be an agent of this kind, or to enact the judgement, or to act for the motive or reason in question' (*ibid.*, p. 58). There is no question of being a Marxist and then having to work out whether you ought to make the revolution or not. Despite Terry Eagleton's invocation of those gentlemen on the *Financial Times* who seem to have some knowledge of the operation of the law of surplus value, because Marxism is a scientific practice, a *praxis*, it is only in the process of changing the world that it can constitute itself as a science.<sup>3</sup> Despite the contradictions, explicit and concealed, in Denys Turner's article it is this abolition of the fact/value dichotomy that is its significant achievement and allows him the positive conclusion, to which I assent, that if morality (as he defines it—scientific social knowledge) and Marxism are not one and the same

<sup>3</sup>Turner himself makes a related point in his dialectical analysis of the relationship between methodological coherence and objective knowledge, and of the fact that Marxist science could only come into being under capitalism (*ibid.*, pp. 123-4).

thing, then 'we do not know what morality is'.<sup>4</sup>

On the matter of *Christianity* and Marxism Denys Turner is not so rash as to defend an identity-thesis but rather their 'strong compatibility' ('Can a Christian be a Marxist?', p. 244). The title of the piece suggests a personalist orientation—I would rather have argued about the compatibility or otherwise of Marxism and Christianity as discourses—but as there are almost as many difficulties involved in finding out just what Christianity is in any one context as there are in discovering just what 'being a Marxist' means, we are probably as well off with one argument as we are with the other. Turner rightly attacks, and demonstrates at some length the impossibility of, the notion that someone can be a Marxist and also have a few private Christian beliefs. For him Christianity is a public, historical praxis, as is Marxism, which cannot be divorced from (although it may, must, support relations of criticism towards) the history of the Christian institutions, in particular the Church. Turner perceives and forecasts the horizontal splitting of the Church against its current ecumenical bourgeoisification and argues that it has never been in a unitary way hostile to historical revolutions but has always split over them. This is so, and from the political point of view encouraging. It is however at the level of theory that questions of compatibility need the most careful attention. I have already referred to Turner's mistaken belief that Marxist accounts of the reasons for people being subject to Christian ideology and the truth of that ideology are compatible. This is, in the kindest use of the word, nonsense. It is nonsense not because Denys Turner is a fool or because he can't write plain English but because of the problem I have already described of the difficulty of debate, and of making compatibilities and identities, between a science and an ideology. They speak different languages and experience a high level of mutual unintelligibility when attempts are made to bring them together at the same theoretical level. The Christian, immaterial beliefs, as Turner puts it, 'a God, an act of creation, an act of redemption, souls, grace, post-mortem survival, and the rest' (*ibid.*, p. 244) cannot and do not exist in the same theoretical universe as a materialist science of history which can account for them according to its own methods.<sup>5</sup> It is not that Marxism only accounts for the

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>5</sup>An example of the 'clash of discourses' is provided by a schematic comparison of the structural characteristics of scientific and religious languages. When science says *x, y, z, because* or *therefore c* it reveals itself as a discourse which is sequential, syntagmatic. 'Because' or 'therefore' signify the real simultaneous discovery and achievement of something new and are quite different in function from the same words when they appear in a sentence from religious discourse such as Denys Turner's 'To my mind, everything in [his] ontology demands of the Christian that he rejects the reactionary behaviour of his official church; it is not in spite of, but *because* of his ontology that he is so required. . . . For the Christian, *therefore*, the question is, what is the beginning of this criticism of religion?' (*ibid.*, pp. 247-8). Religious language is paradigmatic, constructed of a 'vertical' paradigm of which the prototype would be something like 'I believe in God'. In it words like 'because' and 'therefore' do not structure a diachronic development as in scientific discourse, but merely serve to conjugate, to 'spatialise' the optative paradigm. Religious language, like all ideological discourse, is thus strictly speaking tautological; it never utters anything that is not in the paradigm right from the start.

causes of such beliefs being held, as Turner would have it, but speaks directly of those beliefs *by virtue* of being able to account for their genesis in material existence. It is not the case, despite the spatial metaphor, that the ideological superstructures are somehow 'above' the material infrastructure; ideologies are in fact rooted in the base in that they are representations of the imaginary relations of men to the real relations of their material social existence, a representational 'working up' of the phenomenal categories of a social formation—in the case of capitalism, wage-labour, exchange, etc.—which present themselves spontaneously to perception; and thus not only the structure but also the 'contents' of ideology can be derived from the material circumstances they simultaneously 'represent' and conceal. Marxism rejects Turner's dualism which separates out the belief from the material circumstances of its genesis as a distinction not made in theory but supposedly descriptive of real substance, a dualism close to the familiar splitting of the material and the mental by which the former becomes some kind of framework within which the latter sites its own epiphanic and radically distinct existence.

