Divinity at Sydney Uni is not for you, I thought again. 'Why don't you check it out?' I said.
'I will,' he said. '... Oh, here's my stop.' He stood up.
'Good luck,' I said.
'Thanks,' he replied. 'God bless.'
I didn't see him turn up for any classes, but that was no surprise and bit of a relief.

After he had gone, I re-entered Bloch's text, sinking into the words and sentences that did not quite make sense to me. Bloch was, if anything, enigmatic. Later I would realize it was his expressionistic style. What amazed me then, however, was the oxymoron he presented. Here was a German scholar who could write without anchoring his pages with weighty footnotes referring to every possible work written on the topic (and a few that weren't). That was a wonder to behold, and that alone was enough to keep me reading... as well as the craggy, stern face that glared at me from the back cover. Bloch was doing his best to look like a fire-breathing Hebrew prophet.

I was to learn much more about Bloch over the next two decades, so much so that his work became the focus of the long first chapter of the first tome, Criticism of Heaven, of my four-volume 'criticism' series. However, this is not another version of my CV (what some seem to regard as the epitome of so-called 'auto-biographical' narratives), where I become the bute at the bar who has had one too many drinks for the good of those around him.

Back then I was a skinny, chain-smoking student of theology at the University of Sydney. Sleeping too little, thinking too much of sex, drinking too much coffee with the consistency of tar, burning the midnight oil, blowing my ears with the music of Midnight Oil (or the Oils, as we called them), I was a candidate for the ministry in the Presbyterian Church of Australia - the Calvinist rump left over after most of the church united with the Methodists and Congregationalists in 1977. It was also before I had learned to be profoundly suspicious of autobiographical stories, so I can give the impression of bating my soul - at least until the time when I did become much more suspicious of these sorts of things.

Now I don't smoke, I get up at dawn to write, drink tea,
blast my ears with (do I dare admit it?) Nick Cave and Jethro Tull, or still think a lot about sex. I am also no longer in the church. But then, these days, I am rather suspicious of these sorts of stories. So who can tell whether what I say now is fiction or not?

Back to Bloch at Sydney University in the mid-1980s. On the grass outside the library where I used to read, kangaroos grazed, we ate wombat stew for dinner, shoes were rare and books even rarer. We would tear them up and pass on the pages to one another when we had read them. At least, that's what my relatives in the Netherlands thought, as did many Europeans, who thought and still think of Australia as a rough frontier, full of Crocodile Dundees (the movie did come out about this time), Steve Irwins and potential princesses for randy European princes looking for a fertile woman to produce an heir to one or another throne — anything to breed out that lazy eye, floppy ear and lantern jaw. In fact, I have lost count of how many times someone, somewhere, has said that I look like Crocodile Dundee. From Taiwan to Tehran, from Groningen to Greenland, St Petersburg to St. Louis-de-Ha-Ha! (the place does indeed exist, in Quebec), the same question has come time and again. Once, in a remote corner of Newfoundland, I was asked whether I was Paul Hogan's brother.

At Sydney University, I was taught by the energetic Barbara Thiering, the one with those crazy ideas about Qur'an and the origins of the Jesus movement (she was able to retire on the handsome royalties from her book, *Jesus the Man*, which made it big with the New Age crowd and the myriad of disaffected church members). Perhaps because of such ideas, she turned out to be a great teacher, one who resolutely refused to foist her ideas on her students, and the one who first whetted my appetite for biblical studies and theology.

Ernst Bloch turned up in the midst of all this via the mild and soupy Jürgen Moltmann. In a course called 'Political and Liberation Theologies', taught to two of us (there were never more than two or three gathered ...) by a grizzly 70-year-old Alan Loy, I had been reading Moltmann's *The Crucified God*. He mentioned Bloch a few times, especially the 'politics of hope', so instead of reading about him, I resolved to read the man himself. After all, who could resist a title like *Atheism in Christianity*?

