Modern Theology 42:1 January 2026
ISSN 0266-7177 (Print)
ISSN 1468-0025 (Online)
DOI:10.1111/moth.70016

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORK: DONALD MacKINNON'S METAPHYSICS AFTER LENIN

KHEGAN M. DELPORT and DRITËRO DEMJAHA

Abstract

Donald MacKinnon expressed a distinctly realist and actualist metaphysic. One aspect of his metaphysics that is less frequently commented upon, however, is his reception of Vladimir Lenin. While not an unqualified admirer of Bolshevism, it is readily apparent that MacKinnon incorporated elements of Lenin's philosophy and theories regarding practice into his critique of idealism and his Christology also. Beginning with the writings of Lenin himself, and tracing this influence throughout MacKinnon's oeuvre, we give the most expansive treatment to date of MacKinnon's reception of Lenin, showing that there is a coherency in his reception of Lenin with his philosophical realism and actualist metaphysics more generally. This can be seen especially in the way that he reads Leninist philosophical tactics as a variety of metaphysical actualism, insofar as revolutionary agency and freedom may exceed reductionist accounts of historical causality or spiritual idealisation. The burgeoning forth of new options and circumstances as a result of revolutionary action, coupled with his belief in the primacy of resurrection, hereby undermines any pseudo-tragic or culturally pessimistic reading of MacKinnon's trajectory.[1]

> We are actors of infinite acts …
>
> – Mario Santiago Papasquiaro[2]

> For those who cleave to it, a paradox of actually existing revolution is that in its potential for utter reconfiguration, it is, precisely, beyond words, a messianic interruption—one that emerges from the quotidian. Unsayable, yet the culmination of everyday exhortations. Beyond language and of it, beyond representation and not.
>
> – China Miéville[3]

Khegan M. Delport
Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Private Bag x 20, Hatfield, 0028, SOUTH AFRICA; Institut für Evangelische Theologie, Fakultät Geistes—und Kulturwissenschaften, Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg, An der Universität 11, Bamberg, 96047, Bayern GERMANY
Email: khegan.delport@gmail.com
Dritëro Demjaha
Westfield House, 30 Huntingdon Road, Cambridge, CB3 0HH, UK
Email: demjaha.dritero@gmail.com

[1] The essay was partially conceived for the occasion of the centenary of Lenin's death (1924-2024).

[2] Mario Santiago Papasquiaro, *Advice from 1 Disciple of Marx to 1 Heidegger Fanatic*, trans. Cole Heinowitz and Alexis Graman (Wave Books, 2013), 2.

[3] China Miéville, *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* (Verso, 2017), 306.

On the Borderlands of Christianity and Marxism

Donald MacKinnon, a Scottish Episcopal theologian and philosopher, proposed a strongly realist and actualist metaphysics, a trend that is pervasive throughout his oeuvre. Today, he is often remembered for his well-known penchant for the tragic,[4] which runs as a leitmotif of his authorship, even as it sharpens more strongly in the period after his Gifford Lectures.[5] At his mature period, MacKinnon regarded tragedy as resistant to any metaphysics or ideology that attempted to diminish, or resolve, historical contingency and loss. Theologically, this is registered within his retrieval of the tragic for Christian thought, his moral realism, and his general antipathy towards theodicy insofar as it concocts "recipes for living" that ensures "endurance will be justified".[6] Within the domain of philosophy, one way this tendency manifests is in his preference for a logical atomism and pluralistic realism; he sought to maintain a sphere for "external" relations within metaphysics, logic, and moral philosophy, against their collapse into a monistic interiority of relations—here explicitly following G.E. Moore *contra* F.H. Bradley.[7] He combined this with an Aristotelian metaphysics of substance

[4] Khegan M. Delport, *On Tragedy and Transcendence: An Essay on the Metaphysics of Donald MacKinnon and Rowan Williams* (Pickwick Publications, 2021); Kenneth Surin (ed.), *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon* (Cambridge University Press, 1989); Giles Waller, "Freedom, Fate and Sin in Donald MacKinnon's Use of Tragedy", in *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature, and Tragic Theory*, ed. Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (Ashgate, 2011), 101-18; Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 108-36.

[5] Donald M. MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (Cambridge University Press, 1974); cf. Graham Ward, "Tragedy as Subclause: George Steiner's Dialogue with Donald MacKinnon", *Heythrop Journal* 34 (1993): 278.

[6] MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics*, 134.

[7] Ibid., 32; cf. Donald M. MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays*, ed. George W. Roberts and Donovan E. Smucker (Lippincott, 1968), 62-63. The *locus classicus* for F.H. Bradley's deconstruction of relations is *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay*, second edition (Oxford University Press, 1969 [1897]), Chapter I-III and Appendix B in the second edition. G.E. Moore's critique of Bradley is found in his seminal "External and Internal Relations", in *Philosophical Studies* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), 276-309. On F.H. Bradley's account of relations, see Guido Bonino, "Bradley's Regress: Relations, Exemplification, Unity", *Axiomathes* 23 (2013): 189-200; A.R. Manser, "Bradley and Internal Relations", *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 13 (1982): 181-95; Pierfrancesco Basile, "Bradley's Metaphysics", in *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. W.J. Mander (Oxford University Press, 2014), 189-208. For our specific argument, we do not presuppose the accuracy of Moore or MacKinnon's critique of Bradley's "anti-relationalism", but only that MacKinnon's aversion to monism is important for his metaphysical project. Indeed, the whole assumption of whether Bradley collapses all relations into internal relations—a reading traceable to Russell and Moore—is a contentious reception of the Bradleyan corpus. Whereas Bradley had defined internal relations as being grounded in the terms that are related, Russell took this to imply that internal relations could be reduced to being properties of each term—despite Bradley's own explicit rejection of the equation of relations and properties—while Moore argued that internal relations could be defined as essential properties of relative terms. In Moore's version, if internalised relations are absent, then the relative term would no longer retain its identity. Moore's critique of Bradley is that while it is perfectly logical to assert that the absence of a relational property means that the relative term ceases to be self-identical, it is another matter entirely to argue that this relative term could never have existed without this relational property. In short, for Moore, this step turns contingent facts and relations into necessary entailments. For our purposes, it is this specific axiom which MacKinnon takes up and equates within determinism. Overall, we think that MacKinnon's preference for G.E. Moore against F.H. Bradley may be read as a part of his more general resistance to conservative idealism, one that is parallel to the "materialist" critique of right-Hegelianism found in Marxism. However, it should be said that while Bradley himself acknowledged the greater truth of internal relations—since a world of purely external relations would imply an experiential field of atomistic dissociation—his metaphysical vision ultimately implies a spiritual and non-relational monism, for which even internal relations cannot be ultimate (cf. Basile, "Bradley's Metaphysics," 198-201). We do admit however that moments of Bradley's speculations in Appendix B may lend themselves to something of Moore's characterisation; e.g., Bradley's hypothetical scenario of "perfect relational knowledge of the world" in relation to all "red-haired" people so that if one started "internally" with "any one character of the Universe" you could eventually "pass to the rest", in which "no passage would be external" (*Appearance and Reality*, Appendix B, 520).

and accident, which was able to sustain—better than Platonism—a hylomorphic contingency,[8] or what he called "the interruptive force of material causality."[9] The possibility of "external" relations to his mind permitted a greater metaphysical openness to accidental and tragic indeterminacy, and cohered with his Aristotelian sensibilities over-against the Platonist suspicion of tragedy. And even though the category of the tragic has little place within the Kantian ethical schema—a fact MacKinnon was not ignorant of—his connection of tragedy to human freedom was inflected by Kant's transcendental approach, and especially the supposition that moral freedom is not empirically deduced or represented without theoretical amphiboly; thus, to avoid a reduction to determinism, it must be transcendentally ascertained as a working assumption of practical reason: "*We cannot represent: we achieve the sense of what we affirm in action*."[10] The primacy of the ethical as an entrance to the metaphysical thus remains key for MacKinnon, as it was for Kant, even as the transcendental import he gives to moral tragedy moves MacKinnon beyond Kant himself.

MacKinnon's Kantianism has been covered elsewhere by those versed in his work,[11] but this emphasis on the primacy of action connects to his reception of other figures. Less commented upon in the secondary literature is his appropriation of one particularly controversial thinker: Vladimir Lenin.[12] MacKinnon dedicated several texts to Bolshevism, and Marxism more generally, even presenting several papers around the centenary of Lenin's birth.[13] MacKinnon was certainly not an unqualified admirer of the Russian Revolution and its aftermaths,[14] as seen in his many critical remarks on Leninist-Marxism and Stalinism. And yet, in his mature period

[8] Donald M. MacKinnon, "Aristotle's Conception of Substance", in *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, ed. Renford Bambrough (London: Routledge, 1965), 97-119; Review of *The Vindication of Absolute Idealism*, by T.L.S. Sprigge, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39 (May 1986): 247.

[9] Donald M. MacKinnon, "Article Review of *The Principle of Hope*, by Ernst Bloch", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41 (May 1988): 248.

[10] Donald M. MacKinnon, "Aspects of Kant's Influence on British Theology [1990]", in *Kant and His Influence*, ed. George Macdonald Ross and Tony McWalter (Continuum, 2005), 364. Italics original.

[11] Cf. Andrew Bowyer, *Donald MacKinnon's Theology: To Perceive Tragedy Without the Loss of Hope* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2019); Khegan Delport, *On Tragedy and Transcendence*, 92-101; John Milbank, "A Critique of the Theology of Right," in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Blackwell, 1997), 7-35.

[12] One exception is Bowyer, *Donald MacKinnon's Theology*, 114-19.

[13] See especially his essays "The Future of Man", "Lenin and Theology", and "The Absolute and Relative in History: A Theological Reflection on the Centenary of Lenin's Birth", in *Explorations in Theology 5* (SCM Press, 1979), 1-10; 11-29; 55-69 resp.

[14] MacKinnon referred repeatedly to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, trans. John O'Neill (Beacon Press, 1969); cf. MacKinnon, *Explorations in Theology*, 18; 49. However, in light of the broader argumentation of this article, one should delimit the range of Lenin's influence over the revolution, and distinguish it from the counter-revolutionary trajectory of Stalinism—at least within Merleau-Ponty's and MacKinnon's understanding of its developments. Merleau-Ponty's "voluntarist" reaccounting of Leninist/Trotskyite thought, overall, appears to resonate with MacKinnon's reading of Lenin: "When he was in power Trotsky had a vivid awareness that although history as a whole can be seen from the perspective of the history of class struggles, to reach its revolutionary goal it must at every moment be thought through and willed by individuals; and although there are privileged moments in history, lost occasions can alter the course of events for a long time and so must be seized when they offer themselves, even if there is not always time to persuade the masses first; and, finally, that history has to be made through violence and does not make itself. Somewhere he relates that one day while he and Lenin were working together, he asked Lenin: "If they shoot us, what will become of the Revolution?" Lenin thought a moment, smiled and said simply: "Perhaps after all they will not shoot us." Even if a revolution is "in the path of history," it needs "individual initiative"; *Humanism and Terror*, 88-89.

