

Marx and the Prophet

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On why the rise of fundamentalism in Muslim-majority countries owes much to the failings of the secular left.

Recent decades have seen a “return of the religious,” as fundamentalist creeds have become an increasingly prominent element of the geopolitical landscape. Not only has the worldwide spread of neoliberal capitalism failed to spread secular notions of science and progress, but the shocks produced by its crises have helped feed sectarian responses based on religious identity.

Going beyond mere condemnation of religious dogma, Marxists have long analyzed [religion](#) as a social phenomenon which can take [many different forms](#). Karl Marx famously highlighted religion’s dual character as both an illusion and a comfort to the oppressed, and many socialist movements have deployed religious iconography (and, for the Christian left, the example of Jesus) in their cause.

Several movements in Muslim-majority societies offer hints of an Islamic left analogous to the [liberation theology](#) seen in Catholic countries. Yet such initiatives lag behind the success of fundamentalist movements who advance a literalist and backward-looking understanding of Islam. In a period of global crises, these latter have been better able to present themselves as an alternative value system.

Yet this religious revanchism is not simply rooted in the soil, as if it expressed Muslim-majority societies’ “essential” cultural traits. Indeed, if Islamic fundamentalism promises a return to an idealized past, its current success is something new. As Gilbert Achcar explains in this interview, its advance owes not simply to the words in the Qu’ran, but so, too, to the defeats of the secular left in the Arab and Muslim world.

JND: You have published several articles on Marx, Marxist traditions, and religions. What elements from the tradition born from classical Marxism do you think are still relevant for understanding religious questions in today’s world? Or does it miss too much?

GA: We should first agree on what classical Marxism means. I myself take it to mean the Marxism of the founders — Marx, but also [Engels](#) — starting from the moment their common theory began to take shape, a process in which *The German Ideology* marks a key turning point. Particularly relevant to the study of religion are their materialist approach to the analysis of historical facts and circumstances, and their political attitude toward religion. I think this first element is still fundamentally important, but on two conditions.

The first condition is that we recognize that classical Marxism’s essential contribution is a methodological approach that relates ideological facts to their material underpinning and explores the dialectical relationship between the material and the ideological. This is the indispensable condition for a resolute repudiation of all kinds of essentialism, like the one that [Edward Said](#) popularized under the label of Orientalism. Indeed, in this work Said was profoundly mistaken about Marx, characterizing him among the nineteenth-century Orientalists on the basis of a single 1853 article on India, which he actually misread.

What this article betrayed — as I explained in an essay in my [collection](#) *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism* — was not an essentialist perception of the Indians, but rather the naively positivist conception of the role of capitalism that Marx and Engels held in those years. The idea that capitalism was creating “a world after its own image,” like “God created man in His own image” in *Genesis*, was deeply flawed: capitalism was instead creating two hierarchical worlds, a dynamic and dominant one in the metropolises and a crippled and dominated one in the colonial world. Yet what Said ignored was that Marx later repudiated this perspective on India, and Engels did likewise with regard to Algeria, when they understood that colonial domination was much more devastating than it was “civilizing.” They grasped this in light of their study of Ireland, a context they could understand much more directly.

Furthermore, Said should have wondered why the specialists from whom he borrowed his critique of Orientalism were all Marxists, starting with Anouar Abdel-Malek, whom he quoted at length in his book, or Maxime Rodinson, whom he praised. This was no coincidence: historical materialism is the most radical antithesis, and the most effective one, of the philosophical idealism called Orientalism, in the sense popularized by Said. Indeed, it was because he failed to grasp this that Said could not avoid the pitfall of essentialism in the vision of the West that emerges from his book.

You don’t escape essentialism by practicing an “Orientalism in reverse” that inverts the negative and positive signs pinned on the notions of Orient and West. A much more radical inversion of analytic perspective is required if we are to get rid of Orientalism and any other form of cultural essentialism: we need to understand that “cultures,” of whatever kind, do not shape material history as much as this latter conditions the character and evolution of cultures. If we want to escape the tautology that characterizes all essentialism, then rather than explain history by religion, we need to explain religion and its usages historically.

The second condition for a good use of the materialist interpretation of religion is to acknowledge that it can only offer a partial explanation of religious phenomena. Of all ideological forms, religion is certainly the most complex, a fact that goes along with the exceptional longevity and adaptability of religious ideologies. Reaching a satisfactory understanding of religions requires the mobilization of the entire tool kit of social sciences, including social psychology and psychoanalysis.