This was a time when I became used to the idea that you read books by people who were no more than names and photographs — especially the 'big names'. The so-called cultural change was still very much part of Australian culture and academia: one looked overseas for the really serious work by the major figures. I'll never forget the shock of meeting such names in the flesh for the first time when I began travelling overseas. Again and again, I came face to face with that 'death of the author' experience, where the picture I had built up of one person or another did not quite match the reality. It first hit me when I actually listened to Moltmann, when he was in Montreal giving a series of lectures at McGill in the late 1980s. Here he was, talking, responding, smiling, and not merely a name with an aura. And he was not quite as impressive as I had been led to believe.

As for Bloch, who really was dead by the time I read him, I was able to figure out from his difficult texts the following: a) Bloch was a Marxist atheist; b) he was fascinated by the Bible; c) he argued that it has a revolutionary core that challenges all domination by the gods and earthly rulers. But he did so with these enigmatic sentences of which I struggled to make sense. They were breathless sentences, allusive, teasing on, as it were, to the Kingdom of God on earth (that is, communism).

At the time I was in full assault on the Calvinist heritage of my parents. Anything was useful ammunition — Roman Catholic monasticism, laziness, High Church rituals — but this was the best by far. A Marxist who claimed the Bible as a central text for the communists! Delicious. My parents had emigrated from the Netherlands in the late 1930s. As my maternal grandfather told me many years later when I asked him why they had emigrated in masse (they and their seven children — the clan now has 25 grandchildren and more than 30 great grandchildren), they wanted to find a place where there had been no world wars and where there was little chance of one. A look at the world map and Australia was about as far you could go.

My parents came from the breakaway *Getreformeerde Kerk* in the Netherlands, the conservative Calvinist wing that has
become disillusioned by the creeping liberalism of the main Reformed Church of the Netherlands. The immigrants from the Gereformeerde Kerk established their own Reformed Church of Australia, of which my parents were members. So, with the Dutch I first spoke I also imbued the deep assumptions and daily practices of Calvinism: prayer before all meals (even in public), a Bible reading after the evening meal, no study or watching television or going to the shops on Sunday. It always struck me as wonderfully strange that a tradition that stressed grace over the law could be so legalistic.

Eventually they had joined the Presbyterian Church precisely because it too had Calvinist roots (via the dour John Knox). So, in that grand tradition of the eldest son following in the footsteps of his ministerial father, I too studied theology for the sake of becoming a minister in the Church. By the time I took up theological study, I was working hard to distance myself as far as possible from the Calvinism of my childhood. Since the hard-line conservative Calvinists had recently won control of the Presbyterian Church, it was not long before I was at loggerheads with them as well. They would be the first who would kick me in the teeth so that eventually I would find much more pleasant pastures outside, although with a significant dentist’s bill.

After reading Bloch on those train journeys, I had to find out more. Bloch was put aside. At the time, liberation theology was carrying on Bloch’s legacy. It was still in full flower, maturing in its efforts to combine Marxist analysis of society with theological reflection. Yet, already there were the first rumblings of roping in these wayward liberationists, especially after one or two Roman Catholic priests had joined the guerrillas in Latin America. By this time, no one seriously looked for inspiration to the paradox of ‘actually existing socialism’ in Eastern Europe and the USSR, which was already unwinding under Gorbachev, Margaret Thatcher (infamous for her phrase, ‘there is no such thing as society’) and Ronald Reagan were reshaping the capitalist world in a re-packaged and vicious laissez-faire, The Rolling Stones (aka. The Strolling Bones) still seemed relatively youthful and Madonna had not yet worn her T-shirt, ‘Kabbalists do it better’.

In this situation I read Marx and then Hegel, on that same daily train journey. Marx’s Capital was my companion for many months, and then Hegel’s difficult Phenomenology of Spirit. Yet, Bloch continued to haunt me as I wrote on Marx and Hegel. What would possess a Marxist – a hero (for a time) of the utopian effort at a new society in East Germany, at least until he fell foul of the powers that be when that effort ran aground, when minds closed and petty jealousies surfaced – to read the Bible so avidly?

