In his 1949 ‘A Matter of Fact’, after offering a sustained critique of the ideological status of the catholic church – which calls to mind, as Roland Boer has nicely pointed out, the fully developed theory of ideology that we get much later – Althusser offers a suggestion as to how the church can leave behind what he sees as its problematic ideological existence.\(^1\) He argues that ‘if the church is to speak to the men of our day, if it is to reconquer, at the price of an inner struggle, an authentic religious life, it must ... be freed of the domination of feudal and capitalist structures’.\(^2\) In Althusser’s analysis, the Church is like the proletariat before its emancipation, enslaved by capital and its own labor. As one might imagine, this emancipation is not the only thing that must be done. Althusser explains that ‘secondly, this social emancipation must be accompanied by a real re-appropriation of religious life by the faithful themselves’.\(^3\) The language of appropriation (and re-appropriation) is, of course, familiar in Marxist discourse – think of Marx’s own description, in the 1844 manuscripts, of communism as the ‘(re)appropriation of the human essence’ by humans.\(^4\) But this is also and perhaps more importantly, a reference to Hegel.\(^5\) As is well known, at this point in his philosophical development, Althusser had not yet come to the sustained rejection of Hegel that he does in later works such as For Marx. Here in fact, it is precisely by employing a Hegelian theory of re-appropriation via history (and historical development) that Althusser seeks to save the church, a theory that later Althusser would reject as too humanist and too teleological (and thus itself ideological). Not that long after writing ‘A Matter of Fact’, however, Althusser begins to distance himself from the church, and, at the same time, from this Hegelian conception of history. This is, as we will  

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\(^1\) See Althusser 1997a. For Boer’s discussion of the connections between this work and the latter, see Boer 1997, pp. 469–86.

\(^2\) Althusser 1997a, p. 193.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) See Marx 1978.

see, clearly demonstrated in his famous ‘Letter to Jean Lacroix’ which was written in December of the same year as ‘A Matter of Fact’.6

Here too, Althusser looks to a conception of history as part of his critique, but instead of endorsing the Hegelian notion of re-appropriation as he does in ‘A Matter of Fact’, he rejects this, and argues that Lacroix is wrong to attribute such a view to Marx. Althusser’s claim in this piece is the one that is more familiar to readers of Althusser’s later work, namely that the Hegelian notion of an end of history in the re-appropriation (or dis-alienation) of humanity from its essence is nowhere to be found in Marx and further, that such a conception is idealist in its core.7 I want to suggest in this chapter that one of the ways that we can best track the move from Hegel to Marx in Althusser’s early work is to do so through his understanding of the role of history, and further, I want to argue that it is this thread that also best links his later philosophical concerns with his early theological ones (and also his later rejection of the theological).

Returning then to Althusser’s early view, there is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a natural convergence between his interest in Hegel and his Catholicism around the notion of history insofar as both – as Althusser understands them – offer us a view of history with an end or a goal. For Hegel, as noted above (and as we will return to below), this end is the reconciliation of humanity with itself at the end of history, and for the Catholic, this is the reconciliation with God. Though it is true that Althusser retains this view in his early writings, Warren Montag has recently argued that even in this early work, we can see in Althusser a struggle with the view of history as having such an end and that it is this ambivalent relationship that offers indications of his later view, namely the critique of conceptions of history that are teleological in this way. Montag locates the beginnings of this struggle in Althusser’s very first published piece, ‘The International of Decent Feelings’, a text in which Althusser, as Montag rightly points out, is engaged in ‘a critique of the messianisms, both secular and religious’ that arose in the immediate aftermath of World War II.8 The messianisms that Montag speaks of here are those that Althusser locates in the likes of Camus, Malraux, Koestler, and Marcel (among others), all of whom, despite their differences, at this moment in history, share what he identifies as the thesis that the class struggle as described by Marx and Engels, the struggle between the proletariat and bourgeoisie under capitalism, has been eclipsed by a greater threat whose spectre becomes visible within the brutality of the

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6 Ibid.
7 Althusser 1997a, p. 207.
8 Montag 2013, p. 193.