To explain religion as the mere “reflection” of the material conditions of life is an instance of excessive reductionism, more excessive in this case than with regard to any other ideological domain. Paradoxically, it is on the ground of the political attitude toward religion that classical Marxism’s contribution retains much more validity. Yet this contribution is largely ignored or misinterpreted. The fact is that, contrarily to what many believe, Marx and Engels were not advocates of “militant atheism” à la Lenin. They were staunch materialists and committed atheists too. But once they had transcended the left-wing Hegelianism of their youth, they asserted that atheism — defined as the negation of divinity — was not very useful.

In fact, Marx and Engels mocked those, such as the disciples of [Auguste Blanqui](#) or Mikhail Bakunin, who wanted to abolish religion “by decree.” While emphasizing the need for the workers’ party to fight against reactionary and quack uses of religion, they defended the freedom of religious practice against state interference. This meant an intransigent defense of secularism in the strict sense of the separation of religion and state: the rejection of religious interference in state affairs but also — and this is too often forgotten — of state interference in religious affairs. Such an approach seems more relevant than ever.

JND: There has been much talk about a “return of religions.” How do you analyze this phenomenon as a Marxist, especially in the part of the world that you know best, the Middle East and North Africa?

GA: There is no denying that we have witnessed a religious resurgence since the last quarter of the previous century, a resurgence that some called “God’s revenge.” This resurgence affected all religions, but most importantly the monotheistic ones. Here is a good example of the limitation of classical Marxism’s input, for it would be utterly unconvincing to explain the recent rise of religious beliefs and practices as a “reflection” of the expansion of capitalism and its [neoliberal](#) metamorphosis. That is especially true of the expansion of religious fundamentalisms, which aim to reshape society and the state according to their dogmatic and literal reading of the religious corpus.

There is, of course, an obvious concomitance between the “return of religions” and capitalism’s neoliberal mutation, which is itself contemporaneous with the collapse of the post-Stalin state system in Eastern Europe. Decisive for understanding the relation between the historical changes that I mention and the surge in religiosity and of religious fundamentalisms is Émile Durkheim’s concept of anomie. I attempted to explain this in my 2002 book, *The Clash of Barbarisms*. By anomie, Durkheim meant the disturbance of conditions of existence and the loss of points of reference, such as we can see in the contemporary world. He explained how the socioeconomic and politico-ideological variants of anomie spur an identitarian retrenchment around points of social solidarity such as “religion, nation, and family.”

This analytic key is to be combined with another one — or rather, an intuition — in Marx’s and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* where they explained that, confronted with the steamroller of capitalist development, part of the middle layers, the petit-bourgeois and the like, “try to roll back the wheel of history.” The idea of a “return” to the predominance of the City of God, of the “restoration” of the distant past of Antiquity or the Middle Ages — a highly mythologized past, needless to say — is indeed a crucial dimension of religious fundamentalisms. Such backward-looking and chimeric escapism is a very understandable reaction to the adversity and misfortunes of our present time, especially when it means identification with a counter-society, be it of the size of a small clan or a large tribe.

It is within this context that the very spectacular surge of Islamic fundamentalism since the last quarter of the past century should be situated. Several factors contributed to this surge, in addition to the general anomic conditions that I alluded to. They are: the use by governments, almost everywhere, of Islamic fundamentalism as an antidote to the left-wing radicalization of the 1960s; the specific role played in this respect by the existence of a fundamentalist state, the Saudi kingdom, located in the cradle of Islam, a state that is a vassal of US imperialism; the emergence in 1979 of a second fundamentalist state in Iran, fiercely opposed to the first and to its US overlord; the wars waged successively by the two global empires in Muslim lands: the USSR in Afghanistan followed by the United States in Iraq as well as Afghanistan; and the nefarious role of the Israeli state, the self-proclaimed “Jewish state.”

Taking refuge in the past is all the more tempting in Islam’s case because the contours of the past to be reconstituted seem better-known for that specific religion, which was born later than most others. In sharp contrast with the [imitation of Christ](#), the imitation of Muhammad is immediately political and combative, and it upholds a model of government. The reason for this is that it relies upon the religious biographies (*sirat*) of the Prophet as well as upon the religious corpus composed of the Hadiths (the Prophet’s deeds and sayings) and the Qur’an. This gives particular vigor to the notion of the “Islamic State” that contemporary theoreticians of Islamic fundamentalism have been formulating for a whole century.

JND: Islam has not seen anything really comparable to Christian [liberation theology](#), with its alliance between a section of the Catholic Church and the workers’ movement. How do you explain this, and what conclusions do you draw from it regarding political prospects in

Muslim-majority countries?

