We had an excellent history teacher during the year before the last of my high school study in Beirut. I still remember listening with bated breath to him telling us the story of the Russian revolution. That was in 1967: revolution was in the air and I had been freshly ‘converted’ to Marxism. Like any good history teacher, ours used to discuss with us various matters of the past, present and future, after classes as well as during them.

One of these discussions remains engraved on my memory: a chat during a break about the issue of religion. I can’t remember what brought us to this topic, but what I do remember is my deep frustration when the teacher contradicted the Marxist positivist that I was, fully convinced that the progress of science and education would wipe out religion in the 21st century. Needless to say, I imagined that century as the outcome of the worldwide triumph of socialist revolution, which I expected to happen during the next few decades. Our teacher held the view that the continuous material enrichment of society would actually enhance the search for spirituality. If my memory serves me right, he quoted approvingly the famous statement attributed to André Malraux, and much discussed since, that the 21st century would be ‘religious’.

Was my teacher right after all? Is the present vigour of religious creeds, movements and sects testimony to the religiosity of the 21st century? Well, what is beyond doubt is that my own youthful expectation proved wrong; but I do not concede victory to the opposite view for all that. The truth is that we all proved wrong, as the common assumption of our different expectations was that society in the 21st century would be one of abundance. Whether it would be atheistic or religious was a question deriving from that basic assumption. The question under debate could be phrased in the following terms: Does the satisfaction of material needs enhance a (supposed) need of religious spirituality?
We won’t know the answer to this last question any time soon, as the prospect of a world ‘free from want’ is as remote as the prospect of one ‘free from fear’ – the last two of the famous ‘Four Freedoms’ defined by Franklin Roosevelt in 1941 as the pillars of the world he aspired to. The first of Roosevelt’s Freedoms – freedom of speech – has surely expanded a lot, though it is still far from complete triumph. The second – freedom to ‘worship God in one’s own way’ – is no longer chiefly threatened by Stalinist-imposed dogmatic ‘atheism’, as people supposed back in Roosevelt’s time, but rather by fanatic-imposed single ways of worshipping God, or any deity for that matter – i.e. by various brands of religious fundamentalism. Nowadays, the freedom that appears to be most wanting and most threatened in major parts of the world is actually the freedom not to worship any deity and to live in one’s own way. That is surely not progress, but the sign of an ideological regression of historic proportions.

The resilience of religion at the dawn of the fifth century after the ‘scientific revolution’ is an enigma to anyone holding a positivist view of the world, but not for an authentic Marxian understanding, as I came to realize since my first steps in Marxist theory. This essay aims not only to provide a clue to the resilience of religion in general, but also to account for the various religious ideologies to which history gives rise at different epochs, and their specificities. For not only did religion survive into our times as part of the ‘dominant ideology’, it is also still producing combative ideologies contesting the prevailing social and/or political conditions. Two of these have received a lot of attention in recent years: Christian theology of liberation and Islamic fundamentalism. A comparative assessment of these two phenomena from the standpoint of Marxist theory, enriched by further inputs from the sociology of religions, is a particularly challenging and politically enlightening endeavour, as I hope to establish.

**MARX’S VIEW OF RELIGION**

The boundaries of Marx’s thinking on the issue of religion were announced in the programme he set himself when he started his transition from ‘Young Hegelian’ philosophy to class-struggle radical materialism, or what we call Marxism. The much-quoted passage on religion in the ‘Introduction’ to his *On the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* is the expression of a decisive moment in the formation of his thought. After having drafted the *Critique* in the summer of 1843 (it remained unpublished during his lifetime), Marx wrote the ‘Introduction’ at the end of the same year and the beginning of the next, and published it in 1844 in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*. The fact that he deemed it good enough for publication is telling, as throughout
his life Marx displayed a reluctance to publish any theoretical writing with which he was not fully satisfied. Along with his famous ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ written the year after, the ‘Introduction’ maps out brilliantly his course toward what Antonio Labriola was to call the ‘philosophy of praxis’. In the 1844 ‘Introduction’, Marx wrote:

The foundation of irreligious criticism is: The human being makes religion; religion does not make the human being. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of the human who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But the human is no abstract being squatting outside the world. The human is the world of the human – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d’honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

Here Marx, after stating one of the key ideas of Ludwig Feuerbach’s critique of religion (‘The human being makes religion; religion does not make the human being’), draws the full implication of this statement, reproaching Feuerbach for his inability to do precisely that. The next statement, that ‘the human is no abstract being squatting outside the world’, is a direct rebuff to Feuerbach. Religion is an ‘inverted consciousness of the world’ only because the human world itself, i.e. society and the state, is ‘inverted’: it stands on its head, to borrow another metaphor used by Marx in relation to Hegel’s dialectics.

Following Feuerbach, and with Christianity mainly in mind, the young Marx fully acknowledged the psychological (spiritual) role played by religion, alongside its essence as a vulgar ‘false consciousness’: ‘Religion is the general theory of this world… its logic in popular form… its enthusiasm… its universal basis of consolation and justification’. However, if one can find in religion a form of humanism – ‘the fantastic realization of the human essence’ – it is only because ‘the human essence has not acquired any true reality’. Thus, ‘the struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion’.
Marx then goes on to develop this insight:

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and the protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the soul of a heartless world, as well as the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people. To supersede religion as the illusory happiness of the people is to require their real happiness. To require that they give up their illusions about their condition is to require that they give up a condition that necessitates illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.