Marxism not only describes the rise and fall of ideologies but also assesses and criticises their substantial content. This is, of course, an assertion and to prove it would go beyond the confines of this paper. But if that seems too patently an evasion let me argue, in place of that enormous historical-anthropological task, something more negative but just as telling, that Denys Turner, and in a different way Terry Eagleton, have already accepted this.

Turner remarks that it is 'the commonest of Christian sense' for Christianity to speak of its own 'origins and peculiar form' as historically determined. God 'created a world of beings who both create and are created by their own historical actions' and so 'how could God *intervene* in that human history except *via* historical agents acting under the constraints of social conditions which men have created and transferred for themselves?' (*ibid.*, pp. 248-9, my italics). Even if the initial assumption is accepted (and this in the end is the crux, between faith and knowledge) this hardly has even internal logic. The word 'intervene' is meaningless, or at least hard to understand in the light of Turner's subsequent remarks, and 'via' is simply inscrutable. For 'God is a being who exists outside of history [which means for Marxism, of course, that he doesn't exist]. . . . But for every action we *believe* is an action of God within history we *believe* there is a sufficient explanation of a purely historical and material form' (*ibid.*, p. 249). The slight shift between the two meanings of 'belief', here italicised, is eloquent; the former is genuinely a case of belief because inaccessible to the kind of knowledge that Turner refers to with his wrong use of the second 'belief', which should probably read 'know' or 'can demonstrate scientifically'. And 'purely', like 'via' and 'intervenes', merely begs all the questions, making opaque whatever could be the nature of an intervention which is not *knowable* or even perceptible. This shift in the meaning of belief is the most serious charge

that can be brought against Turner's argument. Marxism, substantively, does not admit the existence of anything 'outside' of history, and since it deals with knowledge and not assertion it puts the onus on immaterialists to demonstrate such existence. Marxism does this because politically and socially there is too much at stake to allow the infiltration into its methodology of the irrational. The trouble with belief (especially when posited by someone who argues as powerfully as Turner does for scientific knowledge) is that, whatever the public forms to which it might lead, it remains essentially private; like sensitivity in literary criticism it is an elitist concept in so far as it can neither be communicated (rather than expressed) nor taught. And, of course, the 'object' to which it refers remains inaccessible to scientific knowledge, except as an object of criticism, a posited non-existent, especially in the case of historical development where, as Turner says, sufficient explanation is historical and material anyway. But to let pass unnoticed the shift of meaning such as that in Turner's two uses of 'belief'—roughly Christian belief and Marxist 'belief', that hoary old Cold War gibe—would be to admit posited belief as being on the same theoretical level as verifiable knowledge. This is a crucial juncture where Marxism, knowing only too well the political results of theoretical error, will be quite inflexible. If Marxism admits 'belief' as an epistemological category it will turn into its opposite, not a revolutionary praxis but an ideology of protest. This rigid opposition must be as obvious to Denys Turner as it is to me, as must the coyness of the 'theoretical centrism' of the assertion that he mounts in order to elide it that for Christian and Marxist alike 'there is no longer any issue in the world but one, the issue of being for or against the revolution of the capitalist world' (*ibid.*, p. 252). This is indeed 'the issue', but it is not at that level of abstraction that anything will be decided. There are plenty of people around who support 'the revolution of the capitalist world', but which revolution, and into what? This is a case of the verbalism which Alan Wall identified in the Catholic left,<sup>6</sup> and is analogous to that kind of metaphorical eclecticism which allows Terry Eagleton to identify the *anawim* with the proletariat.<sup>7</sup> Of course (some) Christians are on the side of the 'downtrodden and oppressed' but then so, on this kind of abstract plane, are some fascists. It is at the 'lower' level of politics that the admission into theory of belief may have its most dangerous consequences.<sup>8</sup> Turner accepts the point that it is not in some generalised revolutionism that correct praxis lies but rather in the less rarified levels of practical strategies and tactics, the concrete stuff of revolutionary politics, and there Marxism is supreme: despite his earlier argument that Christianity is itself a praxis Turner admits that in the event it is 'Marxism alone [that] can define the praxis of the Christ-

<sup>6</sup>Article cit., esp. pp. 513-5.

<sup>7</sup>See *Body as Language*, 1970, pp. 67-8. Cited by Wall, p. 514.