MacKinnon was quite resilient in referring to Lenin, especially in his critique of idealism—a subject of wry commentary among some of his students.[15] It is seen especially in how MacKinnon reads Lenin's tactics as involving a prioritisation of action over philosophical or spiritual ideation; this connects to his broader metaphysical realism and the conceit that revolutionary intervention may constitute a sort of "evental" opening within history,[16] insofar as it, potentially, outpaces the matrices of determinism. Again, this is formed in resistance to the monistic implications of Bradley, as well as a conservatism in Anglo-Catholic quarters.[17] His belief in a possible burgeoning forth of new options and circumstances as a result of revolutionary action hereby qualifies any culturally pessimistic reading of MacKinnon—even as his oeuvre readily shows that every action occurs within, and is delimited by, material conditioning. Even as these tensions are present in his work, in this essay we argue that MacKinnon resisted any tragic fatalism, or any strategy which sought to contain the sway of the actual within hardened predeterminations. For him, neither hand-wringing quietism nor determinism is metaphysically or practically serviceable; this is a pseudo-tragic option for MacKinnon, unable to account for the irruptions and contingencies of history.[18] However, it is also clear that MacKinnon at moments does interpret Marxism and Leninism within a tragic dialectic of freedom and determination, and this does hermeneutically imprint his reading of Bolshevism somewhat.[19] Moreover, in the background to all this, one may see MacKinnon's reception of Lenin's philosophical tactics as being wrought through his immersion in Anglican incarnationalism,[20] French Thomistic existentialism,[21] and Barthian actualism.[22] Hereby, he sought to resist any percolations of spiritual idealism and its

[15] Cf. Fergus Kerr, "Comment: Remembering Donald MacKinnon," *New Blackfriars* 85 (2004): 267-68.

[16] Here adopting the lingo of French Marxists like Deleuze and Badiou, heirs to Heidegger, one may configure MacKinnon's (and Lenin's) conception of revolutionary action as a kind of "evental" opening in excess of finite being; see for example Alain Badiou, "One Divides Itself into Two," in *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, ed. Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek (Duke University Press, 2007), 16: "the new man is a real creation, something that has not yet come into existence because it arises out of the destruction of historical antagonisms".

[17] By Anglo-Catholic "conservatism", we are referring to MacKinnon's aversion to what he called "ecclesiological fundamentalism", by which he meant "a readiness to accept the historical experience of the church as self-justifying". He characterised these trajectories as "anti-intellectual" and "profoundly conservative" insofar as they ultimately identify "what is with what ought to be"—here echoing his critique of Hegel elsewhere – and it is precisely this which he sees as having "peculiar appeal for Anglicans"; Donald M. MacKinnon, "Authority and Freedom in the Church," in *Kenotic Ecclesiology: Selected Writings of Donald M. MacKinnon*, ed. John C. McDowell, Scott A. Kirkland, and Ashley John Moyse (Fortress Press, 2016), 211.

[18] This can be seen especially in his interventions regarding the question of nuclear armament, and his caustic refrains on any supposed "tragic" resignation in its wake; cf. MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, 175-92.

[19] Here possibly under the sway of his Cambridge colleague Raymond Williams; see Donald M. MacKinnon, "Theology and Tragedy," *Religious Studies* 2 (1967): 163-69; Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Broadview Encore Editions, 2006), 61-84.

[20] His *Signpost* pamphlets give ample evidence for his thoroughgoing incarnational approach from early on.

[21] That is, the reception of the Thomistic *actus essendi* á la Chenu, Gilson, Maritain, and Marcel.

[22] See already Donald M. MacKinnon, "And the Son of Man that Thou Visitest Him – I", *Christendom* 8 (Sept. 1938): 189-190n4, for the pairing of "revelation" and Russell's pluralistic realism. Barth is not mentioned here explicitly, but MacKinnon was already versed in Barthian theology during this period, as can be seen in the *Signposts* pamphlets; cf. Bowyer, *Donald MacKinnon's Theology*, 89. On Barth's actualism more generally, see George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 27-42.

related "de-historicization of Christianity".[23] In light of this, we argue that MacKinnon's turn to Lenin, while no doubt eccentric and controversial, nonetheless is coherent with his broader theological and philosophical commitments.

The argument here will hopefully show through a kind of analogy of proportion, teetering on the borderlands of Marxism and Christianity, that MacKinnon drew provocative comparisons between the Christ-event and the October Revolution, arguing for their mutual, parabolic elucidation.[24] At the outset we should say that by doing this we do not believe that MacKinnon is making any crude valorisation of the Russian Revolution, or giving blanket legitimation to Leninist tactics. Rather, we propose that MacKinnon's Christological actualism is contrasted to an idealistic approach that displaces the historicity of the Christ-event; he then correlates this to a Marxist conception of the unity of theory and practice to show how revolutionary action may usher in historical freedoms irreducible to the sequelae of determinism. This reading is explicitly counterposed to any fatalistic passivity, insofar as this implies that no imaginative politics or liberatory conditions may be achieved historically. To substantiate this reading, we draw upon texts, including unpublished documents, to show the pervasiveness of these themes in his developing thought and his critical reception of Leninism.

In the following section, we address why MacKinnon may have found an intellectual affinity with Lenin, particularly in his later work. We will argue that Lenin's configuration of the relation between theory and practice provided an account of action which aimed to transcend a carapaced determinism, and made allowance for the issuing of creative novelty. Following a leftist acception of Hegel, we show how Lenin configured revolutionary tactics via a priority of the actual, one that involved the reconciliation of the contingent and the essential, freedom and necessity, within dialectical cognition and action. Thereafter, through a comparison with Louis Althusser's own centennial engagement with Lenin, we suggest that Lenin's actualism is not intrinsically averse to a theological reading, insofar as philosophy, from a Leninist perspective, resists the union of theory and practice, even as religious honesty (at the very least) may produce forms of practice and embodied action that are more amenable to a Marxist rendering. In the section thereafter, we will provide a genealogical context for MacKinnon's actualism, illuminating it in relation to his reception of Leninist-Marxism. We make the argument that MacKinnon gradually saw the usefulness of Leninism for resisting the trajectories of British Idealism as well as ecclesiological conservatism and complacency in the postwar period; moreover, he eventually came to see that Lenin's philosophical tactics could be parabolically elucidated through an incarnational actualism. Finally, in the penultimate section, we address the somewhat thorny issue of MacKinnon's analogy between Christ and Lenin, focusing on the act of resurrection as the primary locus for world-transvaluation, before moving to a conclusion.

[23] Bowyer, *Donald MacKinnon's Theology*, 115.

[24] Cf. Donald M. MacKinnon, "Review of *Marxism and Christianity*, by Alasdair MacIntyre", *Journal of Theological Studies* 21 (April 1970): 276-77.

'What was it, what is it, this revolutionary act?'

In this section we will briefly address two issues directly relevant for MacKinnon's reading of Lenin. The first is MacKinnon's suggestion that Lenin transforms the relationship between theory and practice as understood by traditional Marxism, which is already a modified form of historical determinism because its dialectical quality transforms the concept of historical causality traditionally employed by determinists. This allows him, among other things, to affirm a unity of theory and practice in a manner that is significantly resemblant to the Christian affirmation of that same unity.[25] The second issue concerns the relationship between theology and philosophy. It can be brought into focus by comparing MacKinnon's essay from 1970 entitled "Lenin and Theology" with Louis Althusser's seminal "Lenin and Philosophy"[26] from around the same time. The purpose of this comparison is to highlight not only the similarity with which both thinkers—the one a Scottish Episcopal theologian, the other a French Marxist philosopher (and erstwhile Roman Catholic Hegelian)—respond to the centenary of Lenin's birth, but to also show that Lenin's actualist subversion of traditional philosophising (even within the tradition of Marxism) is congenial to MacKinnon's theological aspirations; as Roland Boer notes *apropos* of Althusser, "if we thought that Althusser had put Hegel's theology behind him, then it is Lenin who permits him to return to that theology".[27] As we will see, MacKinnon's engagement with Lenin similarly allows him access to certain motifs of Hegelian thought previously foreclosed by his critique of British Hegelian idealism.

Lenin and Theory / Lenin and Practice

It may be argued that MacKinnon's engagement with Leninist praxis, as an exemplar of metaphysical actualism, primarily represents an attempt to infuse his own "realist" brand of metaphysical actualism with elements of Hegelian dialectical "idealism".[28] However, by going through Lenin, whom he sees as the most consistent Marxist refuser of idealism,[29] MacKinnon seeks to temper this qualified or "dialectical" appropriation; this is important because "idealism remains", according to MacKinnon, "a besetting temptation of the theological understanding". This appropriation of idealism is furthermore no mere act of theoretical syncretism but involves an appeal to Lenin's own "confessed admiration for Hegel's *Logic*".[30] Lenin's study

[25] Kenneth Surin writes of MacKinnon that to his mind "no British philosophical theologian has wrestled more protractedly with the theological implications of Marx's insistence on the unity of theory and practice"; Kenneth Surin, "Christology, Tragedy and 'Ideology'", *Theology* 89, no. 730 (1986): 289.

[26] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (Monthly Review Press, 1971).

[27] Roland Boer, *Criticism of Heaven: On Marxism and Theology* (Brill, 2007), 130.

[28] Indeed, as Bowyer argues, MacKinnon cannot be classified as a dogmatic realist or idealist since he "resisted projects of idealist metaphysics and positivist realism" insofar as they curtailed "the subject's particular place in history", thus leading to "compromise moral comprehension", even as he also retained a "moral realism" that sustained "the perennial dialectic of idealism and realism which warrants the retention of a recall to metaphysics"; *Donald MacKinnon's Theology*, 7-8.

[29] MacKinnon, "Absolute and Relative in History", in *Explorations in Theology*, 57.

