

Communist Christianity and Fundamentalist Islam

Banners of protest

Sunday 11 October 2020, by [ACHCAR Gilbert](#) (Date first published: 1 July 2015).

Christian liberation theology and Islamic fundamentalism both protest and contest social and political conditions in their host societies. But they don't want the same changes.

Religion continues to produce, with undeniable success, combative ideologies that contest social or political conditions. Two of these have had much recent attention — Christian liberation theology and Islamic fundamentalism. A clue to their natures is found in the correlation between their rise and the fate of the secular left in their geographic zones. The history of liberation theology roughly parallels that of the secular left in Latin America, where it is seen as a component of the left. Islamic fundamentalism, though, developed in most Muslim-majority countries as the left's competitor, and has replaced the left in trying to channel protest against what Karl Marx called "real misery", and the state and society held responsible for it. These opposite correlations indicate a profound difference between the movements.

Liberation theology is the main modern embodiment of what Michael Löwy calls an "elective affinity" between Christianity and socialism [1], drawing together the legacy of original Christianity (which faded, allowing it to become an institutionalised ideology of social domination) and "communistic" utopianism [2]. It explains the ability of the theologian Thomas Münzer to formulate in Christian terms, in 1524-5, a programme for the German peasant revolt that Friedrich Engels described in 1850 as an "anticipation of communism in fantasy" [3].

This same elective affinity explains why the worldwide wave of leftwing political radicalisation that started in the 1960s could take on a Christian dimension — especially in peripheral countries where most people were Christian, poor and downtrodden. This was especially the case in Latin America, where the Cuban revolution boosted radicalisation from the 1960s. There was a major difference between this modern radicalisation and the German peasants' movement analysed by Engels: in Latin America, the Christian "communistic" utopianism was combined less with longing for past communal forms (though there was such a dimension among indigenous peoples' movements) than with the modern socialist aspirations of Latin American Marxist revolutionaries.

Opposing western domination

Islamic fundamentalism, on the other hand, took advantage of the rot in the progressive movement. Beginning in the 1970s with the demise of radical middle-class nationalism (symbolised by the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970 after his defeat by Israel in the 1967 war), reactionary forces using Islam as an ideological banner spread in most Muslim-majority countries, fanning the flames of Islamic fundamentalism to incinerate what remained of the left. They filled the void created by the downfall of the left and soon imposed themselves as the main vector of the most intense opposition to western domination: they had incorporated this opposition from the start, but had not stressed it during the "secular" nationalist era. This opposition prevailed again, within Shia Islam, after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. And it regained prominence within Sunni Islam in the 1990s when

armed detachments of militant Sunni fundamentalists switched from fighting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan to fighting the US, after the defeat and disintegration of the Soviet Union, and in reaction to the US's military return to the Middle East prompted by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

In this way, two main brands of Islamic fundamentalism came to coexist across Muslim-majority countries, one collaborating with western interests, the other hostile to them. The stronghold of the first is Saudi Arabia, the most fundamentalist and obscurantist of Islamic states. The present leading anti-western brand among Sunnis is represented by Al-Qaida and its offshoot, the so-called Islamic State (IS); its stronghold within Shiism is the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Both brands share a dedication to a medieval-reactionary utopia — an imaginary and mythical project of society turned towards the past. They seek to re-establish their vision of the society and state of early Islamic history. In this, they share a formal premise with liberation theology's reference to original Christianity. However, the programme of Islamic fundamentalists is not idealistic principles of "communism of love", stemming from an oppressed, poor community on the fringes of society, whose founder was put to death by the temporal power of his time. Nor is it based on some ancient form of communal property, as was in part the 16th-century German peasants' revolt.

A reactionary utopia

Islamic fundamentalists are dedicated to the implementation of a mythologised, medieval model of class rule from almost 14 centuries ago, whose founder — a merchant turned prophet, warlord, and builder of state and empire — died at the peak of his political power. As is the case with any attempt to restore an ancient class society and polity, the project of Islamic fundamentalism amounts to a reactionary utopia.