GA: We can explain this by borrowing Max Weber's notion of "elective affinities" — a phrase that Weber himself borrowed from Goethe. We can see such affinities between communism and the myth, if not the reality, of the original Christianity: see, for instance, how [Rosa Luxemburg](#) tried to assimilate early Christianity to communism in her 1905 [essay](#) "Socialism and the Churches." Likewise, there are elective affinities between the myth, if not the reality, of early Islam and the Islamic fundamentalism of our time. A major difference though is that, in the case of Christianity, the official religious orthodoxy strongly objects to the communistic interpretation, whereas in Islam's case, the official religious orthodoxy favors the fundamentalist interpretation by upholding a literalist dogmatism. This is related to the fact that Islamic orthodoxy has become heavily influenced by an ultraorthodox brand of Islam propagated by two fundamentalist states: the Saudi kingdom, for Sunni Islam, and Iran's Khomeinist republic for Shiite Islam — both states enjoying an important oil rent, to boot.

From the 1960s a significant part of the sociopolitical dissent in Christian communities, especially in South American countries dominated by US imperialism, took up a position in line with the communistic interpretation of Christianity called liberation theology. Indeed, it most often did so against the official churches, which were allied with dictatorships and imperialism.

What happened in Muslim communities was the opposite, as Islamic fundamentalism embarked on its rise. Tellingly, while 1979 saw a revolution in Nicaragua propelled by socialist dynamics and involving a significant left-wing [Christian component](#), in Iran that same year the revolution was propelled by reactionary fundamentalist dynamics and led by a clerical leadership. The left-wing activists who misconstrued the meaning of the Iranian revolution paid a very high price for that: they were brutally crushed by the new government that they had contributed to bringing about.

This included Iran's Islamic left, the most sizable of all Islamic movements comparable to Christian liberation theology: the People's Mujahedin of Iran. Taking their inspiration from the left-wing Shiite theology elaborated by Ali Shariati, the People's Mujahedin were among the first to be crushed, after having been targeted from the start by the spearhead of the Khomeinist reaction, Iran's Hezbollah. Later, the Mujahedin degenerated in exile into the dubious sect that counts Rudy Giuliani among its best friends.

The Iranian experience shows, on the one hand, that an approximate equivalent of liberation theology is possible in Islam and did indeed exist. We could also mention more limited experiences within Sunni Islam, the most recent of which is Turkey's anticapitalist Muslims, who drew some attention during their participation in the 2013 [Gezi Park](#) mobilization against Erdogan's Muslim-conservative government. On the other hand, the Iranian experience shows that it is illusory to expect these movements to reach mass proportions comparable to those that the Muslim Brotherhood, a reactionary and fundamentalist movement, so rapidly achieved in Egypt. This is illusory because Islamic-left movements must swim against the powerful current of Islamic orthodoxy, with an interpretation of Islam that bears few true affinities with early Islam and is thus not very credible in its attempt to reinterpret that legacy.

It is wrong to expect, through a kind of Christian analogy, the emergence of an Islamic replica of liberation theology. The Left in the Muslim world will be only marginally theological. It will, rather, be an essentially "lay" phenomenon, in the sense of the contrast between clergy and "the lay people." Lay left-wing currents claiming the Islamic faith as a key part of their identity have been a key part of the Left in Muslim-majority countries and were even hegemonic therein. Nasserism is the most important example: the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel-Nasser was the greatest embodiment of the left-wing radicalization of the 1960s in both the Arabic-speaking and the Muslim worlds. He did

so in a dictatorial manner, to be sure, but that was largely inspired by the Soviet Union's "actually-existing socialism" at a time when the latter could still promise to "bury" the capitalist states, as Khrushchev could assert in 1956 without making a fool of himself.

In 2012, in the framework of the ongoing Arab Spring, everybody took note of the very powerful appeal in today's Egypt of a nostalgia for what one might call "Nasserism with a human face," that is to say a democratic version of Nasserism. It was represented in the first round of that year's presidential election by the left-wing Nasserist candidate Hamdeen Sabbahy. He was the great surprise of that election, somewhat like Bernie Sanders in the US presidential campaign of 2015-16. Sabbahy got the largest vote in Egypt's two main urban centers, Cairo and Alexandria, and over one-fifth of the votes overall, tailing closely behind the two front-running candidates representing the old regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. Only lay "secular" currents of this kind, not theological ones, will mobilize large masses of believers on the Left.

Such left-wing lay currents dismiss the atheism of Marxists, but they are somehow inspired by their analyses, like the followers of liberation theology. Their leaders are believers and, in some cases, ostentatious observants, but their relation to God is not mediated by the equivalent of a bishop or a Pope (this is easier in Sunni Islam than in Shiite Islam, since the latter is more clerical, as Catholicism is when compared with Protestantism). They keep God on their side, one might say, and they denounce as impostors those who invoke God for reactionary purposes. At the peak of Nasser's popularity, which coincided with the peak of his regime's radicalization, the Muslim Brothers, perceived as collaborators of the Saudi monarchy and of the CIA (which was true on both counts), were marginalized and discredited in the whole region. Nasser did not hesitate to stigmatize the Saudi rulers as traitors to Islam, accusing them of being the enemies of the poor. Popular majorities supported him without any need for him to engage in theological subtleties in order to win them over: here is a good illustration of the Latin adage *vox populi, vox Dei* (the voice of the people is the voice of God).