[30] MacKinnon, "Lenin and Theology", in *Explorations in Theology*, 13; "Absolute and Relative in History", 57.

of the *Science of Logic* between September and December of 1914 has been described as a pivotal episode for contemporary Marxist theory.[31] In the following years, the latter would write his most famous and influential texts, including *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, the *April Theses*, and *State and Revolution*, before leading the Bolsheviks to victory in the 1917 Russian Revolution. According to the feminist Marxist-humanist philosopher Raya Dunayevskaya, Lenin's incorporation into his praxis of the *Logic*-derived concepts of "self-movement" and of the "unity of opposites" constituted "the philosophic foundation for all serious writing that Lenin was to do during the rest of his life".[32] The idea of a break in Lenin's thought, punctuated by his study of the *Logic*, has been variously criticised[33] and defended.[34] For our purposes, it is important to note that MacKinnon reproduces the central motifs of its defenders from the "Marxist-humanist" reception of Lenin;[35] he emphasises not only the latter's admiration for Hegel (which he mentions in both of the major Lenin essays), but also the idea that Lenin makes a contribution, beyond the already dialectical character of traditional Marxism, to our understanding of historical causality and the relationship between theory and practice. Lenin's unique contribution, for MacKinnon, is said to consist in his "existential" (we might today say, "embodied") reconciliation of the claims of determinism and freedom;[36] that while utterly convinced of the objective laws of historical development, he was also both "executant and architect of most drastic historical change", and that his actions leading to the Russian Revolution, "might well be judged by the most conservative Marxist theoreticians to defy the established laws of social evolution".[37]

How to understand this reconciliation? As György Lukács put it in his 1924 book on Lenin (a philosophical obituary of sorts): "Lenin recognised the approaching revolution as the fundamental problem of his time and understood and explained all events, Russian as well as international from this perspective of the actuality of the revolution […] *the actuality of the revolution: this is the core of Lenin's thought*."[38] Actuality must be understood here in the Hegelian sense of the unity of essence and concrete existence constituted through the moments of possibility and necessity which it ultimately reconciles.[39] Philosophers typically oppose what is "actual" to what is inexistent or merely "possible". Hegel is notorious for additionally denying the actuality of contingent or ontologically "substandard" entities, such as tyrannical states, societies in crisis, or children that have not yet realised their potentiality as adults. However, a contingent entity's possibility to become a "developed actuality" is also constitutive of its actuality beyond its merely outer existence. As Michael Inwood notes, contingent entities themselves

[31] Nathan Coombs, *History and Event: From Marxism to Contemporary French Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 66.

[32] Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution: From Hegel to Sartre, and from Marx to Mao* (Delacorte Press, 1973), 97.

[33] Coombs, *History and Event*, 66-86.

[34] Kevin Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study* (Brill, 2022).

[35] There are also indications in "Lenin and Theology" that MacKinnon would emphasise Lenin's continuity with the Narodniks in order to temper the thesis of continuity vis-à-vis Kautsky; MacKinnon, "Lenin and Theology", 13.

[36] MacKinnon, "Lenin and Theology", 15.

[37] Ibid., 15-16.

[38] György Lukács, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought* (Verso, 2009), 11. Original emphasis.

[39] G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 465.

> form the conditions of a developed actuality, which is also necessary, both because all the conditions of its realization are present and because its conditions are sublated or absorbed into it, so that it is in a sense independent and self-determining. A "developed actuality" is an entity such as a living organism that absorbs the chance objects in its environment, so as to foster its own growth according to a pattern prescribed by its inner nature; a rational agent who uses whatever he encounters to fulfil a foreordained plan; or a society which converts the materials and forces in its environment into purposive structures.[40]

Hence, actuality is linked, for Hegel, to the unity of an entity's inner essence and outer existence, as well as to the unity or reconciliation of possibility and necessity. There are existences more actual than mere possibilities, but also possibilities more actual than mere existences. This is because the unity of possibility and necessity results in the recognition that change is as much an index of ontological necessity as what already exists.

MacKinnon correctly generalises that the "Marxist is concerned less to understand than to change".[41] But the possibility of this change (or "actualisation") is based on the revolutionary actor's need to "grasp the interior dialectical movement of historical events".[42] To this extent, the "Marxist is concerned less with being than with becoming, or rather as one who is in some sense a disciple of Hegel, with becoming as the way in which being is realized".[43] It is the form of this realisation or actualisation that is key. As Lukács notes, "for the genuine Marxist there is always a reality more real and therefore more important than isolated facts and tendencies".[44] Lenin's notes on Hegel's *Logic* show deep sensitivity to this insight; he notes—multiple times—that "[a]ctuality is higher than Being, and higher than Existence",[45] and then takes care to consult another one of Hegel's texts on logic (the first volume of the *Encyclopaedia*) in order to confirm that "possibility" is, for Hegel, an empty category: "Whether a thing is possible or impossible depends on the content, i.e., on the sum-total of the moments of Actuality which in its unfolding discloses itself to be Necessity". He concludes, significantly, by noting that the "unfolding of the sum-total of the moments of actuality = the essence of dialectical cognition".[46] This is important because Lenin deliberately emphasises the subjective or "idealist" dimension of Hegel's conclusion. The totality of the moments of actuality—the mediation of possibility and necessity—occurs in "dialectical cognition". The formulation "dialectical cognition" does not occur anywhere in Hegel and is, strictly speaking, an oxymoron; cognition belongs to philosophical "speculation", relating to the positivity of reason, while "dialectic" is associated with the negativity of reason. We do not believe this to be an error, but a deliberate reconfiguration by Lenin who simultaneously turns Hegel "on his head", by reversing subjective cognition's link to speculation and "lowering" it to the level of the negativity of reason, and takes the same negativity of reason to allow for the discernment of the interior dialectical movement of historical events. "Determinism", Lenin insists, "not only does not

[40] Michael Inwood, "Actuality", in *A Hegel Dictionary* (Blackwell, 1992), 34.
[41] MacKinnon, "Absolute and Relative in History", 55.
[42] Ibid., 55.
[43] Ibid., 56.
[44] Lukács, *Lenin*, 11.
[45] Lenin, "Conspectus on Hegel's *Science of Logic*", in *Collected Works 38* (Progress Press, 1961), 156.
[46] Ibid., 158.

pre-suppose fatalism, but, on the contrary, supplies a basis for intelligent activity".[47] This view of dialectical cognition as the totality of the moments of actuality is linked to Lenin's view of subjectivity as freedom, as a critical freedom over the contradictory determination of the present state of affairs.[48] The "average man", Lukács writes, "first sees the proletarian revolution when the working masses are already fighting on the barricades".[49] In doing so he is merely reflecting or "reacting" to empirical reality. There is no space here for free subjectivity because there is an immediate identity of empirical reality and human empirical perception. Freedom requires consciousness of the inner contradictoriness of present existence.

This emphasis on the need for a critical discernment of realities more real than mere facts should not be taken as a rejection of the correspondence theory of knowledge; rather, Lenin modifies the correspondence theory by placing human practice at its centre: as he puts it in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, for materialist epistemology it is "the 'success' of human practice [that] proves the correspondence between our ideas and the objective nature of the things we perceive".[50] This existentially or practically reconfigured modality of dialectical actuality seeks to account for the recognition of something truer to the present than the presently contradictory structuring of being—without appealing to dogmatic Marxist notions of historical necessity; rather it is the *commitment* to one's belief in the contradictory nature of the present structuring of being that mediates the real possibility of free practical action and the formal necessity of things as they presently are.

This particular orientation of Lenin's thought should help us answer the obvious question: why Lenin? Why not, for example, Luxemburg? The fundamental difference between Lenin and Luxemburg is aptly summed up by J. P. Nettl (whose work MacKinnon refers to in "Lenin and Theology"[51]). Nettl observes that while "Rosa reduced philosophy to a tactic", "Lenin enlarged tactics into a philosophy".[52] "Tactics as philosophy" may, for our purposes, be used to sum up MacKinnon's perspective on Lenin's actualism as a special way of constituting the relationship between theory and practice. Tactics are a philosophical or "theoretical" problem because, as we have seen, the actuality of the historical situation must be determined in concert with the dialectical cognition of the historical possibilities of change that informs the possibility of commitment. This then absorbs the philosophical problem of the individual's freedom into the context of a successful tactical operation. It has always been considered unlikely by Marxists that more than a minority of the proletariat would achieve and maintain a revolutionary consciousness; as Paul Mattick wryly notes, however, "Lenin accepted this situation optimistically".[53] His view of Marxism as a specific

[47] "Determinizm ne tol'ko ne predpolagaet fatalizma, a naprotiv, imenno i daet poevu dlja razumnogo dejstvovanija"; quoted in J.J. O'Rourke, *The Problem of Freedom in Marxist Thought* (D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1974), 70.

[48] Again, in his "Conspectus on Hegel's *Science of Logic*", Lenin notes that "when one reads Hegel on causality, it appears strange at first glance that he dwells so relatively lightly on this theme, beloved of the Kantians. Why? Because, indeed for him causality is only *one* of the determinations of universal connection"; Lenin, "Conspectus on Hegel's *Science of Logic*", 162.

[49] Lukács, *Lenin*, 11.

[50] Lenin, "Materialism and Empiriocriticism", in *Collected Works 14* (Progress Press, 1962), 140.

[51] MacKinnon, "Lenin and Theology", 12.

[52] J.P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, *Volume II* (Oxford University Press, 1966), 633.

[53] Paul Mattick, "Spontaneity and Organisation" (1949); https://www.marxists.org/archive/mattick-paul/1949/spontaneity.htm.

theoretical practice, produced "from the outside", tasks the theoretician with its importation into the proletariat; this, in turn, can only be achieved through a practical and ethical commitment to the actuality of the revolution. In this sense, the exteriority of theoretical consciousness corresponds to the interiority of the actuality of a revolutionary situation. As we will see later, MacKinnon was deeply influenced by the atomist theories of G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell as well as correspondence theories of truth. As we will also argue, this led MacKinnon to assert the epistemic priority of "fact" and to emphasise that truth is always measured in concert with the "singular, individual, particular" dimension of reality. This, alongside his vehement insistence on the contingent nature of historical change leads him to turn to an ostensible "voluntarist" like Lenin (rather than the "determinists" to his left), whose belief in a possible burgeoning forth of new options and circumstances depended on an understanding of "theory not [as] a dogma, but a guide to action" —not, in other words, universal "formulas" which "at best are capable only of marking out *general tasks*".[54] As Goethe's Mephistopheles would put it, "Theory, my friend, is grey, but green is the eternal tree of life". The line was a favourite of Lenin's,[55] and is made more significant when one understands the psychological implications of Goethe's *Farbenlehre* where grey, as a shade between black and white, represents neutrality and balance but also stagnation, whereas green—far from our contemporary associations with simple living and wind turbines—represents *usefulness*.

