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Marx and the Gospel of John

Roland Boer

Abstract

This essay offers the first close reading of Karl Marx's early (1835) essay on the Gospel of John. Coming out of the wealth of material of the early Marx, it shows a brilliant young man engaging with and coming up against difficulties with a biblical text (John 15). Careful attention to Marx's essay shows him struggling with two tensions. The first tension concerns two different models of salvation, either a mediatory one (Roman Catholic) or a dialectical one (Protestant). The essay begins with the former and ends with the latter, although it does not resolve the tension. The second tension is between the formal requirements of catechism and the poetic flights of the biblical text: Marx seeks to answer in light of the former but is drawn into the very different formal features of the latter. Apart from indicating the importance of contradiction itself in Marx's later work, the article closes by considering the inevitability of encountering contradictions when engaging closely with a biblical text.

Introduction

[1] Arguably, one of the least known of Marx's myriad texts is a youthful essay of biblical interpretation. It bears the cumbersome title of *The Union of Believers with Christ According to John 15:1-14, Showing Its Basis and Essence, Its Absolute Necessity, and Its Effects* (1835b).¹ Not quite *Capital*, nor even the famous text on religion as the opium of the people, it has lain in obscurity, shadowed by the larger bulk of Marx's work, so much so that I was able to find

¹ I follow the convention in citing Marx, listing the date of composition here and the date of publication in the bibliography.

only one engagement with this text.² I can well imagine why it is ignored, since Marx talks of God and love and Christ, and is thus not quite the Marx we know.

[2] Why give the text critical attention? The fact that it languishes in the doldrums is perhaps reason enough for someone as significant as Marx, but there are other, more important reasons. To begin with, it is an extensive effort to deal not merely with religion, but specifically with the Bible. Much has been said about Marx's relation with theology and the Bible, but very little of that has criticism has listened to what Marx himself actually said. Further, this essay reveals a Marx who stumbles across a series of tensions when he faces a biblical text. Those tensions are my concern.

Text

[3] The essay is primarily an exercise in biblical exegesis. It was one of six essays set for the final examinations in the senior gymnasium class of 1835 in Trier (Marx's home town), testing not merely the students' knowledge of Christian doctrine and the Bible, but also their skills in reading Greek and biblical exegesis. John 15 was chosen by the examiner, Küpper. These two requirements explain the tension (see below) between catechesis and exegesis. Let us focus on the matter of exegesis first. Yet one of the curious features of biblical exegesis is that all too often it goes about its task with an absent text. The biblical text is commented upon, but it does not itself appear. It forms a backdrop, brought in every now and then, but otherwise hovering out of sight like some authoritative absence or Ego-Ideal. Marx's youthful essay is guilty of this too, and so I begin with the text itself:

¹ I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. ¹² This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no man than this, that a man

² Van Leeuwen (2002: 39-42) is the only work I know where the essay is examined. Calling it a piece of "splendid exegesis" with a solid Trinitarian structure and Christological focus, van Leeuwen overcooks his assessment by arguing that it is enough evidence to show that Marx's Christian convictions were sufficient for confirmation.

lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you (John 15:1-14).³

[4] A few comments on the text before we see what Marx tries to do with it. John 15:1-14 is part of the Johannine story of the Last Supper during the Passover (John 13-17), where, after washing the disciples' feet (John 13), Jesus holds forth for some time. He runs through a calm prediction of his crucifixion, the promise of a Counsellor – the Holy Spirit, being hated by the world, and of his resurrection; gives a call to courage; and, finally, offers a prayer for the disciples. Immediately afterwards the whole group leaves for the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus is to meet his fate – calmly, of course.

[5] In the midst of all of this comes our passage, which is really one and two-third passages – or pericopes as they are known in biblical criticism – in between the promise of the Holy Spirit (John 14) and the words concerning hatred by the world (John 15:18-27). In the section neatly sliced out and presented on its own we have one part that is half-way between a parable and an allegory – the vine and its branches (John 15:1-11) – and another concerning the commandment of love (John 15:12-17). The second is somewhat truncated, for the last two verses have been chopped off by the examiner.⁴ The result is that the four remaining verses on the commandment of love end up being attached to the parable of the vine. While there is some overlap between these pericopes, they really are distinct in John's text. However, with the exam question posed for Marx and his classmates, they are crammed into one unit, turning the verses on love into a commentary on the extended metaphor of the vine.

