

Althusser and Theology

Religion, Politics and Philosophy

Edited by

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BRILL

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Althusser's Religious Revolution

Roland Boer

In 'A Matter of Fact', written in 1948, Althusser attempts to develop a theory of the revolution of religious life. The essay appeared at an important juncture of his life, for he was still a member of the Roman Catholic Church, but had recently joined the Communist Party of France. The tensions of that conjunction are clear, but I am interested in his attempt to extend, by analogy, the Marxist theory of social revolution into a revolution of personal spiritual life. In this effort, the context is the apparent untranscendable horizon of the Roman Catholic Church. So Althusser begins by outlining the condition of an ailing, out-of-date, and reactionary church. He then focuses on the conditions for wider social revolution, with which progressive members among the faithful must join in a politics of alliance. Finally, he attempts – all too briefly – to outline what a personal religious revolution might be. Instead of criticising him for breaking with Marxist orthodoxy, the more interesting question is how Althusser finds himself part of the long tradition of revolutionary Christianity.

Is it possible that Althusser was for a time a theologian of liberation, indeed that he may be counted among those who form part of the tradition of revolutionary Christianity? His distinct contribution – albeit not without some problems – is to argue that a revolution in personal religious life is analogous to a socialist revolution. In order to explore this proposal, I exegete carefully Althusser's early text written in 1948, 'A Matter of Fact'. Here we find a young man simultaneously in the Roman Catholic Church and the French Communist Party.¹ While he had grown up in the former and would soon leave it, he had only recently joined the party. So the argument of 'A Matter of Fact' seeks to keep the two together, if only for a brief time. It was originally published in February 1949 as the lead article in the tenth *cahier* of the *Jeunesse de l'Église*, a complex group that sought renewal in the French Roman Catholic Church in the immediate post-war era. The theme of that issue was 'l'Évangile captif', which sought to ask the question: Has the Good News been announced to the men of our day? Althusser reiterates the theme throughout the article, at times in the form of the 'Word', a word that is simultaneously the spoken word of

1 For biographical detail, see Boutang 1992, 2 Vols.

the Gospel, the message it contains, and Jesus himself. As is already characteristic of Althusser's thought, his essay contains arresting proposals coupled with significant limitations. In what follows, I note the latter as I work carefully through his text, but ultimately I am interested in the way he seeks to bring a viable and radical form of religion – as far as he understood it – into a Marxist framework.²

1 Trapped in the Past

Less time may be spent on Althusser's diagnosis – the medical analogy is his – of the condition of the Roman Catholic Church.³ For Althusser, this sick church is a relic of a world that has passed, yet it continues to ground itself in this world. More specifically, it is caught in a time warp: it holds to a feudal ideological system in the context of a tottering capitalism. How can it manage to survive in such a situation? He offers three interrelated levels of analysis: it rests upon a hybrid and out-dated socio-economic base;⁴ its ideology is trapped in the distant past; its politics are overwhelmingly reactionary. His analysis here is still within a more orthodox Marxist framework, seeking to find the cause and origin of his church's malaise in its material and ideological conditions. (Later, of course, he would develop his argument for the semi-autonomy of each level or zone, in which the last instance of the economic never comes).⁵

In a little more detail: the Roman Catholic Church's social and economic situation is mixed, with some still living in semi-feudal structures or at least limited capitalist industrialisation. His purview includes only those parts of the world that are majority Roman Catholic, such as South America, Canada, Ireland, Spain, Southern Italy and Central Europe. But why is Canada included in such a list? Is it perhaps because of Quebec, a significant pocket of Francophone Roman Catholicism in an otherwise largely Protestant country? Or is it due to Althusser's characteristic rush during his manic periods, when the checking of facts fell victim to the theoretical push? We will never know, for

2 Critical work on Althusser's earlier theological writings is alarmingly thin. Apart from Breton's brief piece and my earlier study, nothing else has appeared as yet. Breton 1997, pp. 155–66; Boer 2007, pp. 107–62.

