How Secularists Deal with Traditionalists (or Don't)

Michael Rustin

Review of *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions*, by Michael Walzer. Yale University Press. 172pp. £16.99

This book's topic is a timely one, since no-one can now be in any doubt of the relevance of religious movements and passions to understanding the modern world. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, the international order has been reconfigured along lines of religiously-motivated antagonism, on the part of the West's enemies if not of its own purposes. The rise of militant Islam, in part filling the large political and cultural spaces left by the collapse or destruction of secular dictatorships of the Middle East, is the most obvious manifestation of this resurgence of religious passions, culminating in the project to restore an Islamic caliphate across the region, rejecting the quasi-national state boundaries imposed after the end of the First World War. But just as important are the divisions internal to the Islamic world, between the Shia and Shi-ite branches of Islam, whose leading powers are respectively Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Religious loyalties and traditions also had a significant role during the dissolution of several of the Communist states of Eastern Europe. The Catholic Church was influential in mobilising opposition to the regime in Poland, Protestant churches were significant in the liberation movements of East Germany. The lines of bitter division which emerged in the former Yugoslavia reflected the earlier sway in those regions of Roman Catholicism, the Greek Orthodox church, and Islam. Although the West's hostility to militant Islam, and its military interventions to resist its rise, have not for the most part been formulated by Western nations in religious terms, for the Islamists it has been possible to evoke with effect the memory of earlier Western interventions, notably the Crusades, which had the ostensible goal of Christian conversion. This

development is counter to what was predicted by liberal and Marxist theories of modernisation. Religious fundamentalism then came to be understood by theorists of globalisation like Manuel Castells and Anthony Giddens as essentially a reaction against modernity.

The West's response to militant Islam has been principally formulated not in terms of Christian religious commitment, but in terms of antipathy towards the violence, and intolerance attributed to its leaders and movements, that is in ostensibly liberal, secular, even humanitarian terms. Yet Trump's proposal that 'Muslims' as such should be barred from entering the United States, and even David Cameron's New Year encouragement to British people (but which British people?) to remember their 'Christian traditions', seek to revive a latent structure of religious feeling. A serious problem for Western nations in wishing to insulate their now substantial Muslim populations from 'extremism' is to know how to couch a countervailing appeal to them, especially where Muslim migrants' experience of their new lives in the West has often been one of social exclusion and poverty.

Walzer's central argument is that the secular revolutionaries of the national liberation movements gravely underestimated the strength and depth of the traditionalist religious affiliations of the people they sought to mobilise which they saw as one of the principal obstacles to their emancipation and to nationalist resistance. The national liberation project (in this respect like the project of communist revolution) required the making of a new kind of citizen, no longer bound by the traditions of the past. In a striking parallel, (earlier developed in *Exodus and Revolution,* 1986) Walzer dates the origins of the Zionist project and its contradictions to the original exodus of the Jews from Egypt, with Moses as the bringer of a new code of laws and beliefs whose stringency, as we know from the Bible, was not welcome to his followers. But of course the identities of religion and nation were here indistinguishable, unlike the position of modern Zionist pioneers. But even so, the rejection by the early Zionists of a project to resettle European Jews in Uganda shows how irresistible the religious aura of the land of Israel was even to secular nationalists. India was another mixed or compromise

instance, since while Nehru was a secular moderniser, it was Gandhi's capacity to mobilise Hindu sentiment which delivered a mass following to the Congress Party.

This book can thus be seen as a kind of self-criticism of the rationalistic shallowness of both liberal and socialist projects of emancipation and social reconstruction. These, Walzer suggests, were unable to offer a sufficiently emotionally-resonant vision of an emancipated life to retain the loyalty of their peoples. A significant influence on the author's thinking has been the 'culturalist' anthropology of Clifford Geertz, whose principal idea was that cultures are the most powerful organisers of societies and their internal relations. Walzer's thesis is that neither liberal individualism nor socialist collectivism has proved capable of developing what we might call 'social imaginaries' persuasive enough to resist the appeal of religiously-based sentiments and solidarities.

The secularists proclaiming democracy and liberation were often seen as merely new kinds of power-seeking elites. While they drew their line of demarcation between the authenticity of the new nation and the alienness of the colonisers, they could find themselves on the wrong side of a different line of division that between 'the people' and an 'alien' ruling class of reforming westernised leaders. Erdogan in Turkey has overthrown the secular ruling class settled in power for two generations following Ataturk's revolution. Contemporary populists in the United States and Europe now also organise against allegedly 'out of touch' elites which are alleged to disdain and disrespect ordinary people. Where religion is the main organiser of opposition to secular elites, such secularist elites have sometimes only been able to retain or recover power only through the exercise of brute force, as in Egypt and Algeria.

Walzer, who remains strongly committed to the project of secular emancipation, is at pains to defend each of the three movements he discusses, in India, Algeria and Israel, against the charge that their nationalism was already deeply compromised by its implicit religious affiliations, arguing that each had been committed to the idea of a secular state. Against Marxists who contend that national liberation movements were always liable to be contaminated by religious

exclusivism, he argues that class solidarities as envisaged by Marxism have proved unattainable, and that the particularistic loyalties constructed through the making of national identities were indispensable to the defeat of the colonisers.

Walzer is antipathetic to the claims of each of the fundamentalist religions he discusses, not least because of their oppressiveness towards women - the values of gender equality are set out as principal grounds for moral and political universalism. Walzer nevertheless argues that emancipatory regimes do need to find some accommodation with religious beliefs and practices. In the background to Walzer's argument is the 'American solution' which maintains a firm boundary between state and church, mosque or synagogue, and which requires that religions abjure coercion, at least in physical terms. Laws protecting individual freedoms within a framework allowing cultural and religious diversity, is Walzer's preferred option –as set out in his *Spheres of Justice* (1984).