[6] So what does the young Marx do with all of this? His attempted answer betrays two tensions, one of content and one of form. As for content, by the end of the essay Marx ends up contradicting himself: he begins in a rather long-winded way to argue that however much human beings may strive towards God, they can never quite get there. For that we need Christ, who meets us and helps us over the last steps of the way. However, by the time he comes to wrap up his essay, Marx produces a much more dialectical and to my mind far more interesting argument. In this case, the only way to achieve a properly human virtue is to fix our eyes solely on God; our singular love for God through Christ will make us fully human. I would like to call these two the argument from mediation and the argument from dialectics.

[7] A second tension, this time in terms of form, appears in the nature of the question set for the gymnasium exam itself, for Marx had to answer a set question as best he could: "The union of believers with Christ according to John 15:1-14, showing its basis and essence, its absolute necessity, and its effects." A rather mundane, doctrinal task, is it not, especially in comparison to a text that is almost poetic in its concern for love? In fact, that is the formal

³ I offer the Revised Standard Version of the text here, although Marx would have worked with Luther's translation from 1534.

⁴ The absent verses read: "¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. ¹⁷ This I command you, to love one another" (John 15:16-17).

problem with this whole exercise – the disjunction between the metaphorical poetry of the text and the request to extract some catechetical points from it.

[8] I can almost hear the plodding catechism: what is the basis of union with Christ? What is its essence? And so on. We are a long way from vines, branches, fruit, and the sacrifice of love. Marx finds himself caught between the catechetical question and the parable-like form of the text; while trying to deal with the question adequately, he continually finds himself seduced by the very different formal temptations of the text from John.

Content

[9] In terms of the actual contradiction within Marx's arguments – one in terms of mediation and the other through dialectics – the question seeks an answer in four categories: the necessity, basis, essence, and effects of the union with Christ. Having spent more time than I care to admit with catechisms (my father taught me the Heidelberg Catechism for a whole year), I could have answered such a question with mind-numbing precision: the necessity of union with Christ is due to sin; its basis is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross for our sins; its essence is reconciliation with God; and its primary effect is eternal life with God and the fruits one's reconciliation.

[10] Now, Marx does not quite follow such a conventional argument, although he does give it a try. Instead, he offers a different response: the necessity for union lies in the inability of people, due to superstition or sin, to make that final step to God despite all their striving; the need for redemption due to sin is the basis; a vital communion with and love for God is its essence; and its effects may be seen in a virtue that can be truly human only by means of focusing singularly on the divine. There is no mention of Christ's "sacrifice" on the cross (John 15:13 may have been used as a proverbial proof text), or reference to the economy of salvation as such, which one might have expected given the Lutheran tradition.

[11] The least interesting parts of the essay are those concerned with basis and essence, so I do not propose to spend much time with them. If the basis gains only the briefest of mentions from Marx, then essence becomes saccharine. All Marx has to say about the basis of union with Christ is that it is due to sin and corruption; everyone knows this and so it needs no further discussion. By bringing sin in at this point, when it should really have gone in his discussion of necessity, Marx has rather conveniently slipped by Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the catechetical answer one would have expected for the basis of union with Christ. The outcome is that when he gets to the matter of the essence or nature of the union with Christ, he moves not into the territory of reconciliation but into the realm of communion and love. Words such as "loving eyes," "ardent thankfulness," "sink joyfully on our knees," "forgiving father," "kindly teacher," "fondly snuggle," "most intimate, most vital communion," and "highest love" (Marx 1835b: 638) give a good feel for this stretch of text. It struggles to be sensuously poetic and often tips over into a syrupy expression of feeling. Not his best work, to say the least, although one may find similar offerings in the early letters to his father and the poetry written for both his father and his sweetheart, Jenny.

Mediation: The Roman Catholic Foray

[12] More intriguing by far are Marx's treatments of the other two categories of the initial question: necessity and effects. Here we have a glaring contradiction. In the long opening

section of the essay, Marx opts for a different tack than might have been expected in order to treat necessity. Instead of pointing out the necessity of union with Christ since we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and that our only hope lies in the grace of God, Marx pursues what may best be described as a rather Roman Catholic approach: we may strive towards and reach for God, but we can never quite get there.