3 Although he writes of 'the church', his focus is clearly the Roman Catholic Church, especially in France.

4 Althusser does not raise the possibility that since the church was established before capitalism, it cannot be entirely absorbed by it – or indeed that it will outlive capitalism.

5 Althusser 2010, p. 113.

he gives no reasons for such an inclusion. Yet these semi-feudal structures sit cheek by jowl with the parts of the world that have undergone a thorough bourgeois revolution and where the bourgeoisie's initial opposition to the church has settled into a comfortable relation with the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, in France, Italy, Belgium, and the United States this church has made its peace with bourgeois capitalism. The upshot is that this church as a whole functions within a mixed infrastructure, a feudal-capitalist hybrid that is both past and passing. With that note – that capitalism itself is crumbling – one cannot help being struck by an undercurrent of optimism in the way Althusser frames his argument. The argument as a whole may seem to cast a pessimistic note, yet a little beneath the surface a deeper optimism emerges. His hopefulness may be read as a signal of the time of writing – immediately after the devastation of the Second World War. At that moment, the USSR under Stalin had defeated fascist Germany, socialist revolutions had swept through Eastern Europe, anti-colonial struggles were gaining momentum, and the Chinese revolution was on the verge of success. Althusser had every reason for this quiet optimism.

The Roman Catholic Church's social and economic base may have been an increasingly outmoded hybrid, but its ideological situation was even more backward. This theology is decidedly feudal, with its Augustinian and Thomistic forms that rely upon Platonic and Aristotelian foundations. These positions may be adjusted opportunistically from time to time in the face of the more glaring challenges, but they are never questioned. But Althusser's point is not merely that a system first developed in the thirteenth century is out-dated, but also that it is theologically suspect: it has replaced a God who addresses human beings with a mere concept. God has become an abstraction that leaves people cold.

All the same, abstractions and ideological systems cannot sustain themselves in thin air. So now we come back to a materialist argument that is simultaneously theological. Thus, Thomistic theology, mediated through Augustine, could survive because of the vestiges of feudalism that are embodied not only in the social and economic situations of some places on the globe, but above all in this church. Althusser is both astounded and fully aware that the Roman Catholic Church is able to keep its professionals and many members cocooned in an institution where their way of life and set of assumptions continue to have validity for them. Concepts such as natural law and Thomistic theoretical hierarchies justify, protect and foster an institution that coddles them from the cradle to the grave. As so often happens with such an institution, its members have long forgotten the reason they are part of the church (if ever they knew). Faith in God has been replaced by faith in the institution itself, which must be

maintained at all costs: 'the modern Church is no longer at home in our times, and the vast majority of the faithful are in the Church for reasons that are not really of the Church'.⁶

This situation, with a hybrid, out-dated base and a conservative ideology, leads the church to an overwhelmingly reactionary political position. Althusser cites the examples of explicit arrangements with fascist governments – Italy, Spain and Vichy France – as well as the tacit agreement with the Nazis in Germany. In the immediate hindsight of the late 1940s, these agreements are the most obvious. But he also mentions the papal encyclicals that formed Roman Catholic 'Social Teaching'.⁷ Even before the spate of collegial encyclicals from the Second Vatican Council,⁸ it was clear to Althusser that the encyclicals were craven accommodations to medieval corporatism and liberal reformism. Apart from mild reprimands of the 'excesses' and 'abuses' of economic exploitation, they firmly reject any form of socialism and liberation movements. In sum, the Roman Catholic Church maintains 'a deep, compromising commitment to world-wide reaction, and is struggling alongside international capitalism against the forces of the working class and the advent of socialism'.⁹ No wonder, then, that this church is no longer able to preach the 'good news' to people of 'our time'.

2 Sources of Hope

Despite the grim assessment of his beloved church, beneath Althusser's essay runs a deep current of hope. He still believes that this church may well be able to turn itself around and speak the good news once more. His proposed solution is a bravura attempt to connect socialist revolution with spiritual transformation, to link the collective with the personal. The church may soon face the

6 Althusser 1997a, p. 186.

7 At the time of Althusser's writing, only *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) had appeared, but it is already clear that they responded to periods of social unrest and the appeal of socialism.