By the end of the process of reading and writing on Marx and Hegel, I realized that this body of thought and political practice had a good deal going for it. Why, I wondered, did some of the best minds in the world find Marxism so intriguing and challenging, so much so that they sought to develop it further? I was never in their league, but I do remember thinking that it was good enough for them, it was good enough for me. I was always just a little sceptical concerning the standard story of the rise of the West, of the advancement of the cause of freedom, democracy and Christianity, and here was a way of saying history and our present that made it clear to me that we are far from such things.

This realization was not as sudden as that of my mother. Some years later I gave my father – who likes to make things – a selection of my own beer and a copy of Novel Histories. True to form, he later told me that he didn’t like the beer and couldn’t understand the book. Needless to say, I haven’t offered him a beer since. But my mother read the book and then lay awake, unable to sleep and tormented by the blinding realization – ‘Oh my God, my son is a Marxist! My son is a Marxist’!

My timing couldn’t have been better. By the time I was convinced of the explanatory power of Marx in the late 1980s, the Berlin Wall was teetering and communism was soon to fall back in one peaceful revolution after another from Bulgaria to Lithuania. Euphoria gripped the capitalist West – ‘we’ had won the Cold War, thanks to that old hero of Z-grade Hollywood westerns who happened to be president of the USA. Euphoria gripped Eastern Europe as well, as people (they still tell me this story when I am there) believed they could step past capitalism and communism to a new future. Statues toppled, school
history textbooks were rewritten (especially in the West), and
maps were redrawn. Religious revival was sweeping the East,
we were told, the shop shelves were full of items that no one
could afford. The Church was back in business, and maybe
even the heir to the Tsar would be back on the throne. Just as
I had discovered Marx, everyone was saying, ‘Karl who?’ At
least it became possible to pick up copies of Marx, Lenin and
the rest of the bunch in second-hand bookshops which could
hardly give them away fast enough. I was even given a gift of
a bust of Lenin from a stall in Soha, since no one wanted it
there (he is a rather handsome fellow, with that chin of history
pondering the coal ships from my study window).

During the 1960s, liberation theology slid out of sight,
charismatic and Pentecostal missionaries made headway in
Latin America as one government after another bowed to the
wise recommendations of the International Monetary Fund
and the World Bank, and George Bush Sr toughed up Saddam
Hussein for his indiscretion of invading ‘democratic’ Kuwait.
Everything looked rosy... At least until those planes bumped
into the World Trade Center in New York on that day in
September, 2001, and what turned out to be the Second Oil
War got underway.

By the end of the 1990s, I returned to Bloch’s _Atheism in
Christianity_. In between my first and second reading, I had
the misfortune to teach at a theological college in Sydney for some
years. At one point in those long years, a student approached me:

‘I’ve come to you since I know you are the most sceptical
person here,’ she said.

‘That’s a fair assessment,’ I said, eyebrows raised.

‘Would you tell me, then,’ she said, ‘do you believe in evil
spirits?’

‘Hmmm...’ I said.

She waited.

‘Well, if you look closely,’ I finally answered, ‘you will see
them follow me every time I walk in the front door. They sit
on the roof corners, watch at the windows, and crouch behind
the doorways waiting for some soul to possess. When I go, they
follow me home.’

Go I finally did, although I made sure to wear sandals and
dust them off as I walked out that door one last time. I also
hoped it was the last time I had to go through an oedipal
struggle.

For a time I travelled weekly by bus from Sydney to
Melbourne. A rather long trip to work, about 900km, it
allowed plenty of time to read. By this time, I had managed
to track down a copy of _Atheism in Christianity_ of my own,
from the same print run in 1972 by Herder and Herder, with
the same blue cover and dust-jacket with a stern Herr Bloch on
the back. The title now resonated with me in a new way, for I
had started to feel that every time I walked in the door of that
theological college to teach or go to one of the interminable
meetings, I became an atheist. What is it, I wondered, about
religion, especially Christianity, that can make one such an
atheist? I had begun to think that it was a common outcome,
and that those who stayed in the Church switched their belief
to something else – especially the institution. One of them had
indeed told me on more occasions than I care to remember, ‘the
show must go on’.

