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Lash, A MATTER OF HOPE

Arthur F. McGovern

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A Matter of Hope: A Theologian's Reflections on the Thought of Karl Marx, by **Nicholas Lash**. University of Notre Dame, 1982. Pp. 382. \$19.95.

Reviewed by ARTHUR F. MCGOVERN, University of Detroit.

What can Christian theologians learn from the thought of Karl Marx? In an introductory chapter Nicholas Lash notes that most Christian theologians in the past, if they read Marx at all, looked only for passages to criticize or condemn. In more recent years, liberation theologians in Latin America have called for a more open view on Marx and on Marxist analysis. But even liberation theologians (with the questionable exception of Jose Porfirio Miranda) have been satisfied with borrowing insights from Marx's method of social analysis and have rarely engaged in any in-depth study of Marx's own thought.

Recognizing the need to "take Marx seriously," Lash has undertaken a probing, serious study of Marx's thought to determine what in Marx could be insightful and challenging to Christian theology. Lash, a Cambridge University theologian, deals most extensively with the "early Marx" because his interest centers on the anthropological, philosophical foundations of Marx's theory of history, rather than on his economics and social analysis. Lash's reflections demonstrate not only an accurate and objective reading of Marx, but also a sound grasp of the most important modern commentators on Marx. His book is not a work one would recommend as an introduction to understanding Marx. But theologians and other readers who have some grasp of the issues and controversies related to Marx's writings, or who are willing to read Lash's study with care, will find his work highly rewarding.

Part I of Lash's book begins with an introductory chapter on the importance of taking Marx seriously, and then proceeds to a discussion of the controversy over the continuity between the "early" and "mature" Marx. When many unpublished manuscripts by Marx first came to light (in the 1930s) and became a new focal point of Marxist scholarship (in the 1950s and 60s), many scholars hailed them for the new understanding they provided of the humanistic philosophy which they believed laid the foundations for Marx's later thought. Other scholars, particularly those with Communist Party loyalties, like the French Marxist Louis Althusser, downplayed the importance of Marx's early writings. Althusser argued that a radical "epistemological break" separated Marx's later "scientific" thought from his earlier philosophical humanism. Lash sides (as I do) with those who see a basic continuity between these stages in Marx's development. This stance is important for Lash, since the early Marx's analysis of "alienation" is especially fruitful for Christian theology and its concern for redemption. The two other preliminary chapters in Part I deal with the "Meanings of Marxism" and Marx's *The German Ideology* which Lash rightfully views as the seminal expression of Marx's materialist view of history. A discussion of the "meanings of Marxism"

is especially critical to any Christian evaluation. The dominant, classical view of Marxism treats it as an inseparable body of truths (e.g. on the necessity of atheism, of a vanguard party, of the dictatorship of the proletariat) woven into one solid rope or chain. This view protects its unity (which is what Lenin intended); this same view when assumed by Christian critics of Marxism makes any appropriation of Marxism automatically suspect (which is what the Vatican document of liberation theology apparently intended.) But Lash is right in arguing that Marx's thought is not reducible to any one, "true" interpretation or set of propositions.

In the main body of his work (Part II), Lash takes up various "themes" in Marx's thought—the use of dialectical thinking to penetrate through appearances of things to their reality, the meaning of history, the interplay of Marxist theory and practice, the significance of ideology, etc. Rather than commenting on each briefly, I would prefer to discuss at greater length what I found most insightful in Lash's study—his discussion of Marx's "materialism" and of "Christian materialism." "Materialism" has many meanings: cultural materialism (the pursuit of money and material possessions), epistemological materialism (which includes different types of realism), historical materialism (which stresses the influence of economic structures in history), and metaphysical or philosophical materialism (which rules out all but matter as the basic "stuff" of the universe). Lash contends, correctly in my opinion, that Marx was arguing primarily for historical materialism, which does not presuppose or entail a monistic, metaphysical materialism.

But does not Marx's atheism imply philosophical materialism? Lash has an insightful response to this question. Marx's atheism was rooted in a conviction that humans, not God, should control their own actions and destiny. If God causes and controls history, humans do not. This "God-or-man" dichotomy Marx based on his reading of Hegel, whom Marx took to be representative of Christianity. Hegel spoke of history as if it were the product of "Mind" or God, with human initiatives only used by this Mind or God to fulfill its own purposes. Hence, from Marx's perspective one must do away with God if humans are to be the true subject of their own history. To conclude, as Lash does, that Marx "was not a materialist" carries the argument too far, since Marx in *The Holy Family* and in approving Engels' later philosophic works seems clearly to have accepted materialism. However the more modest but very important conclusion, that Marx's historical materialism does not *entail* philosophical materialism, can be sustained and has been asserted by many Marxist scholars.

The "God-versus-humans" dichotomy assumed by Marx has significant implications for Christianity, as Lash notes in his chapter on Christian materialism. Some Christians have viewed God as acting separately from human actions. But one can also be a Christian and believe that God acts only in and through nature

and human history; hence that God is not an alternate cause to human actions. Moreover, if the central idea of historical materialism is the recognition of the influence of economic conditions on history and on our thinking, then a Christian "materialism" is indeed feasible. It is also quite consistent with Christianity to consider the transformation of conditions which impede human growth as essential to the process of redemption, which too often has been viewed as affecting only the consciousness of individuals.

While Lash acknowledges the fruitfulness of Marx's historical method of analysis, he joins with many other critics in challenging its reductionistic tendencies and its claim to be "scientific." Historical conditions do set limits on what can be changed, but Marxist efforts to prove economic factors to be even "ultimately determinative" do not succeed. The metaphor "reflection," to describe the relation of superstructure to economic base, likewise underestimates the relative autonomy of art, literature and religion. By reducing real knowledge to scientific knowledge, Marxists fail to recognize a whole range of knowledge expressed in symbols as well as through ordinary experience, which is a prerequisite for scientific knowledge. In particular, Marx and Marxists have failed to investigate adequately the true nature of religion which, while it may "project" human needs and aspirations (as Marxists claim), also attempt to express an experience of mystery *discovered* in reality.

In the last chapters of the book, Lash takes up the question of the future. Once conditions are present which allow social change to occur, Christians should be involved. Redemption touches the whole of human life. But Marx's own vision of the future was flawed, not so much by failures in his predictions about the triumph of socialism as by his over-optimism regarding human nature. He failed to recognize limits, most especially in respect to moral transformation that does not follow automatically upon economic changes. Christians can also fail by substituting an optimistic myth of human progress, or by rationalizing sufferings of the past and present in terms of God's providence. The true Christian vision, Lash concludes, is a "matter of hope" for humanity, built upon a recognition of limits but also upon the unity of human ideals with reality, a unity embodied in the person of Jesus.

Many of the issues discussed by Lash will be already familiar to Marxist scholars. But Lash's intention was not to contribute to Marxist scholarship as such but rather to challenge theologians to confront Marx seriously. On this score, he succeeds admirably.