<sup>8</sup>Leading, for example, to this sort of fatalism, the other side of Turner's 'critical utopianism'. 'I believe . . . that capitalism is so developing that either the world will blow itself to smithereens, or else it will just lie down and die, or else will become, by the logic of its own historical development, socialist' (*ibid.*, p. 253)!



ian' (*ibid.*, p. 252). Turner thus retreats into some fully (i.e. 'purely') Marxist position which is motivated by a Christian commitment outside it. I am forced to the conclusion that it is no longer necessary for Marxists to eject God from history, the most progressive of the Christians have already done this for them. It is no accident that this has occurred, and this is my main point here, for a reading of the contradictions in Turner's argument reveals that he is enough of a Marxist to perceive that there is in fact no compatibility between Marxism and Christianity (no more than between 'morality' and Marxism, which Turner explicitly accepts) without a radical redefinition of one or other of the terms, or both. In the first article he redefines 'morality' out of existence, and in this, along with an idealist deformation of Marxism enforced by the pressure of Christian ideology in the text, God is banished.

At a personal level this movement is characteristic of debate between Marxists and Christian-Marxists, which generally proceed thus: the Marxist, apologising for his lack of precise knowledge of just what it is that the other believes, launches a series of more or less naive questions taken from what he remembers of the religion of his school-days—Do you believe in God? Does he intervene in history? and so on. The answers to these questions are usually perplexing, the version of Christianity offered is nothing like that which the Marxist remembers, which is well and good and does nothing to discredit it of course. But then, by a series of shifts and spirals (more indices of the incompatibility of discourses) there emerges perfect agreement between Marxist and Christian with yet some uneasy residue remaining, not the 'spiritual' gloss on the metalwork of history which the idealist 'Marxist' cherishes, nor the gestural sociality of the 'left' Christian, but this absent God beyond a history which is quite intelligible to apparently fully ('purely') materialist Christians without him. And there debate usually fizzles out, for it becomes obvious to the Marxist at least that if God is safely outside history he is doing no harm there, and in so far as belief may bring Christians into the struggle against capitalism, probably some good.<sup>9</sup> But is this the pallid, residual Christianity which is at issue here? I suspect that it is not, although it is the version which Denys Turner defends.

In Terry Eagleton's article it is not God but 'morality' that is absent, or perhaps 'partially absent', signified in the text but ultimately elusive. Eagleton accepts gladly Turner's abolition of the fact/value dichotomy and tries to materialise 'morality' by rooting it in the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production. Each new development in the productive forces is a development of the capacities of men, as Marx says in *The German Ideology* and thus for Eagleton 'the very concept of a productive force is itself a crucial nexus of the unity of "fact" and "value"'

<sup>9</sup>The crudity of this little *scenario* stems in part from the paucity of such conversations themselves. If God is beyond history he is also beyond cognition where literally anything can 'exist' and within the curved space of tautology endlessly discussed without result. The position of belief in existence beyond scientific cognition is, of course, in logic, impregnable.

(‘Marxists and Christians: Answers for Brian Wicker’, p. 465). But from here the argument becomes problematical. Eagleton, swinging in the opposite direction to Turner, rehabilitates the idealist notion of human nature (historicised and ‘periodised’ albeit) when he attributes to Marx the view that it would be ‘at the deepest level self-contradictory for a man who genuinely grasped the truth that history was blocking the development of human capacities to acquiesce in that situation, for he would in this sense be denying his own nature’ (*ibid.*, p. 468). But this is merely to re-open the fact/value rift because Eagleton’s own reference to the gentlemen from *The Financial Times* provides that there are plenty of men who thus deny their own natures and that it is possible to know the ‘facts’ and not act ‘rightly’. The only way out of this would be to define things tautologically and say that to ‘genuinely’ know is to ‘be’ a Marxist and therefore to be acting rightly *per se*. This formulation would be inadequate because it does not abolish the ‘moral’ problematic but merely collapses it back into an *a priori* ‘moral’ conception of Marxism. I have already offered in place of this the view that to know (not the ‘facts’, this is dangerously empiricist and dualist) is only possible through science which is itself a practise and thus knowledge and action are automatically one. Eagleton, however, would not be content with this and finds it necessary to take up the questions that Brian Wicker puts to Denys Turner. I think this is regrettable because it falls back into that ideological debate about ‘morality’ which it was Denys Turner’s achievement to overthrow. But Eagleton is constrained to this by the difficulty which he sees with his own attempt to moralise the productive forces. Not every development in human capacities necessarily squares with the Christian morality he is trying to materialise. Nuclear fission was, after all, a powerful development of the productive forces and developed ‘man’s’ capacity to incinerate Hiroshima.