8 Althusser would later see *Mater et Magistra* (1961), *Pacem in Terris* (1963), and the conciliar encyclicals *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), *Laborem Exercens* (1981) and *Solicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987). After his death and in the context of the destruction of communist governments in Eastern Europe, there appeared *Centesimus Annus* (1991), *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) and *Deus Caritas Est* (2005). See further Boer 2014, pp. 93–120.

9 Althusser 1997a, p. 191.

objective realities of history, as socialist revolution sweeps even into France. In this wider context, the Roman Catholic Church cannot avoid being transformed – or so Althusser hopes. Concomitant with that social and institution upheaval, he proposes a personal spiritual revolution in which one may be able to reappropriate an authentic religious life. Althusser juxtaposes the two forms of revolution with one another, seeking by verbal connection to place them within the same process. Yet it soon becomes clear that he is really proposing an analogy between social and spiritual revolution. Obviously, such an analogy faces a number of problems, which I broach in a moment, but it may also be read as an effort to extend Marxist approaches to revolution so that they include the religious and the spiritual.

2.1 *From Social Revolution ...*

‘The social liberation of the church’ – this subtitle of the first part of Althusser’s proposed solution is a little misleading. What he really proposes is a socialist revolution in which the church is drawn into the larger dynamics of transformation. And the agents of such revolution should come from the working-class movement, with whom the faithful of the church should join as part of a politics of alliance. However, Althusser already foreshadows this argument at an earlier moment in his essay, where he writes:

We have to trace matters back to these concrete structures in order to understand the tenacity of obsolete concepts in religious ideology. Moreover, we have to expose these structures in order to help bring them to their appointed end, and to help the men who are brought up in them overcome them and become contemporary with their times.¹⁰

Initially, an echo of Marx’s fourth thesis on Feuerbach seems to bounce between the words of this passage.¹¹ For Marx, Feuerbach was still too con-

¹⁰ Althusser 1997a, p. 189.

¹¹ ‘Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-estrangement [*der religiösen Selbstentfremdung*], of the duplication of the world into a religious world and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular [*weltliche*] basis. But that the secular [*weltliche*] basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must, therefore, itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionised in practice. Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be destroyed in theory and in practice’ (Marx 1976, p. 4; Marx 1973, p. 6).

cerned with religion, which lifts itself up from its secular basis and gains an independent existence in the heavens. In response, what is needed is an analysis of the causes of this alienated religious situation, and these causes may be found in the strife-ridden contradictions of the worldly basis of religion. 'The latter must', writes Marx, 'itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionised in practice'. Is this not Althusser's approach, one that he draws from Marx? Let us assume an affirmative answer to this question for a few moments, before drawing out a number of tensions with Marx's canonical approach.

At one level, the whole tenor of Althusser's argument has been moving towards 'the real means required for the Church's social emancipation'.¹² Any substantial liberation must take place at an infrastructural level, at the hands of the workers' movement. At the historical conjunction in which he writes, this movement is – he observes – an objective force, opposed to capitalism and the vestiges of feudalism. Only in this way is real transformation possible; thus, the best option for anyone who cares about the church is to join this movement. Not only is Althusser clearly swayed by the optimism that comes from the sense that 'history is on our side', but he also proposes what may be called a politics of alliance. Progressive Christians should join the socialist movement, not for expedient or strategic reasons, but for the simple reason that they share the same political assumptions: 'the struggle for the social emancipation of the Church is inseparable from the proletariat's present struggle for human emancipation'.¹³ This argument is by no means new, although Althusser seems to feel that it is. At this point, we come across the first of a series of lapses in historical awareness. If he had cast a glance at the history of the socialist movement, Althusser would have found that Marx and Engels had urged that religious commitment is not a bar to membership of the First International.¹⁴ Further, this approach to religion was consolidated in the freedom of conscience clause in the platform of the Second International. Indeed, they argued that even a priest may join the socialist movement.¹⁵ As long as a believer agrees to the party