[13] For instance, even the “divine Plato” expresses “a profound longing for a higher being” (Marx 1835b: 636). And Plato is merely a cipher for the highest point of human history, for no matter how much a people may struggle towards God, no matter how close they get, they always fall short of a true sense of God due to superstition and sin. So also, suggests Marx, with individuals who for all the “spark of divinity” (Marx 1835b: 637) they may have, for all their yearning, passion, and striving for knowledge, truth, and goodness; they fail due to greed, lies, and sin. In other words, we may get close, but not quite close enough. The answer to that problem, at least for Marx, is that the “benign Creator” was unable to hate his work of creation; instead “he wanted to raise it up to him and he sent his son” (Marx 1835b: 637; at this point Marx cites John 15:3, 4).

[14] One thing that can be said about this type of argument is that it is certainly not Lutheran, where we might have expected a focus on undeserved grace and the complete inability of human beings to do any good work. Rather, it has the scent of that solid Roman Catholic doctrine that came to be called Molinism. Luis de Molina (1535-1600) was a Jesuit theologian and ideologue of the Counter-Reformation. Against the reformers’ emphasis on human worthlessness and inability to do any good work, let alone come close to salvation, Molina argued in his *Concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis* (1588) that obedience to the divine commandments and the doing of good works could get you a fair way. Molina’s basic position was that freely chosen human cooperation with the gift of grace was the ultimate cause of the efficacy of grace. This effectiveness, which really relies on the ability of human beings genuinely to obey God, comes from the human decision to obey rather than grace.

[15] The doctrine was an anathema to reformers like Luther for whom there was no freedom of the will to choose. Thus, in opposition to the reformers, Molinism gives human beings as much a role as possible in the process of salvation. And in case we suspect that Molinism espoused self-earned salvation, it argues that the freely chosen act of human beings to cooperate with God is foreknown by God. Thus, the efficacy of grace has its basis not in the gift of divine grace itself, but in the fact that God foreknows we will freely co-operate with the gift of grace. In short, we can reach the gate of salvation, but we need someone to open it for us. In response to the reformers’ emphasis on God’s grace, determinism, and predestination, we have here a strong emphasis on free will and human agency in the process of salvation. For some, such as the Dominicans, this was too much, and it did not help matters that the Jesuits championed Molinism. However, Molinist approaches did influence the approach of Roman Catholics to missions: instead of seeking to convert the hopelessly lost as Protestant missions did in Greenland or the Pacific Islands, Roman Catholic missions in places such as the Philippines or the Kimberley region of Australia looked for signs of a natural progression to God that they could then extend and offer to complete with Christianity.

[16] Now, Marx is hardly pushing the intricacies of Molinism in this essay, but he comes much closer to the Roman Catholic tendency to regard human beings as capable of taking some steps to union with Christ. At the last minute he does try to redeem his Lutheran unorthodoxy: when he resorts to a third proof of the necessity of union (the word of Christ), he suggests that just as a branch of a vine cannot bear fruit by itself, “so, Christ says, without me you can do nothing” (Marx 1835b: 637; at this point he cites John 15:4, 5, 6). Yet, just when we think he is coming back to a tolerably Lutheran position, he concludes with the following: “Our hearts, reason, history, the word of Christ, therefore, tell us loudly and convincingly that union with Him is absolutely essential, that without Him we cannot *fulfil our goal*, that without Him we would be rejected by God, that only He can redeem us” (Marx 1835b: 637; emphasis mine).

Dialectics: The Lutheran Turn

[17] The problem with this argument is that Marx is by no means consistent, for by the end of the essay he makes use of a very different argument. Here, in his discussion of the effects of union with Christ, Marx waxes dialectical (for the first time perhaps): the nub of his argument is that the key to a “milder and more human virtue” lies in what appears to be its opposite, namely a thoroughly pure and divine virtue that comes only through “love for a divine Being” (Marx 1835b: 639).⁵ In other words, it is only through a singular focus (love for Christ) that a properly human virtue arises. Now, the content may be surprising, especially since it comes from Marx’s hurried pen, but the form of the argument is much more so. Only through the divine may earthly virtue achieve its true form. Take the earthly on its own and all we get is virtue as “a dark distorted image,” the “offspring of a harsh theory of duty,” filled with “repulsive aspects” and “coarseness” (Marx 1835b: 638-39). The only way to a more human virtue – one that is both brilliant and mild – is to find the source of virtue in God. The results: the ability to face misfortune with calm assurance, suffer with consolation, deal with the rages of passion, face up to the anger and oppression of the “iniquitous,” and experience joy (Marx has to bring in John 15:11 somewhere).