This project is in elective affinity with ultra-orthodox Islam, which has become the dominant current within Islam, backed by the Saudi kingdom. This Islam is conducive to religious literalism through its cult of the Quran, deemed God's final word. What in most other religions is now fundamentalism as a minority approach — a doctrine advocating the implementation of a literal interpretation of religious scriptures — has a key role within mainstream institutional Islam. Because of the specific historical content of the scriptures it tries to stick to, ultra-orthodox Islam is conducive to doctrines that argue that the faithful implementation of religion requires a government based on Islam, since the Prophet fought to establish such a state. For the same reason, drawing on Islam's history of war of expansion against other creeds, ultra-orthodox Islam is particularly conducive to armed fight against non-Muslim domination.

Acknowledging the elective affinity between ultra-orthodox Islam and medieval-reactionary utopianism, in contrast with that between original Christianity and communistic utopianism, doesn't preclude recognising countervailing tendencies in each. Christianity has a long tradition of reactionary and fundamentalist doctrines. Conversely, the Islamic scriptures include a few egalitarian relics from the period in which the first Muslims were an oppressed community; these have been used to devise socialist versions of Islam.

That there are different elective affinities in Christianity and Islam does not mean that the historical development of each flowed naturally along its specific elective affinity. It adapted to the configurations of the class society with which each religion became interwoven — hugely different from its social origin in Christianity, less so in Islam. For several centuries, Christianity was less progressive than Islam in many regards. Within the Catholic Church the fight continues between a dominant reactionary version represented by Joseph Ratzinger (former Pope Benedict XVI) and the upholders of liberation theology, given new energy by recent leftwing radicalisation in Latin

America.

Understanding affinities

Acknowledging an elective affinity between Christianity and socialism does not mean that historical Christianity was socialist, to be sure. Likewise, to acknowledge the elective affinity between the Islamic corpus and the current medieval-reactionary utopianism of Islamic fundamentalism does not mean that historical Islam was fundamentalist — it was not — or that Muslims are doomed to fundamentalism, whatever the historical conditions.

Even so, in (original) Christianity and (literalist) Islam, this awareness is a clue to understanding the different historical uses of each religion as a banner of protest. It allows us to understand why liberation theology could become so important to the left in Latin America, while all attempts at producing an Islamic version of it remained marginal. It also helps us understand why Islamic fundamentalism has been able to become so important 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.

The superficial Orientalist impression, now widespread, which considers Islamic fundamentalism to be the “natural” ahistorical inclination of Muslims, is nonsense. It overlooks historical facts. A few decades ago, one of the largest Communist parties in the world — officially with an atheistic doctrine — was in the country with the world’s largest Muslim population — Indonesia. (The party was violently crushed by the US-backed Indonesian military after 1965.) In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the main political organisation in Iraq, especially among the Shia in the south, was led not by a cleric, but by the Communist Party. Nasser, who presided over Egypt’s socialist turn in 1961, was a sincere believer and practising Muslim (even though he became the fundamentalists’ most bitter enemy). His influence at the peak of his prestige in the Arab countries and beyond remains unequalled.

It is necessary to locate every use of Islam, as for any other religion, in the concrete social and political conditions where it happens. It is also necessary to make a clear distinction between Islam as an ideological tool of class and gender domination, and Islam as the identity marker of an oppressed minority — in western countries for instance. The ideological fight against Islamic fundamentalism — its social, moral and political views, not the basic tenets of Islam as a religion — should remain a priority for progressives among Muslim communities. But there is little to object to in the social, moral and political views of Christian liberation theology — except for its adherence to the Christian taboo on abortion — even for hardline atheists of the radical left.

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P.S.

Le Monde Diplomatique

Footnotes

[1] This draws on a concept elaborated by Max Weber. See Michael Löwy, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America*, Verso, London/New York, 1996.

[2] “Communitistic” is used here to distinguish this utopianism from the communist doctrines formulated with the advent of industrial capitalism.

[3] Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (1850), in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol 10, Lawrence and Wishart, London, pp 397-482.