Lenin and Philosophy / Lenin and Theology

By stressing the existential mediation of determinism and freedom, MacKinnon is asking us to consider whether the strength of one's ideas can come not only from their intellectual form but also from the person willing them into action. Being "a man of action", MacKinnon notes, "Lenin threw his ideas together in forms that are easily vulnerable; but his ideas were to him a matter of life and death".[56] He manifested the truth of Hegel's claim that willing is itself "a particular way of thinking"; namely, that it is thinking as "particularity", "thinking translating itself into existence, thinking as the *drive* to give itself existence".[57] Louis Althusser would take a similar interpretative stance in his own piece on the centenary of Lenin's birth, the now classic "Lenin and Philosophy". There, he would argue that Lenin's refusal to discuss philosophical matters with the left Bolsheviks was not only tactics but a "practice" of philosophy, based on the "consciousness of the ruthless, primary fact

[54] Lenin, *Letters on Tactics* (Progress Press, 1970), 9.

[55] Ibid., 9.

[56] MacKinnon, "Lenin and Theology", 14; The young Lenin was astutely aware of his "unpreparedness in the [philosophical] sphere"; see his letter to Maxim Gorky from 7.02.1908, Lenin, "Letters: November 1895-November 1911", in *Collected Works 34* (Progress Publishers, 1966), 379-82. Althusser gives the following paraphrase of Lenin's position from the letter: "Lenin said himself: I am not a philosopher, I am badly prepared in this domain" (Letter to Gorky, 7 February 1908). Lenin said: "I know that my formulations and definitions are vague, unpolished; I know that philosophers are going to accuse my materialism of being 'metaphysical'". But he adds: "that is not the question. Not only do I not 'philosophize' with their philosophy, I do not 'philosophize' like them at all. Their way of 'philosophizing' is to expend fortunes of intelligence and subtlety for no other purpose than to *ruminate in philosophy*. Whereas I treat philosophy differently, I *practise* it, as Marx intended, in obedience to what it is. That is why I believe I am a 'dialectical materialist'"; Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 31.

[57] G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.S. Nisbet (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 35. Our emphasis.

that philosophy divides".[58] Certainly, this antipathy towards philosophy is traceable to Lenin's own writings; in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, Lenin professes his admiration for the Christian Marxist Joseph Dietzgen's tactical antiphilosophical stance:

> Dietzgen was ready to prefer "religious honesty" to the "half-heartedness" of freethinking professors, for "there at least there is a system," there we find integral people, people who do not separate theory from practice. For the Herr Professors "philosophy is not a science, but a means of defence against Social-Democracy …". "All who call themselves philosophers, professors, and university lecturers are, despite their apparent freethinking, more or less immersed in superstition and mysticism … and in relation to Social-Democracy constitute a single … reactionary mass". "Now, in order to follow the true path, without being led astray by all the religious and philosophical gibberish (*Welsch*), it is necessary to study the falsest of all false paths (*der Holzweg der Holzwege*), philosophy."[59]

A full heart and half a head, it certainly seems, would have been the preferred compromise. Althusser provides a lucid commentary on Lenin's text: "we need to follow a true path; but in order to follow a true path it is necessary to study philosophy, which is 'the falsest of all false paths' (*der Holzweg der Holzwege*). Which means, to speak plainly, that there can be no true path (*sc*. in the sciences, but above all in politics) without a study, and, eventually a theory of philosophy as a false path."[60] The young Marx famously repudiated the demand of "the *practical* political party in Germany" to negate philosophy. He did so not because there was anything wrong with the demand but because one "cannot abolish [*aufheben*] philosophy without making it a reality".[61] This is why the negation of philosophy itself requires a kind of philosophy of philosophy as the false path, a philosophy, moreover, which must be "practised" (in Althusser's specific sense) because it must refuse philosophical division in the realm of politics. Naive "religious honesty" is therefore preferable, Althusser notes, because it is not speculative but "inscribed in practice".[62] This is all far from an endorsement of "theology" (which, in a Feuerbachian mode, is frequently admonished, throughout the history of Marxism, as a reification of the humanely religious), but it is nonetheless important as a statement on the preference of the one-sidedness of religious honesty over the one-sidedness of institutional philosophy. Those ("integral people") who do not separate theory and practice can look back to the origins of their own embeddedness in a given tradition and, ultimately, that is precisely the sort of thing which MacKinnon finds to be lacking in the theology of his own time.

[58] Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 26.

[59] Lenin, "Materialism and Empiriocriticism", *Collected Works 14*, 340.

[60] Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 31.

[61] Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, trans. J. O'Malley (Cambridge University Press, 1972), 136.

[62] Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 30.

If Marxism, as MacKinnon affirms, is already a modified, dialectical determinism, then the further modification of dialectics afforded by Lenin may be described as an "incarnational" one; in Lenin's "life and work the Marxist idea of social transformation became terrifyingly incarnate". MacKinnon recognises the ambiguity inherent to such worldly realisation, adding that, as the paradigmatic dedicant of revolutionary action, the study of Lenin continuously reminds us of "the dark side of such commitment".[63] And this study of and engagement with Lenin is necessary because we still continue to "live in the shadow of the impact of that incarnation", so much so that its study can be the source of a continual impulse to engage anew with the doctrine of the incarnation and the fundamental realities of Christology and salvation.[64] In so far as there is here an analogy, it is not between Lenin and Christ as such, but between the "life and work" of the one and the other. Once again, MacKinnon notes, it is in Lenin's "biography [that] theory and practice achieve a new unity".[65] We will return to the question of analogy between Christ and Lenin in a later section, but for now what is important to say is that this emphasis on the irreducibility of creative work underpins the shared hostility to idealism which MacKinnon identifies in both Marxism and Christianity.[66]

The Actuality of Christ and Lenin

Having set something of a background for Lenin's appeal for MacKinnon in his mature position, in this section we seek to trace MacKinnon's developing reception of Leninist-Marxism, hereby giving a broader context to his later writings, and why it eventually took the form it did. There are marked differences in tone which are noticeable. But what accounts for the development of his reception of Lenin? In this section, we make the argument, tracing some lines through his earlier writings, that MacKinnon's mature appropriation of Lenin stemmed from a deeper reading of Marxist texts during the period of the Cold War, as well as what he saw as a consonance between Lenin's philosophical tactics and his preference for metaphysical actualism. It was also linked to his reactions to some varieties of Anglo-Catholic conservatism, as may be witnessed in his critiques of the ecclesial establishment.[67] MacKinnon's earlier writings in fact exhibit a strongly polemical posture vis-à-vis Marxism in general. Evidenced here is a marked advocacy for a Catholic intellectualism and social doctrine, linked to his involvement with the Christendom Group—a working group of Anglo-Catholics committed to the development of "Christian

[63] MacKinnon, "Lenin and Theology", 21.

[64] Ibid., 21.

[65] Ibid., 19.

[66] If, as John Milbank suggests, socialism, understood as "the theorisation of society as the work of human personhood made manifest in free labour", is "the joker in the pack of left-wing options", then it is because "'creativity' is the joker in the pack of genealogies of human ontology"; John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Blackwell, 2013), 262.

[67] See the essays contained in Donald M. MacKinnon, *Kenotic Ecclesiology*; cf. "The Case for Disestablishment", *The Tablet* (19-26 December 1970): 1229-1230.

sociology" in the interwar period.[68] From this period, until his mature writings, there is a significant influence of Catholic Thomism and humanism[69] as found in the likes of Etienne Gilson[70] and Jacques Maritain,[71] and later through extensive engagement with Hans Urs von Balthasar.[72] The distinctly Anglo-Catholic sociology and ecclesiology of the young MacKinnon may be gleaned especially from the *Signposts* texts of the early 1940s.[73] Here Christology and ecclesiology are conceptually aligned with flesh-and-blood materiality, insofar as the ecclesial extension of Christ's corporeality through time is related to "the priority of the incarnation."[74] The institutional nature of the church as a particular mediator of universal redemption is hereby clearly articulated.[75] This whole paradigm of historical revelation is contrasted, at this stage, with what MacKinnon sees as the reductionist framing of Marxist social theory. In a contemporaneous text, he opines rather confidently that "the fundamental incompatibility of dialectical materialism with the presuppositions of the Christian faith may now be regarded as an intellectual *fait accompli*."[76] In a review of W.G. de Burgh's *Towards a Religious Philosophy*, he couples logical positivism, Marxism, and fascism together within a cultural moment of "defiance and despair".[77] He categorises these within a "vitalism" and "process-philosophy" that subordinates humanity to "empiricism", reducing us to a "mechanism of production" that he deems "anti-humanistic".[78] Contained in this early period is also his broadside against the Marxist attempt "to explain all cultural phenomena in terms of class-conflict", emphasising "the opposition of principle underlying Marxian and Catholic judgment upon the events of our world", even as he admits that there is a convergence in their "common refusal to allow any human activity exemption from the laws that govern the rest".[79] What this betrays for him is a posturing of a closed system within a more embracing metaphysical totality, a materialism that conceptually eliminates any transcendental

[68] One sees this in his several texts from this early period; for a sample, see Donald M. MacKinnon, "No Way Back: Some First Principles of Catholic Social Judgment Restated", *Christendom* 9 (Sept. 1939), 292-98; "The Nature of a Christian Sociology", *The Student Movement* (May 1941): 111-12.

[69] See the marked influence of Thomistic metaphysics in Donald M. MacKinnon, "The Function of Philosophy in Education [1941]" and "Revelation and Social Justice [1941]" in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty: A Donald MacKinnon Reader*, ed. John McDowell (T&T Clark, 2011), 11-14; 137-60. The influence of the Dominicans at Blackfriars (Oxford) on MacKinnon during the 1930-1940s is probably determinative here.

[70] Donald M. MacKinnon, "Review of *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, by E. Gilson", *The Oxford Magazine* 57 (9 Mar. 1939): 514-15.

[71] Donald M. MacKinnon, "The Thought of Jacques Maritain", *Christendom* 13 (Dec. 1944): 248-51.

[72] Donald M. MacKinnon, "A Master in Israel: Hans Urs von Balthasar," in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God*, trans. J. Halliburton (SPCK, 1975), 1-16; "Some Reflections on Hans Urs Von Balthasar's Christology with Special Reference to *Theodramatik* II/2 and III [1986]", in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 281-88.

[73] See the pamphlet Donald M. MacKinnon, "The Church of God", originally printed in 1940, and conveniently republished in *Kenotic Ecclesiology*, 89-155.

[74] MacKinnon, *Kenotic Ecclesiology*, 95.

[75] Ibid., 114; 120.

[76] Donald M. MacKinnon, "Surveys: Christian Social Thought", *Theology* 38 (May 1939): 378.

