1 Introduction

You will eat, by and by
In that glorious land above the sky
Work and pray, live on hay
You'll get pie in the sky when you die (That's a lie!)
Joe Hill, 'The Preacher and the Slave'[1]

My contention is that any form of afterlife belief which reconciles people to existing exploitation or oppression is indeed a lie. In fact, for all that Christians have historically propagated views of the afterlife which do reconcile people to injustice (were this not the case, Joe Hill would hardly have needed to write the previously quoted song), I hold that *from the perspective of Christian theology* all such reconciliatory afterlife belief is to be judged inadequate and contrary to the gospel. God wills goodness and flourishing for God's creatures, not simply in some eschatological future[2] but in the here and now. Moreover, as liberation theology has taught us, God has a preferential option for the poor and oppressed, and is therefore not on the side of any doctrine which damages the poor and oppressed. Much afterlife belief, as a consequence, stands under divine judgement.

It is not my position, however, that belief in an afterlife should simply be jettisoned. Writing out of the Christian tradition, and considering myself bound by its norms,[3] I cannot simply cast to one side the hope that we will live again after death. 'If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.'[4] Yet it is immediately obvious, or should be, how this hope can become an alibi for ignoring this present world, its iniquities and its prospects. What, then, is Christian theology to say?

What is it to say *to whom*? In other words, who is the intended audience of this Element? First and foremost, since this is a work of Christian theology, I am writing for other academic theologians and for Christians more generally. But the intended range of the Element goes beyond that. I include, unsurprisingly, Marxists in the hoped-for readership. However, there are not many Marxists in the left these days – to my mind a sorry state of affairs. But there are still plenty

[1] Hill 1911.
[2] The distinction is sometimes made between eschatology, dealing with the final consummation of the created order, and para-eschatology, dealing with the immediate future of souls after death. I will ignore this terminological distinction here. I will, however, deal with (what gets called) para-eschatology in Section 3 on the intermediate state.
[3] Specifically, I am a Catholic and consider myself bound by that Church's *de fide* teaching. Quite how this positioning, which might to some seem entirely incongruous with the kind of liberative perspective I develop here, is to be justified is an interesting question, but not one I have space to deal with in this Element.
[4] 1 Corinthians 15:19 (New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (NRSV); all biblical quotations following from this version).

of people who long for a better world in many ways: those who fight for ecological justice, for women's liberation, against homophobia and against racism, and many others. Through thinking about how afterlife beliefs cohere with, or fail to cohere with, their political practice and thought they may learn something important. In particular activists who are also Christians have a lot to gain, I think, from acknowledging and working through tensions between eschatology and political hope. But, to return to the beginning of my list, it is theologians in general I have most especially in mind. We cannot afford to ignore criticisms of eschatology, particularly when they arise out of suspicion cultivated in the name of social and political justice.

My proposal is that we can best make progress towards disentangling our doctrine of the afterlife from complicity with social wrongs by reading it critically alongside voices who, with full power, denounce religious eschatology as in some way damaging to the human condition. A lengthier treatment of this issue would certainly have to engage with the contributions of Nietzsche and Freud. Here, though, I will focus on Karl Marx. One of the most articulate and persistent critics of religion, Marx endorsed opposition to religion (including afterlife belief) in the cause of a better society. He is therefore well qualified to be a dialogue partner for present purposes.

The word 'dialogue' is important here. The point of this Element is not to criticise Marx, or to mount a defence of Christian doctrine against him. What is proposed is, rather, an uncomfortable conversation, during which we are brought, by consideration of Marx's ideas, to understand how our articulation of eschatology can become a means to escape from the struggles and suffering of our present political order – in Marxist language: an imaginary reconciliation of real contradictions. We can expect, in what follows, to learn from Marx. We can also be open to the possibility that the Marxist tradition can learn from Christian theology. We should not, though, orientate ourselves towards that possibility in an arrogant fashion in such a way as to mitigate the force of Marxist criticism of our own positions. We should not presume to take the speck out of our brother Marx's eye whilst ignoring the log in our own.[5] Reading Marx against our belief in an afterlife will, and should, prove unsettling.

For the rest of this introduction, I will very briefly provide a guide to Marx, his thought, and Christian theological engagements with that thought. After that I will conclude with a note about a particular issue in Christian eschatology. In the rest of the Element a dialogue of the sort I have alluded to will be given the stage.

[5] Cf. Matthew 7:4; Luke 6:41.