In *On Toleration* (1999) Walzer expressed sympathy for the tolerance of both the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, in contrast to systems which assert the rights of individuals but reject the idea that groups and cultures have their own entitlements. He develops this idea here, discussing the ideas of Austro-Marxists such as Otto Bauer who envisaged a reformed (Austro-Hungarian) empire which would respect national cultures, equal citizenship for all inhabitants, and cultural autonomy for the previous subject-nations. This model has affinities with the aspirations that some socialists once had for the European Union.

Persuasive as Walzer's argument is in many ways, there remains a question of whether it is right. Did these national liberation movements fail to contain the rise of religious fundamentalism mainly because of their own elitist blindness to popular religious sentiments? Might it have been the case, as Walzer's argument implies, that more culturally-sensitive national liberationists might have succeeded where the Zionists, the FLN, and Nehru's Congress Party failed? Is the only alternative to Walzer's argument the mobilising claims of working class solidarity, which failed so catastrophically to resist the appeals of nationalism in 1914, to give one instance?

It seems to me that more particular explanations can be given for the failure of to resist the appeals of reactionary nationalism. In the case of India, the critical factor was surely not the blindness of Nehru and his associates to the continuing presence in Indian life of Hindu religion, but rather their failure to confront the material powers, especially in regard to land-ownership, which gave this religion its popular sway. What has discredited the national liberationists in India is not their indifference or antipathy to religion, but their failure to do enough to raise the living standards of their people and also, of course, their corruption and their reliance on the influence of landowners, in what became an institutionalised system of patronage and bribes. The decisive compromise was thus with the feudal residues of Indian society, which the Raj had previously used to its own advantage.[1]

Instructive here is the contrast with China, where the national liberation movement was Communist and which chose from the start to settle its accounts with feudalism by taking all land into state ownership. Once the regime decided, after the death of Mao in 1976, to embark on rapid economic development through an alliance with an emergent bourgeoisie, there could be no resistance from an earlier landed class, since it had gone. This left the field free for industrial development, massive building and infrastructure, in contrast with India. The dominant religion of China, Confucianism, traditionally identified with ideas of good and wise government, made it possible for the Chinese Communist Party to achieve some kind of accommodation with these traditions. The point is that the regime has made its central goal the improvement of the living standards of its entire people, and has successfully made this the chief grounds for its legitimacy. One can view this, from a Marxist perspective, as having been a successful hegemonic strategy, in both responding to the material needs of the people, and assimilating into its rule some of its dominant cultural and religious traditions.

If we look at the case of Zionism in Israel, there seem also to be particular reasons which explain the failures of secular government. The conditions for its

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[1] Kerala, with the role of Communists in government, its high Human Development Index, and its weak religious parties, is the exception within India.

success were above all peaceful coexistence and economic symbiosis with its Arab neighbours, which could have made the ideals of individual freedom, cultural and cosmopolitan diversity, and increasing prosperity, sufficiently realised to have maintained a secular order. But instead we have had decades of antagonism and war from which religious fundamentalism is able to benefit. The decadent and authoritarian regimes of Israel's neighbours (as Perry Anderson has recently pointed out in *New Left Review* 96), and the willingness of the United States to uphold both sides of this catastrophic antagonism, for its own geopolitical reasons, is a part of the 'exceptionalist' reason for this situation to persist, with the rise of religious fundamentalism its consequence on both Arab and Israeli sides of the divide. The traumatic history of the Holocaust is another 'abnormal' factor in this situation, since it gives legitimacy to a sense of unending persecution and danger.

We can look for particularistic explanations of the rejection of secularism and the rise of religious fundamentalism in the case of Algeria too. Most relevant here is the violence and brutality of the war of colonial independence with France, and the return to France of its settler population and many of its collaborators after France's defeat, leaving the economy and administration in ruins. The new regime was thus militarised, and used to the extreme use of force, from its beginning –unlike India, for example, liberated without an armed struggle. The contrast with the post-colonial regimes of Morocco and Tunisia, both formerly ruled by France, but decolonised peaceably, is surely striking. Here, post-independence, compromises of a kind were achieved leaving much less scope for insurgent religious movements.

I wish to suggest, in other words, that it is not just a representative failure of secular liberation movements to understand and achieve viable relationships with religious traditions which explains their loss of hegemony in each of these three nations. In each case, these secular regimes needed for their survival and success to create certain conditions, which they were not able to do. The balance of causal influences was in each instance different. In India, the primary explanation lies in the material sphere of ownership and its relationship to

political power. In Israel, the explanation lies in the continuing state of armed conflict. In Algeria, it is the legacy of the war of liberation with France and its effects on the emergent regime which has the main responsibility.

None of this is to question Walzer's argument that progressive political movements need to respect the religious and cultural traditions of the peoples they lead or govern, or risk rejection by them if they fail to do so. But there is a broader condition for their success too, which is their need to have regard to the other major aspects of popular well-being and security, not least in material terms. It is where the anxieties brought about by insecurity and impoverishment are greatest, that movements offering powerful identifications against defined enemies (religious, nationalist or ideological) have their compelling appeal. It is these broader failures of secular regimes, liberal or socialist, and not just their tone-deafness to religious sentiments and beliefs, which explain their vulnerability to fundamentalist and exclusionary challenges.

University of East London