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The Stone that the Builders Rejected: Work, Empire, and the Two Faces of the Bible

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the liberationist vision of Sandford's "Luxury Communist Jesus," the reactionary Jesus of Myles' "Opiate of Christ" and the imperialist chronologies of Wan's "Reflections on Empire" in relation to broader questions concerning the ambiguities of scriptural hermeneutics and the complex relationship of Christianity to capitalism.

Keywords

Christianity, capitalism, Protestant work ethic, Marxism

At the heart of these papers' engagements with the Bible is the question of Christianity's status as the "special religion of capital" (Marx 1863). The history of Christianity is the history of biblical interpretation; it is also the history of the emergence of Christian imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism. The biblical texts have proved to be, like the figure of Christ himself, both stumbling block and cornerstone to the mixed and multiple histories of Christianity. As Ernst Bloch says, "there is something very two-faced" about the Bible; "something that is often a scandal to the poor and not always a folly to the rich" (Bloch 2009, 14). Something of the contested nature of the texts themselves and the Christianities which lay claim to them is visible in each of the papers gathered together here.

Michael J. Sandford's paper belongs in the venerable tradition of challenging Protestant Christianity (specifically, in this case, the work ethic

which emerges from the history of Protestant Christianity) by holding it to its own standards—fidelity to scripture—and finding it wanting. The Jesus of the Protestant work ethic, Sandford argues, is so far removed from the Jesus of the Bible that "the historic and continuing connection between Protestantism and the work ethic is nothing less than astonishing." I want to explore this astonishment a little.

The Protestant work ethic emerges concurrently with capitalism. It is associated (as Weber discusses) with the doctrine of predestination, which rejects the notion that our good works can save us and yet also—by its sharp distinction between the visible and invisible church, by its privatization of faith—leaves its adherents with no way to know whether they are predestined to salvation other than their outward behaviour. This logic is newly visible in the late stage of capitalism we currently inhabit, in which "the relationship between a worker's contribution and his or her reward are more difficult to measure," such that 'employers focus on measuring what they can, increasingly resorting to proximate measures' (Weeks 2011, 70–71). We work long hours and dress professionally not because these things create surplus value, any more than thrift could save the early Calvinists, but because they make us *seem like the sort of people* who create value. But this movement from the outward, visible, and social determination of salvation to an inward, invisible and private notion of faith belongs with broader social and economic shifts; it is part of "the 'enclosure' not only of communal lands but also of social relations" (Federici 2009, 9). The opposite of luxury communism is a society made up of hard-working families;[1] and so to Sandford's enumeration of Jesus' celebration of worklessness, irresponsibility and indulgence we might add his promise to turn men against their fathers and daughters against their mothers (Mt 10: 35); his refusal to allow prospective disciples to bury their dead parents or say goodbye to their families; and even his claim, in Matthew 21: 31, that "tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you"—for what do tax collectors and prostitutes have in common if not their propensity to separate hard working families from their money?

But the relationship between the Protestant work ethic and the enclosure of the commons also raises the question of the relationship between Jesus' luxurious lifestyle and the community in which it emerges. Sandford

1. While this is currently in flux, the popularity of the 'hard working family' in contemporary political discourse indicates that it remains in many ways the exemplary form of the particular investment in private property on which capitalism relies: without compulsory heterosexuality and reproductive futurity, where is the incentive to stick at a job, to buy a house, to invest in the existing order of things?

acknowledges a dual possibility here:

> one could either emphasise the importance of [Jesus' women benefactors] for making the ministry of Jesus and his disciples economically plausible, or, more cynically, one could speak of Jesus and his disciples' parasitical dependence on female labour. Either way, it is clear across the synoptic gospels that Jesus and his disciples avoided working for money, seeing it fit to depend on benefactors instead for the provision of their material needs.
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> Sandford, this issue, 252.

Yet this distinction is crucial to the question of whether or not Jesus might be counted as a luxury communist, just as the distinction between "public affluence" and "private luxury" has been central within recent discussions of luxury communism (mcm_cmc 2015). There is nothing radical about luxury as such, nothing revolutionary about male dependence on the labour of women; philanthropic giving may well create some small space for worklessness within a broader economy but a truly communist luxury would be one which we forge for ourselves, together. Mary may have chosen a better part than Martha, but there is still work to be done, dinner to be made, and dishes to be washed. Is the "accusing" question directed at Jesus because of his disrespectable rejection of the Protestant work ethic or because, without his labour, there is simply no one left in his family to "enact the gendered role of 'supplier of resources'?" Was the option of a life of luxurious indolence available also to Jesus' mother, brothers and sisters? These questions remain at least partially in the background in Sandford's piece, which is perhaps a little too Protestant in its focus on Jesus' rejection of work as a model for individuals rather than as the product of the communal creation of time for rest and goods for enjoyment.

The Protestant work ethic was made possible by the separation between an individual's status before God and their participation in the church community. A similar dynamic is at play today, as the rise of precarious work goes hand in hand with "new forms of individualization through employment...which are ever less capable, if at all, of being organized through traditional institutions of representations of interest" (Lorey 2015, 31). Can the Jesus who broke the collective rest of the Sabbath to do the work of healing (arguing that he was authorised to do so by his likeness to the always-working God he calls Father) really offer us a model by which we might, together, enter the Sabbath rest that the letter to the Hebrews holds out as the promise of Christian community?