12 Althusser 1997a, p. 193.

13 Althusser 1997a, p. 194.

14 Marx and Engels faced pressure, on one side, from the anarchists who wanted to make atheism part of the party platform, and, on the other, from opponents who stated that atheism was compulsory in the First International. Their response was to insist that atheism is not compulsory for party membership (Marx 1985, pp. 207–11; Engels 1986, pp. 607–8; Engels 1988, pp. 28–9).

15 The *Erfurt Programme* of 1891 states: 'Declaration that religion is a private matter [*Erklärung der Religion zur Privatsache*]' (SPD 1891a; SPD 1891b).

platform, sharing the aims of the working-class movement, then he or she is welcome to join. In fact, many had been doing so, especially during the period of the Second International.

Thus far, I have assumed for the sake of analysis that Althusser follows Marx's approach to social revolution, according to which the focus must be on analysing and transforming the base for any substantial results. However, soon enough Althusser begins to move beyond – or rather, expand – Marx. The first hint is in his curious observation that the economic, social and even familial structures, which need to be revolutionised in practice, belong 'to worlds that our period has consigned irrevocably to the past'.¹⁶ Why propose a social revolution if history has consigned such structures to the past? Or rather, why revolution when evolution – the unfolding of history – would be sufficient? All one needs is a little more patience and the whole edifice will crumble into the dust of ages already gone. On this matter at least, Althusser is able to escape the tension he has created, for he has already shown that the Roman Catholic Church has a peculiar tenacity in terms of both its base and superstructure. Yet his argument does raise the curious situation of a call for social revolution directed at an obsolete institution.

This hint of a tension with Marx's own approach becomes a full-blooded difference on the question of the continued validity of religion. Marx's main argument was that religion itself would dissipate when the alienating social and economic causes that led to religion had been revolutionised – hence the absence of any need for a direct opposition to religion, since religion is a secondary phenomenon. By contrast, Althusser seeks to hold on to the possibility that religion too may be transformed in a revolutionary process. Yet he develops that possibility not through any direct confrontation with Marx, but through subtle modifications of what seem initially to be conventional Marxist statements. Let me focus on two such statements. The first reads: 'The "theoretical reduction" of the present religious malaise has led us to identify religious alienation as its true origin. We need, then, to consider the means that can operate a practical "reduction" of that origin by destroying it so as to transform it into its truth'.¹⁷ Does this not read like a solid Marxist approach? Religious alienation requires a practical 'reduction' to its social and economic causes, so as to bring about both its destruction and its transformation (*Aufhebung*) into 'its truth'. But what is its truth? For Marx, truth entails a socialist revolution so that a new mode of production may be constructed in which alienation is

16 Althusser 1997a, p. 189.

17 Althusser 1997a, p. 193.

no longer a reality. Given that alienation is the cause of religion, religion itself will disappear. For Althusser, the truth sought is quite different, for it is nothing less than the recovery of religious truth and authentic commitment. This argument will appear shortly, but already a signal appears with the crucial phrase, 'religious alienation as its true origin'. The replacement of 'economic alienation' with 'religious alienation' alters the whole meaning of the passage I quoted above. This shift becomes clearer a few sentences later, where Althusser writes: 'the reduction of collective religious alienation presupposes this political and social struggle as the condition without which no emancipation, not even religious emancipation, is conceivable'.¹⁸ On this occasion, the simple insertion of the phrase 'not even religious emancipation' changes the whole sense of the sentence. Without that phrase, Althusser is in conventional Marxist territory; with it, emancipation is no longer emancipation from religion (among many other features), but emancipation of religion. He does not wish to abolish the church, but to save it.