Brian Wicker wants to know how to judge his own practise. Turner has done nothing for him except ‘juggle with words’ and what he wants is ‘some general and *commonly agreed* set of guidelines’ which will enable him to judge whether he is a ‘practising’ Christian or Marxist (‘Marxist and Christians: Questions for Denys Turner’, p. 463). These guidelines will, in Wicker’s view, have to be derived from ‘the metaphysical basis of ethics’ which Marxism refuses to take seriously, and will consist of ‘Any ethical absolute [which] touches, or claims to touch, upon a metaphysical, transhistorical nerve which Marxist dissections refuse to recognise’ (*ibid.*, p. 464). No charitable eclecticism; indeed these ethical absolutes are defined in negative relation to Marxism. Eagleton baulks at ‘metaphysical’ and swings back again towards materialism, and again it is the symptomatic reading which is telling. He attempts to construct a Marxist ‘normativeness’ (and to do him justice he admits that this is no more than a tentative exploration) which is based not on metaphysical absolute but (‘from a Marxist point of view’, significantly) on the contrast between ‘that sensuous relation to the concrete use-value of an object’ and ‘that

reciprocal abstracting of both object and the living powers of both its owner and producer which is enforced by commodity production and exchange-value' (article cit., p. 470). From this point of view torture would be wrong because a violation of the sensuous, concrete relation with another, which is 'in some sense' normative. This seems to me the best possible strategy for creating a new 'morality' and begs as many questions as it seems to solve, not the least of which being the difficulty of deciding just what the 'normative' use-value of a person would be. Eagleton points out that he is not suggesting an equivalence between 'the absolutism of the Christian prohibition' such as that against torture but merely that there is 'latent' in Marxism a 'materialist theory of morality'.

Torture is of course the old bugbear of such discussions: 'If, in a revolutionary war, a hundred comrades could be saved by information held by a captured enemy would it be justified to torture him?' and so on. I don't pretend that this isn't a 'real' question, nor that I have an answer to it, as it is put, of any sort. It is an extreme question, deliberately emotionally intensified in order to express the moral crux more fully. The similar but less dramatic case of using violence in a revolutionary situation usually passes muster with less discussion, but it seems to me that shooting policemen would be just as much a violation of the sensuous-concrete as torture although less 'deliberate' (but hardly involuntary in an automatic sense) and usually, although not necessarily I understand, less drawn out. And in the end my putative silence on that question is mirrored by that of Eagleton who essentially banishes the question, like Turner's God, from history: 'Marxism has little to say about 'morality' *directly*: it is silent because the material conditions which would make such discourse possible do not yet fully exist' (*ibid.*, p. 470).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>On the question of torture. For anyone who has actually studied revolutionary situations the question as it is put here is quite literally abstract. History rarely, never, puts such questions in this pure, philosophical form. A revolutionary situation is a complexly overdetermined historical conjuncture in which *ideology* plays not the least important part. It is not within science that men become 'aware' of the real contradictions and fight them out but, as Marx says, within ideology. All liberation movements generate and/or appropriate their own ideology which is not the same thing as Marxist science. Over a broad span of our history the revolutionary ideology may be broadly designated 'socialist ideology' and it contains many slogans of a purely ideological kind. Let us take a general abstract slogan like 'For freedom from oppression'. This could be uttered by just about anybody, Tory, Anarchist, Fascist. In any given situation science could reveal the class character of such a slogan and indicate whether, in that context, it is to be supported or not. (The same applies to a more 'realistic' slogan such as 'Nationalise the banks'.) The slogan is nonetheless ideological and historically local (indexed in this example by its 'universal' form) for in a fully Communist society 'freedom' will disappear at the same time as the lack of it, and it would then be meaningless, in the most fundamental sense of the word, to demand it. In revolutionary situations it will be the revolutionary ideology that provides the answers to 'moral' questions, consisting partly of the transference and re-activation of previous historical ideology (it would be impossible to have a revolution in this country without elements of Christianity unwittingly providing some of the stuff of the revolutionary ideology), and partly of a series of negations of the ideology and practice of the class enemy. If, for example, the oppressor (who is materially and historically constrained to be less than scrupulous about these things) tortures then it is likely that the slogan 'Down with torture' and its equivalent prohibition in revolutionary practice will have a quite practical and immediate relevance. I saw a poster recently that referred to Zimbabwe, advancing the slogan 'No more hangings'. This was not a 'moral' poster.

To end where I began, the 'absences' and conflicts in the articles of Denys Turner and Terry Eagleton (compared with the very 'present' but very idealist piece by Brian Wicker, despite its interrogative form, monovalent) are not simply accidental. They derive from the clash of discourses inherent in a debate such as this between a science and an ideology. The predetermined failure of such a projected synthesis enforces, by the nature of its own inner, contradictory logic, a distortion of position which in Turner's case deforms his Marxism and simultaneously drains his Christianity of the kind of historical validity (as praxis) which his historical Marxism would demand, and in Eagleton ensures an oscillation between materialist answers to idealist questions and the converse. If this does not provide the substantive answer, at least it indicates the nature of the project. A more fruitful unity between Marxism and Christianity will be achieved at the level of political practice. Most Marxists and some Christians find themselves in struggle against capitalism and it is in the exigencies of that struggle that they will find their deepest commitment not only to the revolution but also to each other. But such unity in practice, like all united fronts, will be an alliance founded on a *difference*, and not an identity or even a close compatibility at the level of theory.