[77] Donald M. MacKinnon, "'Religion and Philosophy'. Review of *Towards a Religious Philosophy*, by W. G. de Burgh", *Laudate* 15 (Dec. 1937): 225.

[78] Donald M. MacKinnon, "And the Son of Man that Thou Visitest Him – II", *Christendom* 8 (Dec. 1938): 265-66; also cf. "No Way Back", 293-94.

[79] MacKinnon, "And the Son of Man that Thou Visitest Him – I", 186-87.

reference that might offer repose from immanent self-sufficiency. In its rejection of theoretical idealism, dialectical materialism submits all possible conditioning, transcendent or otherwise, to the "science of history"—to use Marxist parlance.[80] Ultimately, for MacKinnon, this denies the ontological grounding for freedom—and thereby ethical action. It implies a reduction of human persons to things, and thus excludes "the possibility of metaphysics", which is concerned with the interpersonal, immaterial aspects of moral personhood.[81]

Here it might be helpful to get a sense of MacKinnon's own metaphysical approach in general, indicating why he is distanced from this reductionism. Echoing a Kantian schematism of knowledge and practical reason,[82] MacKinnon conceives metaphysics and creative freedom as a synthetic *a priori*, a transcendental deduction which guards against the demotion of freedom to sheer necessity or phenomenalism,[83] hereby grounding what he calls "the irreducibility of the ethical".[84] In this way, MacKinnon resists reductive empiricism, and defends a metaphysics congenial to a normative and ethical approach, especially in relation to epistemic realism and the self-determination of moral agents. In terms of realism, MacKinnon was deeply influenced by the atomist theories of G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell as well as correspondence theories of truth;[85] for him, this was concerned with "the authority of fact" as well as the "singular, individual, particular", against which the question of truth or falsity was measured.[86] This allowed a greater place for the contingent and the particular, in distinction from what he saw as the Bradleyian collapse of "external" into "internal relations", and thus the merging of the merely accidental into the essential. Additionally, here following A.E. Taylor and W.F. Sorley, MacKinnon's metaphysical project forms a moral argumentation for transcendent and theistic realism;[87] similarly to Kant, it was within the primacy of the ethical that one touches upon spheres of persistent and redoubtable value, and here particularly in the way that moral tragedy acts as "system of projection"[88] which "by the very ruthlessness of its interrogation enables us to project as does no available alternative, our ultimate

[80] Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 40.

[81] Cf. MacKinnon, *The Borderlands of Theology*, 140.

[82] Cf. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), A532–58 = B560–86.

[83] Donald M. MacKinnon, "What is a Metaphysical Statement?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 41 (1940-1941), 23. In a published panel discussion in the same journal, he spoke about how "the problem of *a priori* concepts is the problem of the relation of the rules governing the use of such terms as redness, and those governing the use of such terms as causality"; MacKinnon et al, "Are There *A Priori* Concepts?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 18 (1939): 53. Throughout his career, MacKinnon simultaneously maintains a fascination and suspicion of metaphysical and moral "intuition"; on this, see Bowyer, *Donald MacKinnon's Theology*, 178-79.

[84] Donald M. MacKinnon, "A Note on Sorley as a Philosopher", in W.R. Sorley, *A History of British Philosophy to 1900* (Cambridge University Press, 1965), xvii; "Ethical Intuition [1956]", in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 104.

[85] Donald M. MacKinnon, "The Christian Understanding of Truth", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 1 (Feb. 1948): 19-29; Donald M. MacKinnon, "Does Faith Create its Own Objects?" *Religious Studies* 26 (Dec. 1990): 439-51.

[86] Donald M. MacKinnon, "Some Aspects of the Treatment of Christianity by the British Idealists", *Religious Studies* 20 (Mar. 1984): 137.

[87] This approach has been spelled out, for instance, in the work of Angus Ritchie; see *From Morality to Metaphysics: The Theistic Implications of our Ethical Commitments* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

[88] MacKinnon takes "projection" from Wittgenstein; cf. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §§ 3.11-13; 4.0141.

questioning".[89] Already in this period we can see that MacKinnon opposes any pseudo-tragic metaphysics—which as regards Marxism he links to a thoroughgoing dialectical materialism that sees capitalism as intrinsic to a necessary process of absolute self-constitution. He argues instead that the Christian approach must adopt a different "metaphysical" vantage that is able to discern "the nature of that which is", thereby distinguishing the essential from the modally contingent.[90] For MacKinnon, no historical necessity underlies capitalist predations, for this is to give a retrospective justification for what might have been otherwise. To do this, he argues, is to travesty the ethical task. Anticipating the likes of John Milbank, MacKinnon refuses to ontologise this passage within a secularised natural law;[91] rather, "the tragic dialectic of contemporary society", as characterised by industrialised capitalism, is implicated in a "distortion of thinking" and "the bitter fruit of the darkening of understanding".[92] It is the contingent product of a deranged consciousness, grounded in a refusal of sane correspondence to principles of justice. As he will say in a later essay from the 1960s, the Marxist critique of false consciousness only makes sense if we are disciplined by a truthful probity—a kind of moral facticity—to which we correspond, since transformative action requires "commitment", and this implies that we pledge ourselves "to what we claim to be the truth".[93] For why should there be reference to falsity, unless there also exists a normative judgement regarding the question of what is true? And again, such valuation cannot be reduced to the deliverances of historical fortune, for this simply once more begs the question regarding the standards we use to make such judgements, which cannot be merely empirical, but rather belong to the domain of qualitative and transcendental evaluation.

And yet despite intellectual disquiet, MacKinnon in the 1940s is sensitive to the way that Marxism performs an edifying critique of any social action that advocates escapism. Already during this period, in anticipation of similar correlations of Christianity and Marxism he makes later, the incarnation for MacKinnon performs an analogous critique of such delusory tactics, insofar as we "cannot escape from our history any more than the Incarnate Son of God could flee the historical medium of his universal, redeeming work, with all its individual roughness and peculiarity". Replicating patterns that are discernible in his mature Christology, MacKinnon's rendering of "the stern reality" of the Christ-event does not negate but rather amplifies tones of "historical relativity". Drawing analogies from this incarnational logic, Christology illuminates general strategies of social redress and activism, even as it does not necessitate a particular social configuration in the here and now. As a matter of priority and practical implementation, political action from within the church may arise from among those "whose lot is cast" within quotidian "actualities". For MacKinnon, the character of this action may ultimately be more laicised than clerical in composition, which leads him to admit that there are certain nodes of correlation here between theology and Marxist praxis; at this point, he frames Catholic subsidiarity as analogous to vanguardism, whereby a coterie of "elites" possesses the

[89] MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics*, 136.

[90] MacKinnon, "And the Son of Man that Thou Visitest Him – I", 188.

[91] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, second edition (Blackwell, 2006), 191-97.

[92] MacKinnon, "And the Son of Man that Thou Visitest Him – I", 188.

[93] MacKinnon, "Moral Freedom [1969]", in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 95.

"insight" to fashion a new society within the "rent fabric" of the present.[94] One senses anticipations of liberation theology at moments like these—as well as echoes of Lenin's "dialectical cognition", as discussed earlier.

Something of a shift in MacKinnon's emphases on Marxism and Leninism can be periodised to the spring of 1950, when George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, convened an Anglican consultation on the theme of communism, published later as *Christian Faith and Communist Faith* in 1953, with MacKinnon serving as editor and contributor.[95] In a broad-sweeping chapter co-authored with Denys Munby,[96] MacKinnon engages in a highly critical account of both Lenin and Stalin; here the scientific claims of Bolshevik ideology are largely dismissed, even as the moral undertones of its social critique are underwritten. The Leninist tactic of "rational violence" enacted through party machinations exhibits to them "an almost icy discipline with a neo-Hitlerite passion of destruction" even as they admit that its mood is not one of *Götterdämmerung* but rather of *Aufklärung*, prosecuted in the spirit of Voltaire rather than Wagner. In Leninism, the communist party becomes that site which unites the monopoly of state violence with the goal of social equalisation, a place of "understanding through action" in which the vanguard through its "agency" enacts "the pattern of the future" within the present.[97] Again, Leninism is rendered here as a totalising, inescapable "struggle *for* power" articulating a vantage regarding "the very nature of things", a metaphysical expanse that is "so overwhelming, so all-absorbing, that no room is left to meditate the possible, to scan quizzically the run of things human, and to enlarge the horizon of aspiration by allowing the word 'perhaps' a place in one's language".[98] Marxism and Leninism is indeed an encapsulating vision, a "metaphysics"[99] in which "there is no natural law, other than the fact of the class struggle", exemplifying a ruthless imaginary, severed from virtues such as "pity and compassion";[100] it is thereby enforced and enacted until "the conditions under which men are inescapably alienated from ourselves are ended".[101] However, one nevertheless senses here MacKinnon's sympathy for the Marxist critique of idealism in which there is a "retreat from the concrete exchanges of action into the inner life of the mind".[102]

For MacKinnon, the Christian appropriation of social "revolt" must eventually reckon with transcendence, which is less related to some "abstract allegiance" to a "realm of values" and rather to "the concrete fact of the crucifixion of the Son of God".[103] The Christ-event does not negate historicity but suggests "that finality be-

[94] Passages in this paragraph are taken from Donald M. MacKinnon, "Where Do We Go from Here?", *Blackfriars* 23 (Sept. 1942): 354-55; 357.

[95] *Christian Faith and Communist Faith: A Series of Studies by Members of the Anglican Communion*, ed. Donald M. MacKinnon (MacMillan, 1953). MacKinnon's two solo-authored chapters in this volume, entitled "Christian and Marxist Dialectic" and "Prayer, Worship and Life" have been republished in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 45-54; 55-66 resp. For these two chapters, we quote from the later versions.

[96] Donald M. MacKinnon and Denys Munby, "Leninism and Stalinism", in *Christian Faith and Communist Faith*, 21-57.

[97] Ibid., 34.

[98] Ibid., 35.

[99] MacKinnon, "Christian and Marxist Dialectic", 45.

[100] Ibid.,46.

[101] Ibid., 50.

[102] Ibid., 50.