These subtle shifts in Marxist approaches to religion and revolution set the scene for the final section of Althusser's essay – 'The Reconquest of Religious Life'. I turn to that section in a moment, but first I would like to note another dimension of the shifts I have identified. Here we find a prophetic anticipation of Althusser's own subsequent movement out of the church and away from his faith, or at least a movement from one faith to another. For this moment of prophecy, we need to backtrack a little in the essay, to the earlier discussion of philosophy and truth. Althusser asks: how does one find truth? The Roman Catholic Church may insist that it can appropriate truth by means of the contemplation of philosophy, but it is faced with the reality that truth is no longer found in such a fashion. Instead, the workers' movement has shown that truth is to be appropriated through action: 'our time has seen', writes Althusser, 'the advent of a new form of human existence in which humanity's appropriation of the truth ceases to be carried out in philosophical form, that is, in the form of contemplation or reflection, in order to be carried out in the form of real activity'.¹⁹ The upshot is that philosophy becomes a collection of illusions, which fade once we have reclaimed integrated human action. Now Althusser is on slippery ground, which will eventually take him away from the church: the illusion is that one may find truth through contemplation, which is precisely how the church approaches truth. Or does he really mean that one may find *faith* through contemplation? The translation is easily made;

18 Althusser 1997a, p. 194.

19 Althusser 1997a, p. 189.

indeed, it seems to me that Althusser is speaking as much about faith as he is about truth. In doing so, he entertains the possibility that faith itself is now open to question, precisely in the way that Marx argued for the abolition of philosophy in the face of action, which repossesses philosophy and turns it into something qualitatively different. Is Althusser laying the ground for a transition from one philosophy to another, from one faith to another? It seems so, particularly since he speaks of the form of philosophy rather than philosophy as such. Philosophy as contemplation (idealism) ceases to have validity, while philosophy as action (materialism) marks its distinct presence in his work. The transition from religious faith to Marxist faith – not without significant and contradictory traces of his earlier faith – would come later, signalled above all by the long ‘Letter to Jean Lacroix’.²⁰ However, since I have written on that dimension of these early writings elsewhere, and since my focus here is on Althusser’s embryonic theology of liberation, I turn now to the final section of his essay.

2.2 *To Spiritual Revolution*

In the relatively few lines of this final section, Althusser outlines what is needed to reclaim the authentic spiritual life of the church. As I mentioned earlier, the revolution in question now focuses on personal spiritual life, in contrast to the distinctly political revolution he proposes in the previous section. Yet this spiritual life takes place with the church, so he cannot avoid speaking of the latter as well. In this respect, he hovers between reform and what may be called a ‘foco theory’ of revolution (with debts to the Cuban Revolution). Althusser is not always clear whether he is advocating reform per se of the church or whether he is able to keep his reform-oriented proposals under the rubric of revolution.

Earlier in his text, Althusser offers some small hints – forerunners perhaps – of what is to come. He speaks of a ‘few active but isolated small groups’, even of the ‘most open-minded of the priests or the faithful’ who oppose the church’s passion for reactionary politics.²¹ These people return in the final proposal, now as ‘small groups of activists’ who are ‘relatively small and terribly isolated’ in the immensity of the Roman Catholic Church.²² Althusser does not shirk the reality that such groups exist on the margins, as ‘pockets of humanity’ that work hard at reducing the alienation of capitalism. With this phrase, it seems that

²⁰ Althusser 1997a, pp. 197–230.

²¹ Althusser 1997a, pp. 191, 192.

²² Althusser 1997a, p. 195.

Althusser is advocating a *foco* (*foquismo*) theory of revolution. This approach assumes that the dominant system is unable to be all-pervasive, that pockets exist in which one may create a new and unalienated life. If such enclaves are able to expand, providing models for others to follow and to which they will be attracted, then it may be possible to bring about a full-scale revolution. One example is the Cuban Revolution, with its small revolutionary groups in the jungle-covered mountains that eventually managed to take over the whole country.²³ Yet the Cuban Revolution itself drew from the more significant example of the Chinese Revolution, which first established enclaves in Ruijin and then – after the Long March – in Yan'an, only to succeed through struggle at winning the revolution many years later.²⁴

