Theology is a problem for Louis Althusser’s philosophy in multiple ways. In the first instance, there is the common vision of Marxism as a kind of secular theology. In this view, Althusser’s vain attempts to grant Marxism its status as a science are perhaps more revelatory than their author intended. What they reveal is Althusser’s commitment to Lenin’s pronunciamento that ‘the teaching of Marx is all-powerful because it is true’. The quest for the fundamental theory, the ‘Theory of theoretical practice’, has something theological about it, to the extent that it seeks comprehensiveness, a set of grounding principles that are ultimately indistinguishable from grounding convictions of a theological sort. Sartre famously echoed Lenin’s sentiment when he remarked that Marxism is ‘the unsurpassable horizon of our time’. Despite Althusser’s half-hearted objections to the contrary, it is hard to shake the notion that, for Althusser, this was a guiding presupposition of his thought.¹

This caricature is complicated by the fact that central to Althusser’s contribution to Marxist theory – and a main source of scandal in his intervention – was his recusal of the most religious element of Marx’s vision of history: its eschatology. Indeed, the best way to understand Althusser’s insistence on Marxist science is not apologetically, but literally. For Althusser, Marxism errs to the extent that it harbours theological vestiges, which are most pronounced in a vision of history committed to overcoming alienation rather than simply ending exploitation. Readers of Althusser and his critics know that Althusser undertook to establish the bona fides of Marxist science via an extended critique of the ‘early Marx’ and the resurgence of sympathy these writings garnered in the wake of Stalinism.² As I have argued elsewhere, the reaction to Althusser’s science as somehow complicit with a Stalinist conception of dialectical materialism is confused, but understandable.³ It is confused because it

---

* Research for this chapter was supported by the Australian Research Council (DE140101770).
1 Hallward and Peden 2012b, p. 219; Peden 2014, p. 144.
2 See Althusser 2010, and Althusser and Balibar 1970.
fails to recognise that Stalinism was a chief target of Althusser’s criticism, not because it was opposed to humanism but because it was of a piece with it. It is understandable because it reflects the different cultural understandings of science and its concepts that separated the Parisian production of Althusser’s thought from its Anglophone reception.

In certain respects, Althusser’s entire project is predicated on a rejection of theology, in both its explicit and nominally secularised forms. Althusser rarely spoke the language of secularisation, and when he did so it was typically in the context of a discussion of the institutions of the French state and its schools. Despite his relative silence on the subject, we can nevertheless find in his work an antidote to theories of secularisation that take the form of philosophies of history. For Althusser, the historical, temporal priority of religion to the ideologies of the modern age is not to be regarded as a logical priority over them. In this, we see the gravamen of his commitment to science. The discovery of DNA in the twentieth century, its empirical significance as well as the conceptual ramifications of its presence in biological discourse, allowed for a retrospective understanding of phenomena in historical periods that did not have knowledge of DNA. It does not matter that those who experienced the dodo bird had no knowledge of its genetic make-up; and our knowledge of its genetic make-up is indifferent to historical actors’ experience of it. Similarly, Althusser’s effort to construct a scientific concept of ideology is predicated on not so much a rejection of, but rather an indifference to, the question of whether such a concept was prefigured in any antecedent discourse. Obsolescence is an unavoidable effect of scientific discovery, and Althusser is not interested in re-establishing continuities between scientific discourses and their precursors. Even when he seems to indulge a logic of the precursor – as, for example, when he regards Spinoza as a kind of precursor to Marx – the image is not one of continuity or genealogy. It is more a matter of conceptual parity.

It would be misleading, then, to suggest that secularised theology goes by the name of ideology in Althusser’s writings, as it does in so many others (including, arguably, Marx’s). The point of Althusser’s work is to show that any vision of history that posits modern ideology as the heir of theology, or the surrogate notion of a ‘religious worldview’, rests on a flawed schema. Ideology is not an

---

4 See, for example, Althusser 2014b, pp. 88–93.
5 The twentieth-century debate between Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg is the locus classicus for the argument as to whether the historical roots of modernity in a religious age compromise its claims to secularity (see Löwith 1949 and Blumenberg 1983).