[18] I must admit that up until this last section I found Marx’s essay a little overblown and less than inspiring. However, what he has tapped into here is what may be called a Christological dialectic: the only complete human being is Christ himself. He can be a full human being precisely because – according to orthodox doctrine – he is divine. From this point all manner of things follow: as the new Adam (1 Corinthians 15), Christ undoes the first sin; in his person he unites both human and divine as a mark of the truly human; that union enables all human beings to attain union with the divine.

[19] Is this the first and last time Marx would make use of such an argument? In terms of content, the answer must be yes; in terms of form, not quite. We are not going to find him arguing anywhere else that the only way for human fulfilment is by being drawn up into God. The form of the argument is a different matter entirely. In fact, Feuerbach states that his own argument of the divine as a projection of all that is best in human beings is explicitly analogous to a Christological model (xviii). Marx has merely reversed the flow: instead of

⁵ The starting point here is John 15: 9, 10, 12-14, especially the greatest commandment: “that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15: 12).

moving from God to human beings and back again, he begins with human beings, shows how God is the projection of our minds and aspirations and then returns to human beings. It was this insight that Marx took up enthusiastically: developing it into the argument that religion is the projection of oppressed and alienated human beings (1845). Yet the basic form is still there, drawn from Feuerbach's own Christological model, a model that we also find in this early essay on John 15. But that is not all, for there is also an echo of that model in a statement: "thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth" (Marx 1844: 176). In this case, the path from heaven to earth is not merely a one-way street, a call to get on with the real business of earthly criticism.

[20] The catch with this last part of Marx's argument is that it runs straight up against his opening depiction of human beings striving to reach God. I do not mean that the problem lies solely with his effort to hold together two somewhat contradictory theological positions, for that seems to be a leitmotif of theology. Rather, his difficulty is that he tries to couple two very different types of argument. In the section on necessity he argues that human beings and God meet somewhere in the middle: we may strive and strain to do our best and it gets us some of the way there, but then God must meet us halfway and come to our rescue. Only with his help can we attain our goal (union with Christ). But in the section on effects he argues that the only possibility for a properly human virtue comes from God, to whom we must direct our love. In short, only through the divine may an earthly virtue come to life.

[21] If the first approach to salvation might be called mediation, then the second is dialectical; the first moderates between two extremes (humanity and God), while the second pushes one extreme (God) to bring the other forth (humanity). While the argument for mediation allows a good deal of space for the exercise of human virtue, the dialectical argument identifies earthly virtue as repulsive, coarse, and a harsh discipline of duty. They are two different arguments in tension with one another in Marx's text, one characteristically Protestant and the other Roman Catholic. And it is a tension that emerges when Marx tries to deal with a biblical text. It is as though he has the two ends of different pieces of rope in each hand; strain as he might to get their ends to touch one another, the forces pulling each piece of rope in opposite directions is far stronger. But it is also a tension that manifests elements of Marx's own context: in the immediate sense, he belonged to a Lutheran minority (his father converted from Judaism soon after his birth) in a predominantly Roman Catholic town. In the broader sweep of history, Marx absorbed a culture and a history soaked with the legacy of conflicts between these two branches of Christianity, especially with the history of the Reformation and then the brutal Thirty Years War (1618–48 CE). These tensions show up in this essay of the young Marx in terms of what I have called the arguments from mediation and dialectics.

Form

[22] However, this tension in Marx's argument is but the first. Although it tends to slip into form, the tension between the arguments for mediation and dialectics is mostly one of content. The second tension is more strictly formal, and that is the one between the nature of the text from John 15 and the catechism-style question posed about it in the examination. While the Gospel text deals in the metaphor of the vine and its branches, pursuing its

various possibilities – vinedressers, fruit, pruning, withering, fires, and burning, only to make the connection with abiding in Christ, love, and friendship – the question seeks a distinctly catechetical response, moving through the various stages of salvation. I know only too well this effort to butcher texts for the sake of some doctrinal point or other; poetry, myth, metaphor, parable, and allegory are chopped into very different and unseemly shapes.