The problem is that the pockets in Althusser's church are stricken with self-doubt. Their efforts at providing an alternative model for the Christian life, full of self-criticism, meets with silence and disinterest from those they seek to persuade. They seem to have little hope of reforming the collective power of this church. For Althusser, the problem is that the objective conditions for a recovery of authentic religious life in the church do not yet exist. The social conditions for revolution, in which the church may be swept up, do exist, but not the spiritual conditions. However, between the lines of Althusser's text, another reason emerges. He hints at this reason with his comment that the groups in question fear that they may induce the church 'to threaten or repudiate them'.²⁵ In other words, they are attempting to transform the church by example, by exhibiting a way of living the religious life that will show others what is possible. They are certainly not threatening to tear down the fabric of the church and construct a new church from the ruins of the old. This approach is clearly an option for reform from within, although it also reveals the internal logic of the claim to be 'catholic', to incorporate the whole of Christianity within this particular institution. If one assumes that there is no salvation outside the church, then one's only option is reform rather than revolution.

At this point, the historical thinness of Althusser's essay emerges once again. A wider view of the history of Christianity would have revealed to him a perpetual pattern of stagnation and efforts at reform, in the name of a return to the original form of Christianity (as it was constructed by the various groups attempting reform). From the monastic movement of the fourth century, through the Beguines and Beghards of the twelfth century, to the Reformation

23 Guevara 1998.

24 Snow 1994.

25 Althusser 1997a, p. 195.

itself, each set out to reform an otiose institution. Some succeeded in reforming the church from within, as the many monastic orders of the Middle Ages illustrate; some were eventually closed down, as with the Beguines; and some found themselves leading a new movement and new church, as we find with the Reformation. Others, however, challenged the very structure of the church and sought revolutionary overthrow – Thomas Münzer and the Peasants provide the most well-known example, but many other movements appear in the history of Christianity.²⁶ At this moment, Althusser does not seem to suggest such an approach, preferring a transformation from within. Indeed, he unwittingly draws closer to the Reformation itself, seeming to express a suppressed longing that the Reformation had succeeded in France and that the Huguenots had not been crushed so brutally.²⁷ In the name of an authentic religious life, the Reformers set out to transform the church from within, believing it had lost its way. Their movement had two clear consequences, neither of which they initially intended. The first was to reform the Roman Catholic Church itself, via a Counter-Reformation that set itself, paradoxically, against the Reformers; the second was to establish a new institution, or rather, a series of institutions.

I make this connection with the Reformation, since Althusser seems to wish for both a transformation from within and for a revolutionary destruction of the church, followed by a thorough rebuilding. But the connection is formal only, for Althusser goes much further. Just when we may begin to suspect that he is a reformer at heart, he turns around and offers a revolutionary approach. Since the Roman Catholic Church is unable to engage in the necessary task of transformation itself, due to the structures that will not tolerate any challenge, he states: 'It is necessary, then, to shatter these structures and struggle against the forces protecting them'.²⁸ But what, precisely, does this revolutionary shattering mean? For Althusser, the overthrow and reconstitution of his church – which may well be brought about through a wider social revolution – is but the condition for a transformation of personal religious life. Here is the real revolution. In order to indicate what he means by a spiritual revolution, Althusser deploys the same language used earlier for speaking of social revolution: it

26 See especially the neglected but important study of Kautsky 1976a; Kautsky 1976b; Kautsky and Lafargue 1977. Only part of this work has been translated into English (see Kautsky 1897).

27 Antonio Gramsci is explicit concerning this wish for a successful Reformation in Italy, pointing out that Italy was the worse for not undergoing such a thoroughgoing transformation of all levels of society. See Gramsci 1996, pp. 142, 213, 243–4; Boer 2007, pp. 255–73.