Religion is an expression of ‘suffering’: the sublimated ‘expression’ of ‘real suffering’ as well as ‘the protest’ against it. This is a very perceptive statement indeed; however, Marx did unfortunately not pursue the ‘protest’ part of it. In the following two sentences, he only emphasized the ‘expression’ dimension. They are Marx’s most quoted sentences on religion: ‘Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the soul of a heartless world, as well as the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people’. Had Marx stuck to his initial insight and sought to capture the incitement dimension of religion – as well as its resignation dimension designated metaphorically by the soothing power of ‘opium’ – he could have written the last sentence differently, using another metaphor to designate a stimulant: It is, at one and the same time, the opium and the cocaine of the people.

If one wants people to supersede religion in its function as their ‘illusory happiness’, it should be in order to achieve ‘real happiness’. If one wants people to get rid of ‘their illusions about their condition’, it means realizing a fundamental change of their real condition, into one that does not necessitate illusions anymore. That is why the criticism of religion leads potentially – it should lead, provided the ‘embryo’ is allowed to develop – to the criticism of ‘real suffering’, that ‘vale of tears of which religion is the halo’. The criticism of religion should, then, lead to the criticism of the human world, i.e. state and society, law and politics. Philosophy, after unmasking the ‘holy form’ of human alienation, should strive to unmask its ‘ unholy’ worldly form.

It is first of all the task of philosophy… to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked. Thus, the criticism of Heaven turns into the criticism of Earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.
This line of thought is pursued in the 1845 ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, with its conclusion on revolutionary praxis – ‘revolutionary, practical-critical, activity’.

Feuerbach starts off from the fact of religious self-estrangement, of the duplication of the world into a religious, imaginary world, and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. He overlooks the fact that after completing this work, the chief thing still remains to be done. For the fact that the secular basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must itself be understood in its contradiction and then, by the removal of the contradiction, revolutionised...
Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.⁵

Ironically, in roughly the last four decades, two religious movements have striven to ‘change the world’ in a subversive manner, in order to establish their own version of the Kingdom of God, an anteroom of ‘Heaven’, on Earth: Christian liberation theology and Islamic fundamentalism. A revealing clue to their respective natures is to be found in the correlation between the rise of each of them and the fate of the secular left in their respective areas. Whereas the fate of liberation theology is roughly parallel to that of the secular left in Latin America, where it actually acts, and is perceived, as a component of the left in general, Islamic fundamentalism developed in most Muslim-majority countries as a competitor of, and an alternative to, the left – in trying to channel protest against ‘real misery’, and the state and society that are held responsible for it. These opposite correlations – positive in the first case, negative in the second – are indicative of a profound difference between the two historic movements.

RELIGION AND RADICALISM TODAY: LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Liberation theology is the main modern embodiment of what Michael Löwy calls – aptly drawing on a concept that Max Weber coined, and named after one of Goethe’s famous novels – the ‘elective affinity’ between Christianity and socialism.⁶ Putting it more accurately, the ‘elective affinity’ draws together the legacy of original Christianity – a legacy that faded away, allowing Christianity to turn into the institutionalized ideology of existing
social domination – and communistic utopianism. ‘Communistic’ is used here as something distinct from the communist doctrines formulated with the advent of industrial capitalism. Weber himself depicted quite well this dimension of original Christianity:

During the charismatic period of a religion, the perfect disciple must also reject landed property, and the mass of believers is expected to be indifferent toward it. An expression of this indifference is that attenuated form of the charismatic communism of love which apparently existed in the early Christian community of Jerusalem, where the members of the community owned property ‘as if they did not own it’. Such unlimited, unrationlized sharing with needy brothers, which forced the missionaries, especially Paulus, to collect alms abroad for the anti-economic central community, is probably what lies behind that much-discussed tradition, not any allegedly ‘socialist’ organization or communist ‘collective ownership’. Once the eschatological expectations fade, charismatic communism in all its forms declines and retreats into monastic circles, where it becomes the special concern of the exemplary followers of God.\(^7\)

It is this ‘elective affinity’ between Christianity in its charismatic phase and a communistic social programme that explains the ability of a Thomas Münzer in the early 16\(^{th}\) century to formulate in Christian terms a programme that Friedrich Engels described, in 1850, as an ‘anticipation of communism by fantasy’.\(^8\) Engels’s description was, however, problematic to the extent that he attributed what he deemed unsuited to the prevailing historical conditions to ‘human fantasy’. Although he himself acknowledged the affinity between Münzer’s ‘communism’ and original Christianity, he reached an inconsistent conclusion, at once crudely deterministic and oddly idealistic:

*The chiliastic raptures of original Christianity offered in this respect a very serviceable starting point.* On the other hand, this reaching out beyond not only the present but also the future, could not help being violently fantastic. At the first practical application, it naturally fell back into narrow limits set by prevailing conditions. …The anticipation of communism by fantasy was in reality the anticipation of modern bourgeois conditions.\(^9\)
Engels could have found the clue to what he described as ‘anticipation by fantasy’ and ‘a genius’s anticipation’ in the affinity between what he called ‘the chiliastic raptures of original Christianity’ and the historical condition of a German peasantry faced with profound upheaval and a severe deterioration of its living conditions; indeed, for a ‘historical materialist’, to see it as a fantastic anticipation of a future state was a surprising assessment of the social program of a peasants’ uprising. In reality, the various programmatic statements of the German peasants were not a product of ‘fantasy’ but of two basic ingredients, combined in different ways.