Robert Myles' paper suggests not, and raises two further questions: *which* Jesus are we talking about when we talk about the Jesus of the Bible;

and *why* might we want to appeal to Jesus as the earliest proponent of luxury communism? Beneath these questions lie others emerging from Marx's work which (as Alberto Toscano argues) "asks what the conditions of production of religious representations are, in order to then ask how these conditions themselves might be transformed" (Toscano nd.). What material conditions give rise to different narratives of Jesus, and then in turn to different readings of those narratives? What different context might we infer or appeal to in reading John's different depiction of the figure of Jesus than that found in the Synoptic gospels? What might we say about the context in which, as Myles discusses, the trope of "subversion" comes into play in ways which are ultimately in service of "loyalty and obedience to the biblical text"?

Perhaps the appeal to a subversive Jesus in service of a conservative biblical hermeneutics of fidelity to the founding text of Christianity makes sense within a context in which, as Sara Ahmed describes, "the hegemonic position is that liberal multiculturalism is the hegemony"; in which it is possible to repackage very old and very conservative tropes of racism, sexism and homophobia as edgy and subversive jabs at the supposedly ruling consensus of political correctness; in which "racism can be embraced as a form of free speech" precisely insofar as it has come to be understood as "a minority position which has to be defended against the multicultural hegemony" (Ahmed 2008). Which empire, precisely, might the contemporary expositors of a subversive Jesus be positioning themselves against? Given the increasing centrality of the perceived threat to the West's 'Christian heritage' within far-right, Islamophobic movements,[2] along with the burgeoning myth of Christian marginalisation and persecution in the West (itself very much a part of the contemporary belief in 'political correctness gone mad' which Ahmed discusses) Myles' question—What lies behind the New Testament scholars' yearning for the text to be subversive?"—raises broader issues of the role of biblical scholars within these Western and Christian narratives. As Myles says, "the heightening of power and authority in Jesus is a classic reactionary move: Rome's problem is that it does not have a tight enough grip on the world, but Jesus' authority stretches to the furthest reaches of the universe." What is interesting in the assertion of John's Jesus as a subversive

2. See, for example, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Hans Brun, 'A Neo-Nationalist Network: The English Defence League and Europe's Counter-Jihad Movement' (a 2013 ISCR report, http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ICSR-ECJM-Report_Online.pdf), which discusses the shift within the discourse of the European far-right away from the traditional language of fascism and towards the need to defending European from the threat posed by an intolerant Islam).

figure is precisely the contradiction at work in this claim, which so closely mirrors the contradiction found within contemporary political discourse. Perhaps it is not only the Jesus of John's Gospel who is reactionary, but also the very deployment of this Jesus as a 'subversive' figure by contemporary biblical scholars.

On Myles' reading, the claim that Christianity is subversive of imperial rule has been suspect since at least the writing of John's gospel. This argument pushes back to an earlier date the common claim that it was with Constantine that Christianity truly capitulated to imperial ideology. What is surprising about Wei-Hsien Wan's tracking of the history of the division of time into before and after Christ is not, then, that Christendom ultimately came to model its calendar on that of the Roman Empire, but that it took so long for this Christological chronology to be universally accepted. Perhaps it is apt, however, that it was in the eighteenth century—arguably the period in which the violently colonising ambitions of Western Christendom achieved their fullest expression—that the Gregorian division of time was finally universalised. But this period also marked the encounter with other cultures which forced the Christian invention of both "world religions" and the "secular." As Daniel Colucciello Barber argues, in order to become secular, Europe had to emancipate itself from its own religious heritage, conceiving itself not as the coming together of Athens and Jerusalem but as the triumph of Athens over Jerusalem: 'the secular West rejects religion for itself, but it does so, one might say, as the price that must be paid in order to reject the non-West by characterising this non-West as religious' (Barber 2011, 110). Perhaps it was inevitable, then, that once this Christian schema for the ordering of time had been universalised in the service of colonialism it would subsequently be de-Christianised in the name of secular universalism.

The two-facedness of the Bible which Bloch names, and which is evident in reading Sandford and Myles' pieces alongside one another is all the more clear in Wan's piece, which highlights both the revolutionary promise of 1 Peter's unsettling of imperial time and also the ease with which this counter-imperial time came, in the end, to be a simple repetition of the Roman re-ordering of time around a central figure of imperial power. What would it mean not simply to choose between these alternatives—a reactionary Jesus and a revolutionary Jesus, imperial time and the counter-imperial disruption of time—but to recognise that both are part of the history of Christianity, the weft and weave not only of Scripture itself but also of the history of biblical interpretation? Toscano argues that what is absent in Marx's work is a serious examination of

> the connection between "the religion of everyday life" (the forms of actual abstraction, belief and fetishism that populate "secular" capitalism) and the institutions and subjectivities thrown up by religions in their specific and contested historical and political existence. In other words, to link capitalism as religion with religions [and, we might add, religious studies] in capitalism. (Toscano, "Rethinking Marx and Religion")

Faced with complex and ever-shifting role of Christianity within contemporary Christianity, with the two-facedness of both the Bible itself and the practices of biblical interpretation, perhaps there is, as Deleuze says, 'no need for fear and hope but only to look for new weapons' (Deleuze 1992, 4). The luxury communist Jesus of Sandford's essay, the reactionary Jesus of Myles' reading of John's gospel, and Wan's interrogation of the Christian formation and deformation of imperial time seem like good places to begin the search.

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