[103] MacKinnon, "Prayer, Worship and Life", 55.

longs somehow to that which is particular and contingent".[104] Indeed, Christologically-speaking, there is "no escape from contingency"[105] and "no transcendence of the pervasive temporal".[106] Here MacKinnon wants to avoid the speculative temptation to convert Christ's "deed" into an "idea".[107] In distinction from "a Platonic myth" that reveals "the rhythm of events", it is rather through the concreteness of Christ's "deed" that salvific reintegration is achieved. For him, both Christianity and Marxism are united by their emphasis on "the import of action and its renewing consequences";[108] but MacKinnon goes on to internally distinguish this mutual emphasis by saying that "the materialist aspirations of Marxism can only be met by a faith that proclaims a deed done in flesh and blood and issuing in a real transformation of that in which it was done".[109] The very nature of Christ's act, moreover, is a revelation of divine love, for indeed, to echo the Johannine refrain, love is expressed pre-eminently through action rather than words alone (1 John 3:18);[110] such a movement is grounded for MacKinnon in the life of the immanent and economic Trinity[111] and re-enacted through ritual and liturgical incorporation.[112] Comparably, though with a vastly different import, for communism it is through the "the Leninist monolithic revolutionary State",[113] that is, through the participation in proletarian struggle, that "one might say that history achieves self-consciousness"; it is a visionary praxis that combines "an undaunted metaphysical profession with the mastery of every method of contemporary technology". MacKinnon explicitly and already during the 1950s reads the Leninist participation in social contradiction tragically: for the Leninist, either human beings absolve themselves from "the burden of responsibility for the direction of their world", or they enter into the suffering of "the Party's dialectic" which contains "the promise of measurable future development".[114] The Marxist-Leninist hereby adopts the "Promethean" posture of appropriating the goal of providence into the hands of the Party, performing acts that "estrange" us from the world for the sake of a new world, as well as the past self from the new self that is born through revolutionary struggle.[115]

In the 1960s, MacKinnon's interest towards Marxism increased. During this period, he saw the growing tensions of the Cold War, and a Christian passivity regarding nuclear armament, as forming part of a cultural pessimism that Marxist theory could

[104] MacKinnon, "Philosophy and Christology", in *Borderlands of Theology*, 58.
[105] "Ibid., 81.
[106] MacKinnon, "Prolegomena to Christology", *The Journal of Theological Studies* 33 (1982): 158.
[107] MacKinnon, "Atonement and Tragedy", in *Borderlands of Theology*, 103.
[108] MacKinnon, "Prayer, Worship and Life", 57.
[109] Ibid., 60.
[110] Ibid., 61.
[111] Ibid., 64.
[112] Ibid., 58.
[113] Donald M. MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory* (Collier, 1957), 233.
[114] The last series of quotes are taken from Donald M. MacKinnon, "What is the Attraction of Communism Today?" This is an unpublished lecture which MacKinnon delivered on 10 January 1959 at the first meeting of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics at Peterhouse College, Cambridge. No page numbers are available in the version we have. The authors thank Dr. André Müller for granting access to these texts.
[115] Donald M. MacKinnon, "Some Notes on 'Philosophy of History' and the Problems of Human Society", in *The Logic of Personal Knowledge: Essays Presented to Michael Polanyi on His Seventieth Birthday, 11 March 1961* (Routledge & Paul, 1961), 178.

counteract. During this period, even as the idea of the tragic exhibits a prominent place in his thought, he nonetheless warns that the "recognition of the tragic must not be allowed to inhibit action, even if it must deepen perception and, in consequence, purify the motives and intentions from which men act".[116] The prioritisation of action within Marxist-Leninism is portrayed as setting a "question mark" against "the sort of facile historical determinism fashionable among … Christian conservatives".[117] He also gives mention elsewhere to Georgi Plekhanov, one of Lenin's major influences, as providing a contribution "the role of the creative individual in history".[118] In this period, a much more positive coloration of Marxism is noticeable overall. The priority placed within Marxism upon action and the risk of struggle as a site for knowledge is endorsed: for "we can only understand if we are prepared for the risks involved in the attempt to remake our world". This is counterposed to a tragic "cult of resignation" characteristic of "a pessimistic evaluation of human achievement".[119] These concerns merge once again with his philosophical actualism and realism: MacKinnon explicitly mentions Karl Barth's critique of "theological subjectivism" as this is centred on "the great disturbance of Christ's incarnation" in which God makes Godself the object of self-revelation.[120] And as is characteristic of MacKinnon's approach already somewhat, the important lesson that the Christian is to learn from Marxism is its "critique of every sort of idealism".[121]

Between 1969 and 1971, student activism at the University of Cambridge was energised, something exemplified by the animations surrounding the deportation of the Christian Marxist Rudi Dutschke. This had an impact on MacKinnon, who delivered addresses in support of Dutschke. It may not be coincidental that his writing on Lenin reaches its zenith during this period.[122] In his essay penned on the centenary of Lenin's birth, referenced in an earlier section, MacKinnon writes of how Lenin "existentially" reconciled "the claims of determinism and freedom", of "rigorous objectivism" and the "supremely executant".[123] He showed himself as a somewhat tragic figure, as one who would not "suffer blindly as the plaything of an inevitable destiny, but rather to pay the price, if necessary, of the guilt incurred" for the sake of human progress.[124] It is here that MacKinnon explicitly uses the language of the parabolic to compare Lenin's action in October 1917 with the Christ-event, even as any such analogy remains asymmetric in a decisive sense: the incarnation and

[116] Donald M. MacKinnon, "Some Reflections on Secular Diakonia (1966)", in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 70. The theme of "purgation" in MacKinnon's thought has been treated somewhat critically in John Milbank, "Between Purgation and Illumination: A Critique of the Theology of Right", in *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy*, 161-96; a more positive appraisal of MacKinnon's "therapeutic" approach can be found in Bowyer, *Donald MacKinnon's Theology*.

[117] MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, 38.

[118] MacKinnon, "Moral Freedom", 94; "Power Politics and Religious Faith", *British Journal of International Studies* 6, No. 1 (1980): 11. MacKinnon mentions this even as he casts a sceptical glance at Plekhanov's "monistic conception of history"; "Moral Freedom", 84-85; 93-94.

[119] MacKinnon, "The Dialogue between Christianity and Marxism", *Marxism Today* (June 1966): 187.

[120] Ibid.,186.

[121] Ibid.,187.

[122] We owe this contextual point to a private conversation with Rowan Williams—a student of MacKinnon during that time—who was also present for some of his lectures on Lenin.

[123] MacKinnon, "Lenin and Theology", *Explorations in Theology*, 15.

[124] Ibid.,19.

resurrection is a more radical transformation of worldly options than any other revolutionary action. Many of the themes we have encountered elsewhere reappear here, and once more express for him "the decisive discontinuity of Christian reality and metaphysical idealism":

> If the Christian faith is true … its truth is constituted by the correspondence of its credenda with harsh, human reality, and with the divine reality that met that human reality and was broken by it, only in that breaking to achieve its healing. At the foundation of the faith there lies a deed done, an incarnating of the eternal in the stuff of history. It is not the delicate subtlety of our imaginative interpretations that is constitutive of the penetration of our human lot; what these interpretations seek to represent is the *act* that sets our every essay in conceptualization in restless vibration. For by that deed, the very foundations of our human world were laid. What was it, what is it, this revolutionary act? At least let us be sure it is act, if it be no more than satisfying spiritual idea, it is vacuous and the world remains unshaken.[125]

The materialist orientations of Marxism are now praised for a "dogged realism"—an aspiration for human action to correspond to reality—even as there is a complementary emphasis on how "the creative individual", within solidarity, "transforms a given situation by drastic realisation of its revolutionary possibilities".[126] Indeed, for MacKinnon, both Christianity and Marxism push against the idea that "nothing really *is* done", and that we misunderstand the causal nature of action if we immediately subordinate it to "the categories of necessary condition, sufficient condition, necessary sufficient condition".[127] Here we sense once more an implicit critique of Bradley's monistic determinism insofar as actuality—rather than being reducible to a chain of relational causality—makes allowance for the genuinely emergent. Moreover, both traditions suggest that there is an entrance of something like the absolute into history—not a non-revisable set of theoretical or political coordinates, or a denial of the "radical incompleteness" of knowledge, but rather an event of transvaluation that changes everything put into relation to it. Through such revolutionary action, whether this be Good Friday or the events of Red October, "[n]othing can ever be the same again" and so as a result it "transforms the very texture of world history".[128] To convert history into "a ballet-dance of ideas", for MacKinnon, is ultimately "to deny the tragic", and so Christ's act of reconciliation, as well as revolutionary action of the Marxist-Leninist variety, must not imply any escapism from "the sheerly intractable", but a continual measurement by the "rough, untidy, always concrete actuality", and thus instigates us "to refuse the humanly tidy dismissal of life's roughest edges".[129]

[125] Ibid., 20-21. Lenin's vociferous rejection of Berkleyian idealism is of course the *bête noire* in his engagement with the empirio-critical left (e.g. Bogdanov), as seen in his *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*.

[126] MacKinnon, "The Absolute and Relative in History", in *Explorations in Theology*, 56.

[127] Ibid., 59.

[128] Ibid., 60.

[129] Ibid., 68.

The lesson that we have yet to begin to learn

We have already seen that engagement with the Marxist rejection of idealism is important for MacKinnon because of that temptation "to which theology is continually subject, of withdrawing into the securities of metaphysical idealism".[130] By "idealism", here and elsewhere, MacKinnon means the "ontological thesis of autonomous spiritual activity" and he rejects, in connection with this, the understanding of the theologian as someone who is first and foremost concerned with "a complex tradition of spirituality".[131] This is theology as the "falsest of false paths"—here recalling Lenin's meta-critique of philosophy. Thusly construed, the theologian is someone who traces the successive phases of the development of a spiritual tradition whilst leaving "the purposes of the creative individual who set the impress of his life upon Christianity remain opaque, inscrutable in themselves, altogether hidden from us".[132] What remains are simply the structures; the subsequent phases of the development of this tradition of inexpressive origin. Consequently, "practice is greeted as something only significant in so far as it helps to trigger off a system of ideas".[133] And this excoriation of practice is, at the theological level, an eclipse of the fundamental Christian reality of the incarnation.