On the one hand, there was the utopian ‘communistic’ inspiration found in original Christianity. On the other hand, there was what could be described as ‘romantic’ longing for the ancient Germanic communal property system, on the part of peasants confronted with pauperization and proletarianization as a result of the gradual dissolution of medieval society – in the same way that, three and a half centuries later, the Narodniks expressed the longing of Russian peasants for the obshchina. In both cases, these were very specific instances of what Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* characterized as the ‘reactionary’ attempt by ‘fractions of the middle class’ to ‘roll back the wheel of history’. However, as Marx would acknowledge many years later about the Russian case, in such instances where commitment to past social forms means preserving collective property, holding back the wheel of history could give, through a spring effect, a powerful impetus for a major leap forward – theoretically at least.

The communistic dimension of original Christianity is actually what gives sense to Engels’s own assessment of Münzer’s program:

His programme, less a compilation of the demands of the then existing plebeians than a genius’s anticipation of the conditions for the emancipation of the proletarian element that had just begun to develop among the plebeians, demanded the immediate establishment of the kingdom of God, of the prophesied millennium on earth. *This was to be accomplished by the return of the church to its origins and the abolition of all institutions that were in conflict with what Münzer conceived as original Christianity*, which, in fact, was the idea of a very modern church. By the kingdom of God, Münzer understood nothing else than a state of society without class differences, without private property, and without superimposed state powers opposed to the members of society. All existing authorities, as far as they did not submit and join the revolution, he taught, must be
overthrown, all work and all property must be shared in common, and complete equality must be introduced.\textsuperscript{12}

Here again the crude ‘historical materialism’ by which the young Engels tried to abide, thereby attaching the ‘communist’ programme exclusively to the proletariat under capitalism, is all too manifest. What Engels was trying to skip in order to comply with the dogma, although he acknowledged it indirectly, was the fact that (1) there is a recurrent communistic tendency that has appeared in various proletarian protests throughout history;\textsuperscript{13} and (2) that this tendency can be readily expressed in Christian terms, due to the affinity between its aspirations and original Christianity. Instead, Engels tried maladroitly to explain Thomas Mü\textsuperscript{14}nz as an instance of ‘anticipation of communism by fantasy’ and the Christian dimension as a mere garb imposed by the historical circumstances.

If the class struggles of that time appear to bear religious earmarks, if the interests, requirements and demands of the various classes hid themselves behind a religious screen, it little changes the actual situation, and is to be explained by conditions of the time.

The Middle Ages had developed out of raw primitiveness. It had done away with old civilisation, old philosophy, politics and jurisprudence, in order to begin anew in every respect. The only thing which it had retained from the old shattered world was Christianity and a number of half-ruined cities deprived of their civilisation. As a consequence, the clergy retained a monopoly of intellectual education, a phenomenon to be found in every primitive stage of development, and education itself had acquired a predominantly theological nature.

In the hands of the clergy, politics and jurisprudence, as well as other sciences, remained branches of theology, and were treated according to the principles prevailing in the latter. The dogmas of the church were at the same time political axioms, and Bible quotations had the validity of law in every court. Even after the formation of a special class of jurists, jurisprudence long remained under the tutelage of theology. This supremacy of theology in the realm of intellectual activities was at the same time a logical consequence of the situation of the church as the most general force coordinating and sanctioning existing feudal domination.

It is obvious that under such conditions, all general and overt attacks on feudalism, in the first place attacks on the church, all
revolutionary, social and political doctrines, necessarily became theological heresies. In order to be attacked, existing social conditions had to be stripped of their aureole of sanctity.  

These assertions beg two questions. First, how is it that, beside numerous instances of revolts inspired by religious heresies, several plebeian revolts in the Middle Ages did not produce any specific religious heresy, or were even void of any religious character, let alone a theological one? That was the case more or less, for instance, of the 1378 Florentine Revolt of the Ciompi, the 1380 French Revolt of the Maillotins, the 1381 English Peasants’ Revolt, the 1382 French Revolt of the Harelle, and the 15th century Catalonian Rebellion of the Remences. As a matter of fact, sections of the 16th century German peasants’ revolt itself, in the Black Forest and Southern Swabia, were initially based on social demands free of any religious coating. Second, how is it that the most socially radical expression of the plebeian revolt of the European Middle Ages – the one led by Thomas Münzer – was at the same time one of those most directly linked to a Christian ‘heresy’?

The answers to these two questions lead to a relativization of Engels’s thesis: the dominance of religious ideology during the Middle Ages was indeed such that one could not expect any atheistic ideology to prevail among a significant section of the plebeian masses. In an era when the religious Weltanschauung overwhelmed every aspect of thought, the tendency for social dissent to express itself within the boundaries of religious creed was likewise overwhelming. However, this does not mean that ‘every social and political movement [was doomed] to take on a theological form’, as Engels put it. They could very well merely invoke the creed with no pretence of producing a theological doctrine, while concentrating on social issues and demands in a quasi-secular manner – unless a specific interpretation of the creed was particularly conducive to the expression of their aspiration.