JND: Could you expand more on the Egyptian case? Do left-wing Nasserists refer to Marx? And aside from the left-wing heirs of Nasserism in Egypt, could you give other examples of left-wing forces originating in movements upholding Marxism in the region? I have in mind here the Iraqi Communist Party, which has a significant following and has recently won the parliamentary elections as part of a coalition.

GA: Today like yesterday, left-wing Nasserism is not hostile to Marxism, although it does not consider it as a reference. During its radicalization in the 1960s, Nasser's regime integrated within its single ruling party — even in the party's organized elite, the "vanguard organization" — several Marxists originating from Egypt's Communist movement, which dissolved itself and merged into the Nasserist party in 1964. The ideological osmosis between Nasserism and Marxism was such that, in the middle of the 1960s and especially after the defeat inflicted by Israel upon Nasser's Egypt in the Six-Day War of June 1967, whole sections of the pan-Arab Nasserist movement converted to "Marxism-Leninism," including armed-struggle organizations such as the National Liberation Front of South Yemen and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The same osmosis existed also within the Algerian FLN, especially during the period that preceded Ahmed Ben Bella's overthrow in 1965 by the military junta led by Houari Boumédiène.

Conversely, some Communist Parties (CPs) in the Arabic-speaking world such as those of Morocco or Sudan compromised with Islam, even to the point that this latter staged Qur'an recitations at the opening of its mass meetings. This was a perilous exercise, although one can understand that a large mass party such as the Sudanese CP — one of the region's two largest Communist parties, the other one being Iraq's CP — could take the risk of trying to turn the people's voice into that of God. In the long run though, Communists always lose in this game: by endorsing the mixing of religion with

politics, they stand on the ground of their religious and fundamentalist opponents, who appear more legitimate on this terrain.

The Islamic fundamentalists were the leading ideological supporters of Omar al-Bashir's suppression of the Sudanese Communists after the 1989 coup. Before that, Islamic fundamentalism had been used in the 1980s as a source of ideological legitimation by Gaafar an-Nimeiry, whose dictatorship had crushed Sudan's Communists back in 1971. Islamic fundamentalists and the like also played a key role in the terrible [liquidation](#) of the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965-66. This was the world's largest CP after those of the USSR and China, and a party that had also indulged in mixing religion with politics. The moral of this story is that Marxists will not be able to outcompete the fundamentalists and other Islamic reactionaries on the theological terrain. While denouncing every exploitation of religious beliefs to reactionary ends, they must vigorously uphold the separation between religion and state and leave to their progressive Muslim allies the task of confronting religious reaction in theological combat — a task which these latter are better equipped for, for they are more authentic.

As for the Iraqi CP, it is but a shadow of what it was at its peak at the end of the 1950s. It collaborated with the Baathist dictatorship in the 1970s, only to be crushed by it by the end of the same decade. Those of its members who escaped incarceration and assassination were forced into exile. They went back to Iraq after Saddam Hussein's overthrow by the United States, but they then collaborated with the occupation authorities. In recent years, they have regained some dynamism by engaging in social struggles. In this context, they allied with the current led by Moqtada al-Sadr, a religious leader by inheritance who is generally described as a populist and who distinguishes himself from other Iraqi Shiite movements by his opposition to Iran's influence. The Communists did indeed take part in the parliamentary elections as a component of the coalition dominated by al-Sadr's followers. But we should not exaggerate: this coalition did not "win" the elections. It only obtained the largest number of seats — a mere 54 out of 329 — as one of more than thirty-five lists represented in a highly fragmented parliament. Moreover, these elections saw a sharp rise in abstention, with less than half of registered voters casting a vote. The most spectacular outcome for the Communist Party was the election of one of its women leaders in the Shiite holy city of Najaf. But here again it is a perilous exercise, even for a party that bears little relation with its previous self and less so with Marxism.

In this part of the world as in any other, when Marxists must enter alliances with forces of in many ways opposed ideological and programmatic orientations, the five golden rules formulated in 1905 by the Russian revolutionary Alexander Parvus remain essential: "1) Do not merge organisations. March separately but strike together. 2) Do not abandon our own political demands. 3) Do not conceal divergences of interest. 4) Watch our ally as we would watch an enemy. 5) Concern ourselves more with using the situation created by the struggle than with keeping an ally."

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