This brings us to the most controversial and also the ultimate goal of MacKinnon's engagement with Marxism and Lenin, namely to critique theology by way of an analogy between the lives and works of Lenin and Christ. "Dare we find", MacKinnon asks of Lenin's world-historical role in the October Revolution, "a parable of the fundamental Christian reality, the Incarnation of the Word of God?"[134] And in a subsequent essay on Lenin titled "Absolute and Relative in History", MacKinnon once again insists that "unless I am utterly mistaken, there is discernible a highly significant analogy with the work of Christ".[135] How to evaluate this ostensibly scandalous parabolic intervention? For Bowyer, one of the few commentators to analyse MacKinnon's writings on Lenin, MacKinnon sees Jesus's "universal significance" in its "refraction in parabolic stories of individuals who have spent themselves for humanistic social reform. His references to Lenin must be interpreted (and moderated) by reference to this wider logic".[136] Roger White, in an essay on the parabolic, points out how "MacKinnon lays particular emphasis upon the ways in which the parables are more than simply challenging. They are not merely initially disconcerting—the more one looks at them the more disconcerting they become. They continually seem perverse, offensive, even blasphemous in their suggestion. We are in a different thought world from that of the conventional pious homily."[137] Similarly, for White, the

[130] MacKinnon, "Lenin and Theology", 22.
[131] MacKinnon, "Absolute and Relative in History", 57.
[132] Ibid., 57.
[133] Ibid., 58.
[134] MacKinnon, "Lenin and Theology", 15.
[135] MacKinnon, "Absolute and Relative in History", 59.
[136] Bowyer, *Donald MacKinnon's Theology*, 119.
[137] Roger White, "MacKinnon and the Parables", in *Christ, Ethics, and Tragedy*, 56. Throughout the essay, we hope we have shown that MacKinnon is not engaging in any simplistic baptism of Leninist Marxism. Nonetheless, an element of provocation may underlie something of MacKinnon's intention; for as he says elsewhere, chiefly in regard to the parables of Jesus: "[a] parable must disturb, rather than edify"; MacKinnon, "Parable and Sacrament", in *Explorations in Theology*, 170.

parables may be said to "give us a direct image of divine transcendence: that is to say, they continually offer us analogies for God that simply do not fit comfortably with our ideas about Him".[138] The offence and discomfort is part and parcel of the real and embodied way in which the parables constitute the conditions for self-transcendence and lead us beyond ourselves and towards the unmediated intensity of human realism. And yet, White himself does not consider this most offensive and uncomfortable of MacKinnon's parables—the analogy between Jesus and Lenin. Even Bowyer speaks of the need to "moderate" MacKinnon's engagement with Lenin and to relativise him as one of many individuals "dedicated to humanistic social reform". But then why Lenin? "One has to ask", MacKinnon says at one point, speaking of Lenin and J. H. Holdham, "which of the two matters most in the history of the world".[139] (The comparison is, of course, not incidental; Holdham was not only a significant figure in Scottish Christianity, but the author of *Life is Commitment* and had himself learned deep lessons from the history of the radical left, most notably Feuerbach, in order to arrive at his vision of "conviction politics".) The answer, then, is "Lenin: because he matters". Or *mattered*. We must, of course, ask whether MacKinnon's engagement with Lenin, situated as it was, as Bowyer reminds us, in a time when "revolutionary politics were in vogue on British university campuses and Marxism still counted as a serious political influence within mainstream academia and politics" should qualify our understanding of the significance of Lenin after the death of the ostensible socialist projects of the twentieth century.[140] One thing, however, is clear, and that is that MacKinnon's appeal to Lenin was as obviously coterminous with a complaint against the complacency of mainstream academia and politics—both within and outside the conclave of Anglo-Catholicism—as it was concerned to emphasise the analogy between Jesus and Lenin's respectively obscure and peripheral origins. To this extent, we cannot ignore the salience of the critique against contemporary theology which emerges from MacKinnon's Lenin writings.

If, as we have seen, MacKinnon engages with Lenin's actualism in order to perform a series of philosophical manoeuvres, including integrating aspects of Hegelian dialectical idealism into his own thinking, there is also a way in which he articulates the analogy of Jesus and Lenin in order to emphasise the significance of the actual and, in particular, of the "primacy" of work for a Christian vision of the "primacy" of resurrection. Indeed, MacKinnon explicitly asserts in one essay that the resurrection is "the *prius* of my whole argument",[141] and elsewhere explicitly understands the resurrection in "objective" terms[142]—language redolent with Hegelian and Leninist overtones.[143] As a general remark, we should add that Mackinnon under-

[138] White, "MacKinnon and the Parables", 58.

[139] MacKinnon, "Lenin and Theology", 21.

[140] Bowyer, *Donald MacKinnon's Theology*, 115.

[141] MacKinnon, "Order and Evil in the Gospel", in *The Borderlands of Theology*, 95.

[142] See his reflections in D.M. MacKinnon and G.W.H. Lampe, *The Resurrection: A Dialogue Arising from Broadcasts by G.W.H. Lampe and D.M. MacKinnon*, ed. William Purcell (Mowbray, 1966).

[143] As seen, once again, in Lenin's notes on Hegel's *Science of Logic*, and particularly Lenin's rejection of Kantian "subjectivism"; cf. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 118-19.

stands this analogical matrix, as Roger White does,[144] in accordance with the priority of the *analogia proportionalitatis* insofar as Christ and Easter exhibits a proportional relation to Lenin and the October Revolution—without a collapse of the *maior dissimilitudo*.[145] And so for Christianity, in distinction from Leninism, this primacy of creative work (as the *par excellence* human act) derives from the resurrection as the fundamental article of faith. MacKinnon articulates this as

> [the Father's] Amen to the work of human salvation that the Son had achieved in human flesh and blood. "In the beginning was the Work". For the Christian who reads the fourth gospel aright, the subtle metaphysics of its preface was only a prolegomenon to a narrative that sought to bear witness to the fact that at the foundation lay the deed done in human flesh and blood into which the very fullness of the Word was (if I may so speak) poured out and its deepest, most arcane sense disclosed.[146]

The resurrection is the truth of the incarnation, the deepest sense of the fundamental reality of Christianity. Hence, theologically as well as philosophically, MacKinnon stresses the "actuality" of the things to come over against the mere "existence" of things that are coming to pass. Reading the Gospel *aright* means recognising this inversion (so to speak); here it is worth mentioning that there are relationships in the text not only to John 1:30 but also to Hegel's claim that spirit is the truth of nature (even though it comes after it),[147] as well as to Marx's claim, in the afterword to the second edition of *Capital*, that the dialectic "must be turned right side up again".[148] To quote MacKinnon again: "If there is a lesson to be learnt here, it is perhaps only an old one to be received in a new and harsher way: the lesson that we have yet to begin to learn—what it is that Christ has done in overcoming the world that his work, which his Father has given him to do in love for that world, might be perfected. 'Not as the world giveth, give I unto you.'"[149] For MacKinnon, it is this Johannine inflection which needs to be maintained in our reading of the Christ event, namely that it is the Father's Amen to "the deed done in human flesh and blood" that reveals "the arcane sense" of the pre-existent Christ. Comparable to Barth's

[144] Roger M. White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language* (Ashgate, 2010). White explicitly mentions his indebtedness to MacKinnon for his theory of analogy. In terms of the difference between "analogy" and "parable", MacKinnon sometimes imagines parables as a form of analogy, as when he says—vis-á-vis the parable of the Prodigal Son—that it forms "an analogy of the relentless, almost obsessive quest of the Creator of the creature …"; "Parable and Sacrament", 169. Both the parabolic and the analogical, for MacKinnon, form a movement from a more familiar relation to a less familiar one (cf. *The Problem of Metaphysics*, 84). However, what distinguishes a parable from an analogy is the way that parables for MacKinnon are more contextually related, designed to inform a specific audience (cf. ibid., 80). MacKinnon also emphasises how parables have a deep connection to "the ironic" as a mode of projecting the transcendent or the ultimate (ibid., 84-93), intending to disturb or enlarge our perception so that we may be brought to seeing the world as it is—here in line with MacKinnon's realist metaphysics.

[145] Here emphasising Cajetan's rendition of analogy. For the mature Aquinas the *analogia attributionis* seems to have assumed logical priority.

[146] MacKinnon, "Lenin and Theology", 24.

[147] G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. J.N. Findlay (Clarendon Press, 1990), 29; cf. Michael Inwood, *Commentary on Hegel's Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 291.

[148] MacKinnon, "Lenin and Theology", 22.

[149] Ibid., 21.

identification of the Logos with the Incarnate Son,[150] it is this retroactive logic which discloses Christ's eternal being-in-act for MacKinnon: in the beginning, always-already, was the work. It is "to confess that finality belongs somehow to that which is particular and contingent".[151] Christ is the Lamb slain, even before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). And if this "dialectical" reversal of the priority of death and resurrection vis-à-vis Christ's historical origins is an accurate rendering of things, then might one not similarly read his account of freedom and determinism through Christology? As the Johannine Christ says: "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again" (John 10:18).[152] It is this Johannine intermingling of glorification and crucifixion, of the power to take up and lay down, that probably lies in the background of MacKinnon's account of Easter (John 3:13-14; 8:28; 12:27-33; 13:31-2; 17:1).[153] In this light, might one not read MacKinnon's account of Lenin's embodied reconciliation of "the supremely executant" and "rigorous objectivism" along similar veins so that it is the emergence of contingent historical freedoms which become the "truth" of necessity? Elsewhere, MacKinnon had imagined freedom as a "performative" enactment, and in this context he even uses the imagery of a "charmed circle" in which it is through enacting freedom that we, paradoxically, "bring into being a moral universe" that is already *there*—here in line with his general realist approach.[154] The similarity here to Hegel and Lenin's account of "actuality", with its existential reconciliation of necessity and possibility, should not be overlooked.

Overall, the condition for the possibility of an analogy between Jesus and Lenin must be understood in terms of the "objectivity" of their works, by which we mean not simply the historical objectivity of Easter and October 1917, but also the social objectivity of the forms of historical freedoms whose "truth" we can come to understand as Christians only once we have understood, as MacKinnon puts it, "what it is that Christ has done in overcoming the world".[155] Of course, as a matter of orthodoxy, one must maintain the proper taxis of Christ's action in relation to other forms of liberatory intervention, as MacKinnon repeatedly indicates in his critical engagements with Marxism; however, it does seem that MacKinnon believes that the incarnation—similarly to Benjamin's account of messianic action and redemptive constellation[156]—illuminates other attempts of revolutionary action, even in their profound failures and missteps, while the resurrection at least points to the character of such action as grounded in the same historical path forged by the life and words of Jesus Christ. This is the lesson that we have yet to begin to learn, and which every historical tragedy renews ever more harshly. For as MacKinnon is also wont to do, he does not exclude Christ's atoning work from certain tragic consequences: he states

[150] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.2: The Doctrine of God*, trans. G.W. Bromiley et al (T&T Clark, 1957), §33. That MacKinnon has such a Barthian reading in mind is echoed in his "Further Reflections", in D.M. MacKinnon and G.W.H. Lampe, *The Resurrection*, 107-12.

[151] MacKinnon, "Philosophy and Christology", 58.

[152] Taken from NRSV (Updated Edition).

[153] MacKinnon, "Order and Evil in the Gospel", 90-96.