The fact that the most radical ideology of any of the plebeian protest movements against the medieval society, Münzer’s communistic ideology – which actually appeared at a time when the Protestant Reformation was signalling the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Early Modern Times – took the form of a Christian heresy, advocating ‘the return of the church to its origins’, points not, or not only, to an epochal constraint of religion on thought (Münzer, after all, was a contemporary of Machiavelli!), but to the convenience of one aspect of historical Christianity for such a communistic program.

Ernest Belfort Bax, in his remarkable history of the peasants’ revolts, summarized the demands put forward by Michael Gaismair, one of the most
radical figures of the 16th century German peasants’ revolt, who led the uprising in Tyrol and Salzburg (demands that included the prohibition of the profession of merchant!), and then rightly added: ‘All this is to a large extent an outcome of the general tendency of medieval communist thought, with its Biblical colouring, and would-be resuscitation of primitive Christian conditions, or what were believed to have been such’. As Bax aptly put it with regard to the German peasants’ uprising as a whole: ‘It was, it is true, primarily a social and economic agitation, but it had a strong religious colouring. *The invocation of Christian doctrine and Biblical sentiments was no mere external flourish, but formed part of the essence of the movement*.15

It is this same ‘elective affinity’ between original Christianity and communist utopianism that explains why the worldwide wave of leftwing political radicalization that started in the 1960s (not exactly religious times!) could partly take on a Christian dimension – especially in Christian-majority areas in ‘peripheral’ countries where the bulk of the people are poor and downtrodden. This was the case in Latin America above all, an area where radicalization got a great impulse from the onset of the 1960s thanks to the Cuban revolution and its socialist-humanistic message. The major difference between this modern wave of radicalization and the German peasants’ movement was that in the Latin American case the Christian brand of communist utopianism was combined, not so much with longing for some past communal forms (though one could find such a dimension among Native American movements, for sure), but with modern socialist aspirations such as those held by the Cuban revolutionaries and various Marxist movements.

**RELIGION AND RADICALISM TODAY:**

**ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM**

Let us now check the findings of the above discussion against the wave of Islamic fundamentalism that took off in the 1970s. The first aspect that imposes itself is the relative prevalence of religion in most Muslim-majority countries compared to the rest of the world. The *medieval* features that Engels described in *The Peasant War in Germany* – the fact that ‘the clergy retained a monopoly of intellectual education’, that ‘politics and jurisprudence… remained branches of theology, and were treated according to the principles prevailing in the latter’, and that jurisprudence ‘remained under the tutelage of theology’ – applies literally to the conditions prevailing in many Muslim-majority countries today.

There are many and complex reasons for that. In a nutshell: the strength of survivals of pre-capitalist social formations in major sections of the area concerned; the fact that Islam was very much, from its inception, a political
and juridical system; the fact that Western colonial-capitalist powers did not want to upset the area’s historical survivals and religious ideology, for they made use of them and were also keen on avoiding anything that would make it easier to stir up popular revolts against their domination; the fact that, nevertheless, the obvious contrast between the religion of the foreign colonial power and the locally prevailing religion made the latter a handy instrument for anti-colonial rebellion; the fact that the nationalist bourgeois and petit bourgeois rebellions against Western domination (and against the indigenous ruling classes upon which this domination relied) did not confront the religion of Islam, for the reason just given as well as out of sheer opportunism. (The one major exception to this was the borderline case of Kemalism, which developed in a formerly imperial state and actually aimed at westernizing Turkey.)

For all these reasons, the situation in most Muslim-majority countries never went thoroughly beyond the frame of what Engels described for the European Middle Ages. Recent times have even witnessed a dramatic reinforcement of the ideological, social and political prevalence of Islam, spurred by the spectacular resurgence and expansion of Islamic fundamentalism, after some real, albeit limited, progress towards secularization in previous decades. Various Marxist explanations of this resurgence have been offered. What must be noted here is that Islamic fundamentalism, generally speaking, grew on the decomposing corpse of the progressive movement in its zones of expansion, contributing to the incineration of the latter’s remnants. It has been a central feature of what was unmistakably a tremendously regressive historic turn: beginning in the early 1970s, with the demise of radical middle-class nationalism (symbolized by the death of Gamal Abdel-Nasser in 1970 after his defeat at the hands of Israel in 1967), reactionary forces using Islam as an ideological banner prevailed in most Muslim-majority countries, fanning Islamic fundamentalism as the most virulent antidote to the remnants of the left.