[23] Marx, it seems to me, is caught between these two directions: a metaphorical and parabolic text, and the ordered steps of Lutheran doctrine. No wonder he barely answers the question correctly, and no wonder he ends up contradicting himself. Even more, Marx lets the text lead him on a different path. Initially he tries to stick to the guidelines, but before he knows it the essay takes on a life of its own. He is constantly tempted to run with the text and leave the structure of the question behind. Let me give a few examples:

Thus, penetrated with the conviction that this union is absolutely essential, we are desirous of finding out in what this lofty gift consists, this ray of light which descends from higher worlds to animate our hearts, and bears us purified aloft to heaven . . . (Marx 1835b: 637).

But, if it could feel, the branch would not only look upwards to the husbandman, it would fondly snuggle up to the vine, it would feel itself most closely linked with it and with the branches which have sprung from it; it would love the other branches if only because the husbandman tends them and the vine gives them strength (Marx 1835b: 638).

Therefore union with Christ bestows a joy which the Epicurean strives vainly to derive from his frivolous philosophy or the deep thinker from the most hidden depths of knowledge, a joy known only by the ingenuous, childlike mind which is linked with Christ and through Him with God, a joy which makes life higher and more beautiful (Marx 1835b: 639).

[24] Not the best writing Marx has produced – too flowery and trying just a little too hard. But then, the Gospel of John is not very good writing either. Repetitive (how many times is it necessary to mention a vine and its branches, or the commandment to love for that matter?), somewhat over-confident (Jesus calmly gives his own commandments, just like his Father), pushing the metaphor a little too far so that it falls into a rather wooden allegory – in each case Marx follows suit. So what happens in these excerpts is that Marx lets the text carry him away, especially in his style. His sentences tend to run on, saying the same thing over again with a small variation. He goes on to kill the metaphor of the branch and vine in perhaps the worst section of the essay – on the nature of union with Christ. In all this he follows the impetus of the text of John.

Conclusion

[25] So what we have in this essay are two tensions, one in terms of the arguments themselves (what I have called arguments of mediation and dialectics) and the other between the nature of this text from John and the catechetical question appended to it. On this second tension, some ingenious exegesis was required. Marx did his best, but the text got the better of him. It is no wonder, then, that his teacher's comments betray these tensions all too clearly. Somewhat puzzled, Küpper writes: "It is profound in thought, brilliantly and

forcefully written, deserving of praise, although the topic – the essence of union – is not elucidated, its cause is dealt with only one-sidedly, its necessity is not proved adequately” (Marx 1835b: n. 198). Rather perceptive, it seems to me.

[26] All in all, it is not quite the Marx to whom we have become accustomed. Even his use of a dialectical argument owes more to theology than to Hegel, who would become so important soon enough. He may simply have been writing what he thought was necessary to pass his examination on religious knowledge – a line that might have been taken had anyone, embarrassed that the founder of historical materialism had actually written a piece of biblical exegesis, bothered to comment on such a text. But his own efforts at a more creative answer suggest that Marx was the last person to follow orders. Yet what is important about this essay is the way the contradictions turn up. One of them – the tension between mediation and dialectics, or between Roman Catholic and Protestant positions – may be seen as a trace or signal of Marx’s immediate context. But there is another factor that is just as important. Marx has come across one of the deep contradictions in theology, in this case over grace. Is salvation entirely due to God since human beings are utterly sinful, or is it due to cooperation between God and human beings, who strive to do good and aspire to God (see Boer)? I would argue that theology is by its very nature a discipline riven with such tensions. Further, he has stumbled across a tension with the Bible, or rather between a poetic text in the Bible and the genre of catechism. The two are very uneasy with one another, and Marx does not solve the problem. Once again, there is a deeper issue at stake, for the Bible is full of contradictions, as anyone who cares to read it soon finds out. Whether they be historical, generic, theological, and political, almost every page holds these problems. As with this essay on John, Marx occasionally uncovers such contradictions, usually despite himself.

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