1.1 Karl Marx against Religion

This is not the place for a biography of Marx. The most comprehensive and readable of those remains David McLellan's (1973). It is, however, necessary to introduce the reader to the outlines of Marx's criticism of afterlife belief. This will be our constant companion in what follows. It has its context amongst Marx's criticism of religion more generally.

It is unsurprising that Marx was a critic of religion. The intellectual milieu in which he moved was one of relentless hostility to religion which was associated with social reaction and was epitomised in Hegel, as read by the 'right' Hegelians as providing a theological justification for the Prussian state. Marx initially moved in 'left' Hegelian circles.[6] These included radical biblical scholars David Strauss and Bruno Bauer, and philosopher Arnold Ruge. The left Hegelians were infamous for their attacks on religion, and suffered for them, variously losing work and standing. In due course Marx came to be critical of the left Hegelians, but their opposition to the established order of things, and to religion which upheld that established order of things, set the scene for Marx's subsequent work.

More influential still on Marx's attitude towards religion was Ludwig Feuerbach. In his *The Essence of Christianity* ([1843] 1972) Feuerbach suggests that religious concepts (and especially the concept of God) result from the projection of human nature onto an imagined divinity. In religion people encounter their own reality as something external to them. Religion is, then, a fundamental distortion of reality. Parenthetically, Karl Barth (2001, ch. 18) considered Feuerbach as part of the history of Protestant theology, his point being that it is *true* that people project their own nature onto God, and this ought to be recognised by Christian theology.

Be that as it may, Marx took up the baton from Feuerbach. He agreed that religious concepts resulted from the projection of what is authentically human (in particular the human essence, or *species-being*) onto an alien religious reality. He further held, however, that the alienation contained within religion had a social explanation. Alienation in the religious sphere, for Marx, arose from the alienation of labour, from the fact that in their everyday lives the mass of people stand in unfulfilling relations. These relations were epitomised for Marx at this stage in his work not only by the relations instanced in wage-labour but also by their relations to the state. What people cannot, in virtue of these relations, have on earth, they project onto heaven. And once projected, the resulting religious fantasies serve to reconcile the alienated to their lot.

[6] See McLellan 1972.

With these additional insights on board, Marx held that German thought – including especially the thinkers previously mentioned – has said what needs to be said about religion. 'The criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism', writes Marx, but he also says that, 'for Germany, the criticism of religion has been essentially completed' (Marx [1844] 1970). This being so, Marx advocated turning 'the criticism of heaven . . . into the criticism of earth'. Critical and practical energy should be dedicated to understanding, and overthrowing, the capitalist order, rather than being focused on opposition to religion. This political orientation is important for the theologian who would engage with Marx to take on board. Marx thought that religious alienation is grounded in secular, this-worldly alienation, and his priority is dealing with the latter (Marx [1843] 2003). Criticism of religion can be a distraction from this task, and Marx was certainly no armchair critic of religion.

Nevertheless, Marx *was* critical of religion, in general, and of the idea of an afterlife, in particular. For Christian theology, which certainly has not taken on board the criticism of religion as had the German philosophy of the early nineteenth century, engagement with what Marx does say about religion, and about heaven, will be constructive. And in that spirit what I propose here is an attempt at dogmatic reconstruction in critical dialogue with Marx. This I take to be a legitimate task of Christian theology. We should, however, heed a Marxian warning. Religious alienation, Marx claims, results from alienation in other spheres, especially the economic. Suppose he is right. Then those beliefs concerning heaven (for instance) that we find reason to criticise from the perspective of Christian theology will have deeper roots than the merely intellectual. Attacking inadequate belief on the doctrinal plane may not be enough to bring about conversion from those beliefs. Instead, it may be through struggle against the secular basis of those beliefs that progress is made. The theologian, too, might have cause to turn the criticism of heaven into criticism of earth. A good theologian, whilst she cannot forget the intellectual task of articulating the faith anew, will – on this account – need to be an activist if her articulation is to find a hearing.

1.2 Christian Theology and Marx

Again, it is neither possible nor appropriate to provide here a survey of the vast literature on the relationship between Marx and Christian theology – attempts at dialogue, comparison, and censure. A good survey of some of these, albeit within a different framework from that adopted here, is Peter Scott's (2022). In the brief space available, however, I do want to address some treatments of relevance to the topic of this Element. These can be divided up into those which

regard Marx and Marxism as sources of socio-economic insight, setting aside the critique of religion touched on earlier, and those which engage with that critique directly. After looking at these, I want to pay particular attention to the work of Nicholas Lash, which is directly salient for our purposes. Before setting about these tasks, I should note in passing that the authors examined for these purposes are exclusively male, pointing to a limitation of this area of investigation which needs to be addressed.