Filling the void created by the downfall of the left, Islamic fundamentalism soon also imposed itself as the main vector of the most intense opposition to Western domination – a dimension that it incorporated from the start, but which had gone into decline during the ‘secular’ nationalist era. Intense opposition to Western domination prevailed again within Shiite Islam after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, and regained prominence within Sunni Islam in the early 1990s after armed detachments of militant Sunni Islamic fundamentalists switched from fighting against the Soviet Union to fighting against the United States, following the defeat and disintegration of the former, and the latter’s subsequent military return to the Middle East.
Thus two main brands of Islamic fundamentalism came to coexist in the vast area of Muslim-majority countries: one that is collaborationist with Western interests – the stronghold of which is the Saudi kingdom, the most fundamentalist/obscurantist of all Islamic states; and another that is hostile to Western interests – the stronghold of which among Shiites is the Islamic Republic of Iran, while its present spearhead among Sunnis is al-Qaeda. Both have in common not only their strict literal adherence to Islamic scriptures and their fundamentalist program, but also their hostility to the left, notwithstanding circumstantial convergences in some instances.18

All brands of Islamic fundamentalism share a common dedication to what is basically a ‘medieval-reactionary utopia’, i.e. an imaginary and mythical project of society that is not turned toward the future but toward the medieval past. All of them seek to re-establish on earth the mythicized society and state of early Islamic history. In that, they share, formally, a premise in common with Christian liberationist theology’s reference to original Christianity. However, the programme of Islamic fundamentalists is not a set of idealistic principles of ‘communism of love’, stemming from an oppressed community of the poor living on the fringes of their society, whose founder was put to death atrociously by the powers that be – as is the case for original Christianity. Nor is it based on some ancient form of communal property, as was the case in part for the 16th century German peasants’ uprising. Islamic fundamentalists share a common dedication to the implementation of a once ‘really existing’, albeit mythologized, social and political medieval model of class rule, founded little less than fourteen centuries ago and whose founder, a merchant turned prophet, warlord and founder of state and empire, died at the peak of his political power.

As is the case with any attempt to restore a centuries-old class society and polity, the project of Islamic fundamentalism amounts necessarily to a ‘reactionary utopia’. By no stretch of imagination could ‘the return of Islam to its origins and the abolition of all institutions that are in conflict with what Islamic fundamentalists conceive as original Islam’ (to adapt Engels’s description of Münzer’s program) lead to a ‘a state of society without class differences, without private property, and without superimposed state powers opposed to the members of society’. It could only mean a huge historical regression.

A question naturally arises at this stage, in light of the previous discussion, which could be phrased in this way: Is there an ‘elective affinity’ between Orthodox Islam – defined here as characterized by strict allegiance to the Sharia – and ‘medieval-reactionary utopianism’ that would contribute to explaining the way in which Islamic fundamentalism has swept through Muslim communities in our epoch? There are several reasons for arguing that
it is indeed the case. Orthodox Islam, presently the most powerful current within Islamic religion, is conducive to religious literalism by its unequalled cult of the scriptures, especially the Qur’an, deemed God’s final word. What in most other religions had become the preserve of ‘fundamentalism’ as a minority current – basically a doctrine advocating the implementation of a literal interpretation of religious scriptures – remained the mainstream norm in Orthodox Islam, which plays a pervasive role within institutional Islam. Due to the specific historical content of the scriptures that it tries to stick to, Orthodox Islam is conducive in particular to a set of fundamentalist doctrines that regard the faithful implementation of the religion as involving a government based on Islam, since the Prophet of Islam fought bitterly to establish such a state. For the same reason, Orthodox Islam is particularly conducive to armed fight against non-Islamic dominations, as Islam’s history, from the start, is one of war against other creeds for its expansion.

FOR A MARXIAN COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

To acknowledge this ‘elective affinity’ between Orthodox Islam and medieval-reactionary utopianism, after having emphasized the ‘elective affinity’ between original Christianity and communistic utopianism, does not stem from any value judgement. It is based on elements of a comparative historical sociology of both religions, in the tradition of Marx and Engels, and the late Maxime Rodinson, the most prominent contributor to a Marxian analysis of Islam. A comprehensive Marxian comparative historical sociology of religions, on the scale of Max Weber’s famous one at the very least, is still badly needed. Although there have been modest attempts to engage in such a project, for which there are many interesting insights to be found in the writings of Marx and especially Engels, as well as in Max Weber’s own deep and rich materialistic analyses, it is a demanding project that remains unaccomplished and must necessarily be a collective undertaking in order to be properly achieved. The different ‘affinities’ peculiar to each religious corpus are rooted in the peculiarities of the historical development of each religion, especially each religion’s historical genesis, notwithstanding their ulterior convergence as institutionalized ideologies of class domination. Weber put it correctly:

It is true that the great ecclesiastic religions differ greatly, especially during their early stages, in their structure of domination and their basic ethics, as it is expressed in rules of conduct. Thus, Islam developed out of a charismatic community of warriors led by the mi-
litant prophet and his successors; it accepted the commandment of the forcible subjection of the infidels, glorified heroism, and promised sensual pleasures in the here and the hereafter to the fighter for the true faith. Conversely, Buddhism grew out of a community of sages and ascetics who sought individual salvation not only from the sinful social order and individual sin but from life itself. Judaism developed out of an hierocratic and bourgeois community that was led by prophets, priests and, eventually, theologically trained intellectuals; it completely disregarded the hereafter, and strove for the reestablishment of its secular nation state, and also for bourgeois well-being through conformity with a casuist law. Finally, Christianity grew out of the community of participants in the mystical Christ cult of the Lord’s Supper; initially, this community was filled with eschatological hopes for a divine universal kingdom, rejected all force and was indifferent to the social order, whose end appeared imminent; it was guided charismatically by prophets and hierocratically by officials. But these very different beginnings, which were bound to result in different attitudes toward the economic order, and the equally different historical fate of these religions did not prevent the hierocracies from exerting rather similar influences on social and economic life. These influences corresponded to the universally similar preconditions of hierocracy, which assert themselves once the charismatic heroic age of a religion has passed and the adaptation to everyday life has been made.  