28 Althusser 1997a, p. 195.

requires a 'reduction' of religious alienation so that one may reconquer religious life. Crucially, he does not mean a reduction to the social and economic causes of religious alienation – note that he uses quotation marks for this type of 'reduction', since it is analogous to but not the same as the reduction of social and collective alienation. Instead, he seeks to shift this conventional Marxist approach to revolution to personal religious life. Thus, a reduction of religious alienation entails systematic criticism and even destruction of all that an individual believer has come to assume is constitutive of the religious life. The list of items to be so destroyed is intriguing: the conceptual universe of faith, theology and the moral system; then the *theory* of the family, of education, of Catholic action, of the parish and so on. All of these operate at the level of beliefs and theory, of ideas and thereby of ideology. Althusser implicitly admits that religious life is different from collective social life. It belongs to realm of ideology, of the superstructure (given that Althusser assumes the Marxist metaphor of base and superstructure in this essay).

He seeks, then, a religious revolution at the personal level, by analogy with the collective dimension of social revolution. As with the latter, destruction is but the first step, for construction of the new must follow. Yet all he can offer here is that every form of human existence – he writes of conduct, living and being – that is now alienated must be reconstructed 'in the truth'. As to what that truth might be (he uses variations on the word 'truth' four times in one sentence),²⁹ he can say only that is to be found in the 'revelation of their origins'. Are these Christian origins, as one reform movement after another has claimed in the history of the church? Or are they the events and facts that are to 'freely confront one another', with the merest allusion to the objective conditions of social revolution he has discussed earlier? Althusser is quite vague at this point, caught perhaps in the internal dynamics of the personal religious life. Or perhaps he has realised that he is proposing a reconstitution – now at an authentic level – of all the ideological features I mentioned earlier, features of the religious life constituted by the church.

Yet this moment of vagueness does not prevent Althusser from closing his essay with a reassertion of his analogy. He calls for both a politics of alliance between progressive believers and the forces of the proletariat in a social revolution, and for a transformation of the religious life of the individual believer. Once again, an unexpected Althusser emerges in the final sentence:

29 'It truly leads, when one lets events and facts freely confront one another and produce their own truth, to the revelation of their origins and the production of that truth, to the constitution of new, concrete modes of behaviour – familial, moral, educational, etc. – that are the truth of the alienated modes' (Althusser 1997a, p. 194).

‘The Church will give thanks to those who, through struggle and in struggle, are once again discovering that the Word was born among men and dwelt among them – and who are already preparing a humane place for it amongst men.’³⁰

3 Conclusion

The core of Althusser’s argument is an effort to develop an analogy – filled with quiet hope – between social revolution and religious revolution, by means of the model of ‘reduction’, destruction and creation of a new mode of religious life. Such an argument obviously reveals his dual position at the time of writing, still in the Roman Catholic Church and yet a new member of the French Communist Party. The tensions and weaker points are thereby indications of the struggle involved in holding together the two sides of his life and thought at the time – Marxism and religious commitment. But I prefer to close by focusing on another matter, namely, the insight contained in two phrases. Althusser writes: ‘We cannot affirm a priori that religion is reactionary’; and again, ‘If religion is not, *a priori*, a form of alienation.’³¹ These express the core of a position that remains underdeveloped in his argument. The analogy between social and religious revolution is possible precisely because religion itself – he speaks of Christianity – may also be a revolutionary force. Against the weight of much of the Marxist tradition, he asserts that religion may be progressive, that it may offer an unalienated life. I for one would have liked Althusser to show greater awareness of the long tradition of revolutionary Christianity, on both its theological and Marxist sides, where this option has been pursued in many different ways.³² Even without such awareness, he does reveal a moment in this essay that he too sees himself as part of that tradition.

30 Althusser 1997a, p. 195.

31 Althusser 1997a, pp. 190, 194–5.

32 On the Marxist side, he would have found it in the work of Engels, Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, and a good number of other Marxists. Engels 1990, pp. 445–69; Kautsky 1897; Kautsky 1976a; Kautsky 1976b; Kautsky and Lafargue 1977; Kautsky 2007; Luxemburg 1970, pp. 131–52.