On that bus in the early days of the third millennium I read as
much Bloch as possible, carefully, slowly, repeatedly. Usually
they were night buses, and at times I read through most of
the night, snuggled up against a plump Irish woman who kept
offering me lollies, or against a neurotic chef who festooned
his cloth travel-bag with padlocks, or against a jailbird (he was
innocent!) who was on his way to see his children for the first
time in five years, or against a 97-year-old man from Slovenia
at whose place Slavoj Žižek played when he was a child, or
against a former stripper from Tokyo who told me the story of
the illness and death of her Persian cat, blow by harrowing
blow, and then about the Doberman Pinschers of her old boy-
friend (I made a mental note not to call).

Marxists, I thought, were not given to writing books about
the Bible or theology. There are one or two, like Lucien
Goldmann or Karl Kautsky or Theodor Adorno or Antonio
Gramsci... well, actually quite a few, as I was still to learn,
who have in fact written on the Bible and theology. But Bloch
was the first and my introduction to this long tradition of
ROLAND BOER

some of the best minds in philosophy, literature and politics.

What Bloch says, it seems to me, is that the Bible is deeply multivalent on a political level. While it may not always be folly to the rich, it is also the Church's bad conscience. Bloch was puzzled and entranced by the fact that while the Bible taught all too often to serve your masters on earth and in heaven, it also stuck a huge finger at them at the same time. Sometimes he pushes things too far, when for example he argues that the earliest stratum of sources (he was writing during the heyday of German dominance in biblical historical criticism) reflected stories of rebellion and protest that were later edited into condemnations of those seditious stories. Or that there was a red thread that ran through from the serpent in the garden to the insurrections of Jesus of Nazareth, one that would eventually lead to the liberation of human beings from God. And, guess where this teleology led him? To Marxist atheism, the final expression of the messianic tradition. Indeed, he seems to have been a bit of a jerk. Fixing people with his messianic stare, he was wont to rise at the close of a lecture or discussion and solemnly announce, 'Truly the spirit has been with us today!' People couldn't help wondering whether he hadn't imbibed one or two spirits over breakfast.

For all his flaws (but that is part of what I like about him), Bloch also has an insight or two, such as his argument for political exegesis well before it became fashionable in biblical studies (but then biblical criticism always seems like the last kid on the block), or the idea of the discernment of myth, where one must discern between myths of rebellion over against those of oppression, or his (best) strategy: the argument that stories of insurrection survived not despite, but because of those stories of suppression. Why do we get so many stories of human rebellion that is crushed and punished? Why do human beings seem to sin against a stern God and brutal rulers, all rolled into one? From the murmuring in the wilderness against Moses to Vashti's condemnation in the book of Esther, there do seem to be an awful lot of these stories.

Here, it seemed to Bloch, lay the reason for the Bible's continued appeal to revolutionary groups. He carefully excavated the story of Thomas Müntzer, the firebrand reformer who

ERNST BLOCH'S ATHEISM IN CHRISTIANITY

took Luther's principles to their logical conclusion, became a revolutionary on the run until he finally lost his head (literally) leading an army of peasants with their pitchforks against the assembled heavy cavalry of the German princes. No points for guessing who won. Then there was Joachim of Fiore, with his theory of the three ages of the world, the final one of the spirit leading to the peaceable Kingdom. He might have added Gerard Winstanley and the Diggers, who simply began cultivating common land, giving out the produce freely to anyone who would join them. The conservative thugs would have nothing of it and drove them out. Or the guerrilla priests at the revolutionary edge of liberation theology, who actually kept Bloch's work alive during its long neglect.