Furthermore, to acknowledge the different ‘elective affinities’ found in Christianity and Islam does not mean that there are no countervailing tendencies in each of them. Thus Christianity has included from inception countervailing tendencies, to which the subsequent development of the church as an oppressive medieval institution added a huge corpus and a very powerful tradition, nurturing various brands of reactionary Christian doctrine and Christian fundamentalism. Conversely, the Islamic scriptures include a few egalitarian leftovers of the period during which the first Muslims were an oppressed community, which have been used for attempts at devising ‘socialist’ versions of Islam. Besides, the fact that there are different ‘elective affinities’ in Christianity and Islam does not mean that the actual historical development of each religion flowed ‘naturally’ along the slope of its specific ‘elective affinity’. It flowed naturally along the slope of the actual configuration of the class so-
ciety with which each religion became interwoven – hugely different from the reality of its social origin in the case of Christianity, less so in the case of Islam. Thus, during several centuries, historical ‘actually existing’ Christianity was less progressive in many regards than historical ‘actually existing’ Islam. And it is in the realm of the same Christian religion, within the same Catholic Church, that nowadays an ongoing bitter fight is taking place between, on the one hand, an institutionally dominant and utterly reactionary version represented by the present pope Joseph Ratzinger and, on the other hand, the upholders of liberation theology, who are finding a new impulsion in the ongoing new left radicalization in Latin America.

The acknowledgement of the ‘elective affinity’ that exists between Orthodox Islam and medieval-reactionary utopianism bears no relation to what Edward Said described as ‘Orientalism’ – it can only be so in the mind of enthusiasts of what Sadik Jalal al-‘Azm aptly described as ‘Orientalism in Reverse’. Acknowledging an ‘elective affinity’ between a modern political ideology and features located within the historical corpus of a religion does not amount to an ‘essentialist’, timeless view of the political uses of this religion. The contrary is actually true. The clearest illustration of that is the aforementioned ‘elective affinity’ between Christianity and socialism: acknowledging it cannot possibly amount, by any stretch of the imagination, to believing that historical Christianity was essentially socialist! The very absurdity of such a proposition shows how far from ‘essentialism’ is the discussion of ‘elective affinities’ in this essay. Likewise, to acknowledge the ‘elective affinity’ between the Islamic corpus and modern-day medieval-reactionary utopianism, in the shape of Islamic fundamentalism, does not in the least amount to believing that historical Islam was essentially fundamentalist – it was definitely not! – or that Muslims are doomed to fall prey to fundamentalism, whatever the historical conditions.

The acknowledgement of the different ‘elective affinities’ of (original) Christianity and (orthodox) Islam is one of the clues to understanding the different historical uses of each religion as a banner of protest. This is what Engels tried to explain briefly in one of his very last writings, where he summarized his earlier views on early Christianity:

The history of early Christianity has notable points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement. Like the latter, Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by
Rome. Both Christianity and the workers’ socialism preach forthcoming salvation from bondage and misery; Christianity places this salvation in a life beyond, after death, in heaven; socialism places it in this world, in a transformation of society. Both are persecuted and baited, their adherents are despised and made the objects of exclusive laws, the former as enemies of the human race, the latter as enemies of the state, enemies of religion, the family, social order. …

The parallel between the two historic phenomena forces itself upon our attention as early as the Middle Ages in the first risings of the oppressed peasants and particularly of the town plebeians. These risings, like all mass movements of the Middle Ages, were bound to wear the mask of religion and appeared as the restoration of early Christianity from spreading degeneration.27

At this point, Engels added the following interesting long footnote about Islam, containing insights that bear a striking resemblance to the famous theories of the 14th century Muslim Arab historian Ibn Khaldun, while ending with a reiteration of the reductionist ‘flag and mask’ thesis about the use of Christianity in social protests:

A peculiar antithesis to this was the religious risings in the Mohammedan world, particularly in Africa. Islam is a religion adapted to Orientals, especially Arabs, i.e., on one hand to townsmen engaged in trade and industry, on the other to nomadic Bedouins. Therein lies, however, the embryo of a periodically recurring collision. The townspeople grow rich, luxurious and lax in the observation of the ‘law’. The Bedouins, poor and hence of strict morals, contemplate with envy and covetousness these riches and pleasures. Then they unite under a prophet, a Mahdi, to chastise the apostates and restore the observation of the ritual and the true faith and to appropriate in recompense the treasures of the renegades. In a hundred years they are naturally in the same position as the renegades were: a new purge of the faith is required, a new Mahdi arises and the game starts again from the beginning. That is what happened from the conquest campaigns of the African Almoravids and Almohads in Spain to the last Mahdi of Khartoum who so successfully thwarted the English. It happened in the same way or similarly with the risings in Persia and other Mohammedan countries. All these movements are clothed in religion but they
have their source in economic causes; and yet, even when they are victorious, they allow the old economic conditions to persist untouched. So the old situation remains unchanged and the collision recurs periodically. In the popular risings of the Christian West, on the contrary, the religious disguise is only a flag and a mask for attacks on an economic order which is becoming antiquated. This is finally overthrown, a new one arises and the world progresses.²⁸