[154] MacKinnon, "Ethical Intuition (1956)", in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 108-09.

[155] MacKinnon, "Lenin and Theology", 21.

[156] Cf. Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'", in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 2003), 403.

repeatedly that the cross and resurrection are bound up with the fate of Judas[157] and that the ecclesial reception of the passion narratives cannot be completely parsed from a history of supersessionism and antisemitism:[158]

> To Christian faith, Jesus is without sin; yet from his life, as a matter of historical fact, there flows a dark inheritance of evil as well as good. One has only to think, for instance, of the infection of anti-Semitism present in the Christian church from the earliest years, and reflected in the New Testament documents themselves, to be made aware of this fact.

There is, then, an ambiguity inherent to the "lesson" which Mackinnon is here concerned to underscore. The primacy of the resurrection allows us to resist any totalisation of the tragic,[159] because it connects human creative work in history to an expressive origin of the actualization of matter, itself a "mystery of action".[160] But at the same time, the actualist and realist resistance against the spiritual autonomy of any Church tradition "forces us to reckon that the world has been changed", and that this change, though exhibiting an incarnational dimension, casts a shadow over its own origin. "As with Lenin, so with Jesus."[161] The incarnational dimension of historical action is an index of divine transcendence as the source and motor of human creativity; but so too is the dimension of human worldly immanence the inevitable inheritance of the world and time. Thus, for MacKinnon, the incarnation implied quite emphatically "the complex discipline of temporality" in which "to be human was to be subject to the sort of fragmentation of effort, curtailment of design, interruption of purpose, distraction of resolve that belongs to temporal experience".[162] It is in this light that we might see his analogy between the work of Christ and Lenin, namely that it is the incarnation, as that act which "sets our every essay in conceptualization in restless vibration", which parabolically elucidates Lenin's act of world-transvaluation, even in its deeply tragic and failed trajectories, so that in its wake nothing can ever be the same.

Conclusion

The essay has brought its focus on an understudied area of MacKinnon's thought, namely his reception of the thought and practice of Vladimir Lenin. On first glance, this is a bit surprising since—as the essay has hopefully shown—MacKinnon's treatment of Marxist-Leninism was hardly a negligible aspect of his output. Indeed, as his

[157] MacKinnon returns to this theme repeatedly, but it formed a central part of his unpublished lectures on the problem of evil (1962/1963); see the appendix in Anthony Cane, *The Place of Judas Iscariot in Christology* (Routledge, 2005), 189-92.

[158] MacKinnon, "Absolute and Relative in History", 65; see also "Atonement and Tragedy", 102-04; *The Problem of Metaphysics*, 130.

[159] That is, a pseudo-tragic metaphysics that removes contingency or freedom from history.

[160] MacKinnon, "Absolute and Relative in History", 67.

[161] Ibid., 66.

[162] MacKinnon, "The Relation of the Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity", in *Christ, Creation and Culture: Essays in Honour of T. F. Torrance*, ed. Richard W.A. McKinney (T&T Clark, 1976), 104.

friend George Steiner once put it, there "are few key texts of Donald's in which Lenin does not make either a ghostly or quite explicit appearance".[163] Indeed, we believe that the spectre of Lenin cannot be exorcised from MacKinnon. Considering that he is believed by many to be one of the most influential philosophical theologians in the post-war period,[164] this existing lacuna within the secondary literature needs remedying. Grappling with his continuing legacy requires interpreting and engaging this aspect of his thought. In this article, we have attempted to make a limited intervention as regards this reception history: Firstly, we have suggested why Lenin specifically may have served as an attractive conversation partner within the wider context of his metaphysical orientation. We have suggested that Lenin's appropriation of Hegel's *Logic* regarding the priority of the actual may have provided an avenue for resisting some of the trajectories of British Idealism and conservatism, and that—through a comparison with the reading of Althusser—this in turn may have opened a way towards seeing Lenin's actions as providing material for theological reflection. Secondly, through a genealogical tracing of Leninist Marxism in MacKinnon's writings, we have shown how his relationship with Marxism developed, moving from a slightly more hostile reaction in his earlier period towards a more positive reception from the 1960s onwards. This recounting shows that MacKinnon gradually came to see how Lenin's account of revolutionary action, and its implied metaphysical realism, served as an elucidation of the primacy of act. This in turn was used by MacKinnon to interpret the incarnation and resurrection insofar as the Christ-act, as an event of contingent history made paradigmatic, constituted a world-altering rupture within the continuum of history. His reception of Lenin coheres with MacKinnon's commitment to a form of atomist realism, in the tradition of Moore and Russell, over-against the idealism of Bradley. His rejection of monistic determinism, that is, the reduction of all external relations into internal ones, also, thirdly, suggested a mitigation of any pseudo-tragic reading of history which denied creative freedom, such as found in revolutionary action. And finally, the analogy of proportionality that MacKinnon makes between Christ and Lenin is centred once more on the prioritisation of action, here configured through the "objectivity" of resurrection as an event of world-transvaluation. All of this suggests, cumulatively, that MacKinnon's appropriation of Lenin, whatever its continuing controversy, is substantially connected to his reception of other thinkers, reaching from Aristotle and Aquinas to Karl Barth and G.E. Moore.

And yet, we should also mention some differences in philosophical approach. One thing is that MacKinnon's reaction to idealism and conservatism ultimately imprints his relation to Hegelianism. In the end, MacKinnon's explicit preference for a more Kantian temper in the realm of ethics curtails his appreciation of Hegel. This can be seen in his Kantian deduction of freedom as the presupposition *for* action, over-against a left-Hegelian understanding of action as an *Aufhebung* constitutive *of* human freedom. Additionally, and much like his complicated reception of Plato,[165]

[163] George Steiner, "Tribute to Donald MacKinnon", *Theology* 98 (1995): 2.

[164] Cf. "Donald MacKinnon", in *Christ, Ethics, and Tragedy*, ix.

[165] He shares sympathies with Karl Popper's critique of Plato as a totalitarian thinker, as most famously stated in his seminal, albeit controversial work, *The Open Society and its Enemies, Volume 1: The Spell of Plato*, fifth revised edition (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

MacKinnon reads Hegel's equation of the rational and the real as a morally deficient vision, one that in Hegel's specific case grants a sort of historical necessity to the Prussian state, but in theory could be extended to any number of deleterious arrangements. This sentiment and approach also underlies his critique of British Idealism and Anglo-Catholic conservatism since MacKinnon has little place for Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, and in the final estimate he is too Kantian and libertarian to be a dialectical determinist—even of the Leninist variety.[166] But if our interpretation has been accurate, then it appears that his reception of dialectical idealism, *via* Lenin, sits in tension with his Kantianism more generally, and so in turn inflects his reading of historicity and freedom. John Milbank had once argued that "MacKinnon acknowledges the importance of Hegel's attention to the historical", but that "he thinks of historical situatedness in semi-Kantian terms as a further categorical restriction on knowledge and behaviour, and not as the positive fact of the culturally constructed character of theoretical and ethical categories".[167] We think this observation does have critical validity as regards the broader corpus of MacKinnon. However, already in his study on ethics, MacKinnon had affirmed that "human freedom could and must be taken beyond Kant",[168] particularly as regards his overly formalist approach.[169] And as we have seen throughout this essay, the role of creative action is given a prominent role within his writings—and especially in his engagements with Marxism. If we take seriously his rejection of monistic determinism, as well as his marginal reflections on the primacy of resurrection, then this reframes how we are to understand his actualism, and may suggest a more "positive" and creative potential within his account of historical action that is not bound to a myopic focus on transcendental limits, here conceived in a "semi-Kantian" vein.

Overall, the whole question remains as to how MacKinnon coherently reconciled contradictory thinkers, such as Kant and Lenin, into his metaphysical and moral thought—a problem we have not sought to resolve here. Instead, we have sought to contextualise and interpret MacKinnon's reception of one of the most contested figures within modern political history in light of his broader project. In particular, we have attempted to read his appropriation within the context of his broader metaphysical actualism and its connection to moral freedom. We hopefully have shown that if we are to interpret MacKinnon holistically, then several interpretative options are no longer sustainable. Here we will mention only a few: Firstly, despite the lacuna of exposition in the secondary literature, Lenin is hardly a marginal presence within the corpus of MacKinnon. Whatever we think of his deployment of Lenin, we cannot interpret the later MacKinnon without due attention to this aspect of his interests. We may dismiss them, but in doing so we also dismiss key aspects of his later thought. Secondly, we have argued that MacKinnon's reception of Lenin should be integrated with his broader "descriptive metaphysics",[170] especially in relation to his

[166] Cf. MacKinnon, "Moral Freedom", 88; "No determinist could write an effective tragedy, could achieve the sort of deep exploration of responsibility, justice, guilt, that we find for instance in Electra or in Hamlet"; MacKinnon, "Atonement and Tragedy", 101.

[167] John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 24.

[168] MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 233.

[169] MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 69 and *passim*; *The Problem of Metaphysics*, 69.

[170] Cf. Khegan M. Delport, "On Aporetics and Apophatics: The Descriptive Metaphysics of Donald MacKinnon", *Modern Theology* 37, no. 1 (January 2021): 139-64.

realism and actualism. This has been alluded to by others, but what we have attempted to argue is that his persistent rejection of monism and Bradleyan metaphysics was bound up with specific *political convictions* connected to his opinions towards British conservatism, beliefs that mirror the left-Hegelian response to right-wing Hegelianism. Moreover, the refraction of Marxist themes within his Christology, as well as in his moral plea for the union of theory and praxis, focalise some of his central animations in the Cold War period, and so cannot be dismissed as superfluous additions. Thirdly, it seems highly questionable—especially as regards his provocative analogy of Christ and Lenin's "objectivity"—that MacKinnon romanticises Lenin or Bolshevism. In fact, one needs to explain how despite his perturbation regarding historical Marxism, evident from his first publications, he nonetheless persisted in his fascination with the *theological* implications of Leninist tactics. One may reduce it to a capitulation to the political moment and the intellectual fashion of the time amongst the British left. However, we think there is more than academic opportunism at work here, and rather that he came to see in Leninism a unique source for imagining the unity of theory and practice, as well as a specific metaphysics of action. These were not idle questions for MacKinnon: his outrage at the general passivity towards nuclear armament as well as ecclesial complacency in relation to the Shoah and the Spanish Civil War are some examples of his self-involvement in these matters. In this regard, his reception of Lenin seems to have stimulated within him a Christian vision regarding the possibilities of historical achievement for our common life, how even a singular event or act, rightly timed, conditioned, and dialectically discerned, could initiate a radical transvaluation: the overcoming of the world through a new kind of work.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.