As the bus trips gradually added more distance between me and the stuffy feeling of the Church and its equally stuffy teaching institutions, Bloch brought me to a new position. I began to see that the easy option was to turn your back and walk out. Like me, so many have chosen to do so. But I began to admire those who took the much more difficult stand of staying inside, for whatever reason (that is beyond me), and struggling for the cause of women, gays and lesbians, people of colour, indigenous people, those impoverished, slaughtered and starving because of our economic system. God knows it is a futile struggle, for religious institutions are brutal, stuffy and conservative places. But I admire those who stay all the same, since it is the tough choice. Perhaps you can only see this from the outside.

I also realized that the strength and persuasiveness of Marxism lay not in its refusal of religion, especially Judaism and Christianity, but in its deep affinity with them. It was not for nothing that Bloch and his fellow travellers said so much about the Bible, theology, the Church and the Synagogue. It really is in the business of providing an alternative political myth that captures the imagination. As the much vaunted 'New World Order' (remember that slogan?) collapses all around us, with fear gripping one Western country after another, with an oil shock almost upon us, with the US hobbled in the Middle East, with countries putting together more and more pieces of police states, with the anti-capitalist movement inspiring a generation of teenagers, it seems that Left thought and practice
is back, although in ways that the old warhorses of the Left hardly expected.

Finally, it seemed to me that Max Weber had pinpointed only one element of Calvinism. As most of you will know, Weber famously argued that Protestantism, especially in its Calvinist form, paved the way for capitalism. By breaking up the monasteries, it turned asceticism, discipline and denial into a daily practice of work. It taught frugality and dependence on God’s grace, as well as obedience to the powers that be. Once it had done its task, it could quietly disappear, or in Weber’s phrase, it was a vanishing mediator. In his opposition to Marx—setting out to show how beliefs and ideas were more powerful than mere material factors such as the economy—he also missed something. And that was the way Calvinism also was a forerunner of Marxism. Some of its crucial ideas fed into Marxism, such as predestination (crudest of the infamous claim that ‘history is on our side’); more subtly the realization that what looks like freedom of choice is nothing of the sort) and grace (revolutions always break out from entirely unexpected quarters; they are entirely undeserved). Needless to say, I have made my peace with Calvin.

Perhaps it’s time to take Bloch with me again, as a companion on my long-awaited journeys by tramp steamer. Who knows who will stop by my chair as I sit, book open, on the deck among the containers? Will it be one of the sailors who has just danced with a fellow sailor at the crossing of the equator? Will it be the engineer who is thinking about studying theology? Will it be someone who asks me whether I believe in mermaids? Or perhaps a militant from Sea Shepherd, on her way to join her protest ship?

Reference


4

NATHAN A. SCOTT JR.’S
THE WILD PRAYER OF LONGING

David Jasper

In 1975, I was nearing the end of studying for a degree in theology at the University of Oxford, and half way through my training for ordination in the Church of England. My seminary, St Stephen’s House, was High Anglican and exuded a general smugness and intellectual conservatism that would have been unbecoming had it not been for the presence in Oxford of such marvellous people as Maurice Wiles, the Regius Professor of Theology, Peter Baelz, the Regius Professor of Moral Theology, Peter Bide, the Chaplain at Lady Margaret Hall, and Dennis Nineham, the Warden of Keble College, where I was later to embark on a happy time of research in nineteenth-century literature and theology under the tutelage of Geoffrey Rowell, now the Anglican Bishop in Europe. For one reason or another, I was fortunate enough to have personal links with all of these people in the early stages of my theological reflections, and I also appreciated (and continue to value) the insistence in the Oxford course on reasonable skills in New Testament Greek, a solid grounding in the Church Fathers, and a decent overall knowledge of the Bible, church history and systematic theology. And yet I was deeply unhappy, not (as I think I would be now) because there was the insistence that theology was only and exclusively Christian, but because I was quite unable