The awareness of the different ‘elective affinities’ of each religion allows us to understand likewise why Christian liberation theology could become such an important component of the left in Latin America, while all attempts at producing an Islamic version of the same remained marginal. It also helps us to understand why Islamic fundamentalism could gain such a huge importance nowadays among Muslim communities, and why it came to supersede the left so successfully in embodying the rejection of Western domination, even though on reactionary social terms. In particular, the acknowledgement of the ‘elective affinity’ between Orthodox Islam and medieval–reactionary utopianism points to one reason for the facility encountered by Islamic fundamentalism in its expansion in modern times, one reason for what Abdelwahab Meddeb called ‘the malady of Islam’.²⁹

Other, historical, reasons for the expansion of fundamentalism in Muslim-majority countries have been described at some length elsewhere.³⁰ They fall basically under four headings: the defeat of middle-class nationalism and the shortcomings of the radical left; the fact that Islamic fundamentalism had been promoted for years as an alternative to the left by the Saudi kingdom and its US sponsor; the ever increasing exacerbation of the economic, social and political crisis in the ‘broader Middle East’; the worldwide anomie resulting from both the neoliberal offensive and the collapse of Soviet ‘communism’. To that should be added more circumstantial factors, such as the boosting power of the Iranian ‘Islamic Revolution’ and the Soviet defeat in the Afghan war at the hand of Islamic fundamentalists, as well as the huge impetus given to Islamic fundamentalism by the US aggressions in the ‘broader Middle East’ and the Israeli repression of the ‘second Intifada’.

The superficial Orientalist impression, now widespread, according to which Islamic fundamentalism is the ‘natural’ ahistorical inclination of the Muslim peoples is sheer nonsense, of course. It overlooks elementary historical facts. As I have recently written,

Many people in the West don’t understand that there is nothing ‘natural’ or ahistorical in the fact that Islamic fundamentalism is
nowadays the most visible political current among Muslim peoples. They ignore or forget that the picture was completely different in other historical periods of our contemporary history – that, for instance, a few decades ago the largest nongoverning communist party in the world, a party officially referring therefore to an atheistic doctrine, was in the country with the largest Muslim population: Indonesia – of course, until the party was crushed in a bloodbath at the hands of the US-backed Indonesian military starting in 1965. They ignore or forget, to give another example of the same kind, that in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the most massive political organization in Iraq, especially among the Shiites in Southern Iraq, was not led by some cleric but was here, too, the Communist Party.\textsuperscript{31}

To the possible objection that the above only proves that Muslim peoples have to get rid of religion in order to express progressive political views, one needs only to point to the post-Second World War decades, contemporary with the long boom of global capitalism, during which mass protest in Muslim-majority countries was dominated by radicalizing brands of middle-class nationalism that sought an accommodation with religion, fostering its modernization. Nasser was undoubtedly a sincere believer and practicing Muslim, even though he became the fundamentalists’ bitterest enemy. The influence he achieved at the peak of his prestige in the Arab countries and beyond remains unequalled.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{POLITICAL CONCLUSIONS}

If the reductionist ‘flag and mask’ thesis does obviously not hold much water in the case of Christianity, its application to Islamic fundamentalism can also be politically very misleading. Thus, to pretend that movements like Lebanese Hezbollah or Palestinian Hamas are just peculiar expressions of mass social and political protest, using Islam only as a ‘flag and mask’ or merely as a ‘language’, is to understate considerably the very important reactionary limitations imposed on the radicalizing potential of their membership, and even their mass following, by their firm adherence to Islamic fundamentalist doctrines.

True, in the same way that it is necessary to locate every use of Islam, as for any other religion, in the concrete social and political conditions where it takes place – hence, making a clear distinction between Islam as the ideolo-
gical tool of oppressive class-and-gender domination and Islam as the identity marker of an oppressed minority, as in the case of oppressed Muslim immigrant communities in Western countries\(^3\) – it is necessary also to draw the necessary distinction between widely varying and contrasting brands of Islamic fundamentalism. Thus, there is a huge difference, for instance, between, on the one hand, an organization like the most reactionary al-Qaeda, which is waging in Iraq a bloody war of sectarian extermination along with its fight against US occupation, and holds a truly totalitarian conception of society and polity; and, on the other hand, a movement such as Lebanese Hezbollah, which condemns ‘political sectarianism’ in the name of its fight against Israeli occupation and aggression and, even while considering the ‘Islamic Republic’ of Iran as its supreme earthly model, acknowledges the religious plurality of Lebanon and consequently upholds the principles of parliamentary democracy.\(^3\)

Still, whatever the case, the ideological fight against Islamic fundamentalism – its social, moral and political views, not the basic spiritual tenets of Islam as a religion – should remain for progressives one of their priorities among Muslim communities.\(^3\) In contrast, there is very little matter for objection in the social, moral and political views of Christian liberation theology, whereas the ideological fight against its strictly spiritual component should certainly not be considered a priority – even for hard-line atheists of the radical left.\(^3\)

NOTES


2 For a discussion of the evolution of Marx’s thought at this stage seen from the angle of ‘proletarian self-emancipation’ as the cornerstone of mature ‘Marxism’, see Michael Löwy, *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*, Leiden: Brill, 2003. From the same author, an excellent introduction to the topic of ‘Marxism and religion’ is to be found in the first chapter of his remarkable book on Latin American liberation theology, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America*, London: Verso, 1996, pp. 4-18. I am indebted to Michael, a dear and long-time friend, for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article – for which he bears no responsibility.


