

Book Review

**Agon Hamza, ed., *Althusser and Theology:
Religion, Politics and Philosophy*
Leiden: Brill, 2016**

Reviewed by Todd McGowan

Agon Hamza's collection of essays on the theological dimension of Louis Althusser's philosophy offers a wholly new look at a thinker who seemed to have already been subjected to a thorough scholarly examination. It turns out, as Hamza points out in his introduction, that we must add an additional moment to the usual periodization of Althusser's work. This usual periodization begins with the epoch of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, moves to the time of self-criticism, and concludes with the late turn away from dialectics. Hamza and his contributors provide a compelling claim for including an early Althusser in this schema, an Althusser before the appearance of the Marxist works that made him one of the best known French theorists.

Althusser and Theology links Althusser's early Catholicism (which he abandoned in 1947) to his conversion to Marxism. Althusser's early writings on religion constitute his first interventions in the project of social change. Influenced by liberation theology, Althusser finds inspiration for equality in the reservoir of his Catholicism, but this is what his followers miss entirely when they read him as the proponent of a scientific Marxism.

The essays gather in this collection come together to give a new ground for understanding the emergence of Althusser's unique brand of Marxism. Not only does the periodization of Althusser's thought undergo a thorough transformation, but his Marxism itself becomes visible in a wholly different

light. The wager of the collection, as Hamza puts it in the closing lines of his introduction, is that “*it is impossible to completely understand Althusser’s philosophy, without having thoroughly studied and understood his Early Catholic Writings.*”¹ This volume pays a convincing case for the validity of this claim.

Althusser and Theology has several standout essays and none that one might freely skip over. One of the most compelling is Warren Montag’s “Althusser and the Problem of Eschatology,” which provides an exacting investigation of the role that theology plays in philosophy for Althusser. By bringing theology to bear on philosophy, Althusser paradoxically rejects the teleological image that we traditionally associate with theology. It is only a theological Marxism that can break the image of historical destiny that colors so much Marxist philosophy.

Agon Hamza’s own essay in the collection, “Christianity as Condition,” examines how Althusser’s discussion of religion can provide a political blueprint for our contemporary situation. According to Hamza, it is in his early Christian writings that we find the origin for thinking about history without a subject and class without identity, which is precisely what is needed today, when the emancipatory project is confronting the challenge of identity politics. Althusser’s great insight concerns the distinction between religion (which is an emancipatory project) and theology (which marshals the fear of God to create unified identities). On the basis of this insight, Hamza claims, “we can ... open up the space to think the distinction between the class without identity, and the conception of the formal totality (‘humanity,’ ‘society’) in an abstract sense—a distinction on which a new relation between religious experience and communism ultimately rests.”² Althusser’s religiosity becomes here the source for reimagining the communist project without the trap of class identity.

In “Between Hegel and Marx: History and Theology in the Early Althusser,” Geoff Pfeifer examines Althusser’s engagement with Christianity in order to understand his journey from Hegel to Marx. Pfeifer locates Althusser’s break from teleology and his well-known conception of history in the present in his movement away from both the Catholic Church and a Hegelian conception of teleological history. Like Montag, Pfeifer is concerned with how Althusser avoids the temptation of teleology while remaining within the Marxist emancipatory project, and he finds the answer in Althusser’s turn away from theology.

There are numerous rewards in each essay in *Althusser and Theology*. This volume could not be more timely. Its publication coincides with an explosion of interest in the thought of Louis Althusser, including the recent publication of a complete version of *Reading Capital* in English, which had never before been available. What’s more, the discovery of the role that Christianity plays in Althusser’s own version of the Marxist emancipatory project locates him alongside many current political philosophers who are making explicit the links between Christianity and secular emancipation.

Althusser and Theology belongs next to works such as Slavoj Žižek's *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For* (Verso, 2000), Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford, 2003), and Giorgio Agamben's *The Time That Remains* (Stanford, 2005). Perhaps not coincidentally, some of the essays in *Althusser and Theology* engage Žižek and Badiou. Gabriel Tupinambá's essay, "'Splitting Althusser at the Point of Religion,'" shows how Badiou and Žižek engage Althusser on the question of religion and how they reveal a path beyond him. For Tupinambá, Badiou and especially Žižek find in the Christian event the possibility of a subject beyond Althusser's interpellated subject, a subject attached to the void rather than to a social identity. This provides the basis for a different version of materialism than Althusser's, but it is consonant with the rejection of identity shared by all the essays in this collection.

The essays in *Althusser and Theology* are wide-ranging. They include a recognition of the emancipatory possibility of his early theological writings and a celebration of the turn away from religion, an investment in Althusser's conception of history without a subject and a call for a subjectivity beyond the Althusserian version. But what these various contributions share is a sense of Althusser's contemporary relevance. It is as if the look back to the early Althusser propels his philosophy forward toward the most pressing concerns of our moment.

1 Agon Hamza, "Introduction: Althusser's Christian Marxism," in Hamza, p. 6.

2 Agon Hamza, "Christianity as Condition," in Hamza, p. 63.