The best known setting for theological engagement with Marx since the mid twentieth century has been Latin American liberation theology. Although the extent of liberation theology's dependence on Marx has been exaggerated by its opponents, it is certainly true that Marx features prominently amongst its dialogue partners (just as, liberation theologians are fond of noting, the non-Christian Aristotle provided a point of dialogue for medieval scholasticism). With a few exceptions – notably José Miranda (1974) – liberation theology has selectively borrowed insights from Marx (and subsequent Marxism) in order to acquire tools for understanding the world. The point is made well by Gustavo Gutiérrez (1996):

> In the contemporary intellectual world, including the world of theology, references are often made to Marx and to certain Marxists, and their contribution to the field of social and economic analysis are often taken into account. But these facts do not, in themselves, mean an acceptance of Marxism, especially insofar as Marxism embodies an all-embracing view of life and thus excludes Christian faith and its requirements. (p. 46)

The form of borrowing from Marx envisaged here, then, is minimal. Nevertheless, to the extent that it is representative of liberation theology, it stands under censure from the (Catholic) Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who in their 1984 *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'*[7] turned critical attention on liberation theology. At the heart of the concern of the *Instruction*'s authors lies the worry that Marxian social theory cannot be disentangled from Marx's atheism and wider philosophy. Thus,

> Let us recall the fact that atheism and the denial of the human person, his liberty and rights, are at the core of the Marxist theory. This theory, then, contains errors which directly threaten the truths of the faith regarding the eternal destiny of individual persons. Moreover, to attempt to integrate into theology an analysis whose criterion of interpretation depends on this atheistic conception is to involve oneself in terrible contradictions.

Whilst one common response on the part of liberation theologians has been to deny the connection between their favoured social theory and Marxian atheism,

[7] www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html.

other left-wing theologians have agreed with the *Instruction*, against liberation theology, that Marx's atheism is not easily separable from his social theory; but, rather than seeing this as reason to reject Marx's thought, they have viewed it as pointing to novel opportunities for theological engagement. Prominent in this respect is Alistair Kee's (1990) *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology*. Here Kee argues that Marx has an ontological critique of religion, a critique of its belief in God, and that this has been ignored by Christians who make use of Marx – in particular by liberation theologians. Radical Christians, rather than continuing this ignoring, ought to take Marx's ontological critique on board and embrace a substantial doctrine of divine transcendence.

Views similar to Kee's can be identified in authors involved in, or influenced by, the Catholic leftist journal *Slant*, which ran from 1966 to 1970. Associated with authors such as Terry Eagleton, and with Herbert McCabe, who acted as a mentor figure for the group behind *Slant,* the journal pursued a politically left-wing Catholicism influenced by the secular New Left of the period, Wittgenstein, and, crucially for our purposes, Marx (Corrin 2013). The *Slant* authors engaged across the range of Marx's thought, differing from the liberation theologians in their preparedness to think about the existence of God, say, or morality in a way that took Marxist insights on board. In this they anticipated the position of someone like Kee.

This openness to Marx's philosophy is perhaps best seen subsequent to *Slant* in McCabe's taking on board of Marx's atheism and expositing alongside it his own doctrine of God as transcendent and not in competition with creaturely agents (Hewitt 2024). Similarly Eagleton, as Britain's foremost Marxist cultural critic fully cognisant of Marx on religion, repeatedly gestures in a McCabian direction towards a classical theism which coheres with Marx's critique of belief in God (Eagleton 2006; 2010). In like manner Denys Turner (1987), moving in the same milieu, takes Marx's approach to God to transcend the theism–atheism dialectic in a manner consistent with an apophatic doctrine of God.

My approach in this Element is firmly on the side of those theologians who do not ignore Marx's philosophical writing. Not only do I hold that this writing is indispensable to the Marxian corpus but I think that in particular Marx's criticism of religion, read with reference to afterlife belief, poses an urgent challenge to Christian thought and practice which simply cannot be ignored if we are to do that justice to the exploited and oppressed which is required of followers of Christ. What follows is an attempt to explicate, listen to, and take on board that challenge.

Before moving on with that business, mention should be made of the engagement of a prominent theologian with Marx's work, Nicholas Lash's *A Matter of*