4 In a previous article on this topic, I have used ‘heroin’ as a metaphor for the *incitement dimension* of religion. ‘Marxists and Religion – Yesterday and Today’,
ZNet, 21 March 2005. A friend of mine, who is a medical doctor told me that the relevant metaphor is rather ‘cocaine’. Since ‘cocaine’ is defined as ‘a stimulant of the central nervous system… giving rise to what has been described as a euphoric sense of happiness and increased energy’ (http://www.wikipedia.org), its metaphorical use seems indeed warranted here – with the obvious limitations of such metaphors in both cases.


6 In his above quoted The War of Gods, a major work of Marxist social theory dedicated to liberation theology. The truth is that conflicting ‘affinities’ were to be found very early in the Christian corpus.


8 In Friedrich Engels, The Peasant War in Germany, ch. 2, available on Marxists Internet Archive.

9 Ibid. (my emphasis) corrected in light of the German original in Marx Engels Werke, Volume 7, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1960, p. 346. Engels’s tendency to present the Christian dimension in Münzer as a ‘screen’ is the reason Michael Löwy prefers the assessment of the leader of the peasant rebellion given by Ernst Bloch in his Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution (1921). This last book was never translated into English; the latest German edition was printed in Leipzig: Reclam, 1989.

10 Marx and Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848), ch. 1, available on Marxists Internet Archive.

11 ‘Theoretically speaking, then, the Russian “rural commune” can preserve itself by developing its basis, the common ownership of land, and by eliminating the principle of private property which it also implies; it can become a direct point of departure for the economic system towards which modern society tends…’. Marx, ‘First Draft of Letter to Vera Zasulich’ (1881), available on Marxists Internet Archive.

12 Engels, The Peasant War in Germany.

13 The term ‘proletariat’ by itself indicates certain continuity: it is derived from the Latin proletarius designating in Roman Antiquity members of the lowest of the plebeian classes, those who paid no taxes and whose only ‘wealth’ was their children. Hence the origin of the word: proles, meaning ‘offspring’.

14 Engels, The Peasant War in Germany. Engels reiterated the same idea thirty-six years later in his Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy (1886), available on Marxists Internet Archive.

15 Ernest Belfort Bax, The Peasants War in Germany 1525-1526, London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1899, p. 86, also available on Marxists Internet Archive. Quotes are here based on the original print edition, as there are some errors in the transcript on the internet.

16 Ibid., p. 33 (my emphasis).

17 For my own contribution to this endeavour, see in particular Gilbert Achcar, ‘Eleven Theses on the Current Resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism’
Thus the Khomeinists tolerated the left in Iran until they got rid of the monarchy and achieved control over the state: the tragic fate of the Iranian left thereafter is well known.

Thus, a literal adherence to the letter of the Qur’an leads easily to uses like those of present-day Islamic fundamentalism, as Abdelwahab Meddeb aptly explained: ‘The Qur’anic letter, if submitted to a literal reading, can resonate in the space delimited by the fundamentalist project: It can respond to one who wants to make it talk within the narrowness of those confines; for it to escape, it needs to be invested with the desire of the interpreter’. The Malady of Islam, Cambridge: Basic Books, 2003, p. 6. One of the key tasks that Meddeb set himself in his book is defined from the onset: ‘We have to recognize exactly where the letter – the Qur’an and tradition – is predisposed to a fundamentalist reading’ (p. 3).

There are, of course, many other features that derive more or less necessarily from the literal interpretation and dogmatic adherence to Islamic scriptures – too many to be discussed within the limits of this article.


Weber, Economy and Society, p. 1185.

For an attempt at showing how oppressive elements contradicting the ‘proletarian’ character of the original Christian message were introduced already by apostles Luke and Paul, see Anton Mayer, Der zensierte Jesus: Soziologie des Neuen Testament, Olten: Walter Verlag, 1983.


Meddeb, The Malady of Islam.

See note 17 above.

32 Despite the analogies drawn between Nasser’s clout in the 1960s and that of Lebanese Hezbollah’s chief Hassan Nasrallah during the 33-Day War of the summer of 2006, the truth is that Nasser’s was hugely more important in that he was not only perceived by the tens of millions as a ‘hero’ but also – certainly so – as their leader.

33 I have underscored this difference in most of my writings on Islam. On the immigrant communities’ Islam, see Achcar, ‘Marxists and Religion’.


35 My 1981 ‘Eleven Theses on the Current Resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism’ ended with the assertion that: ‘even in cases where Islamic fundamentalism takes purely reactionary forms, revolutionary socialists must use tactical caution in their fight against it. In particular they must avoid falling into the fundamentalists’ trap of fighting about religious issues. …At the same time [they] must nevertheless declare themselves unequivocally for a secular society, which is a basic element of the democratic program. They can play down their atheism, but never their secularism, unless they wish to replace Marx outright with Mohammed!’

36 Even on an issue like that of abortion rights, the ideological struggle can be fought without putting into question the spiritual convictions.