

ISLAMISM AND THE LEFT

Michael Walzer ■ Winter 2015

In the three and a half decades since the Iranian revolution, I have been watching my friends and neighbors (and distant neighbors) on the left struggling to understand—or avoid understanding—the revival of religion in what is now called a “post-secular” age. Long ago, we looked forward to “the disenchantment of the world”—we believed that the triumph of science and secularism was a necessary feature of modernity. And so we forgot, as Nick Cohen has written, “what the men and women of the Enlightenment knew. All faiths in their extreme form carry the possibility of tyranny.”¹

Today, every major world religion is experiencing a significant revival, and revived religion isn’t an opiate as we once thought, but a very strong stimulant. Since the late 1970s, and particularly in the last decade, this stimulant is working most powerfully in the Islamic world. From Pakistan to Nigeria, and in parts of Europe, too, Islam today is a religion capable of inspiring large numbers of men and women, mostly men, to kill and die on its behalf. So the Islamic revival is a kind of testing moment for the left: can we recognize and resist “the possibility of tyranny?” Some of us are trying to meet the test; many of us are actively failing it. One reason for this failure is the terrible fear of being called “Islamophobic.” Anti-Americanism and a radical version of cultural relativism also play an important part, but these are older pathologies. Here is something new: many leftists are so irrationally afraid of an irrational fear of Islam that they haven’t been able to consider the very good reasons for fearing Islamist zealots—and so they have difficulty explaining what’s going on in the world.

My main evidentiary basis for this claim is the amazingly long list of links that comes up when you Google “Islamophobia.” Many of them are phobic; I focus on the anti-phobic links, and so I have entered the online world of the left. It is a large and exciting world, highly diverse, inhabited mostly by people new to me. It’s also a little disheartening, because many of the pathologies of the extra-internet left haven’t disappeared online. Obviously, there is no left collective, on or off the internet, but the people I am writing about constitute a significant leftist coterie, and none of them are worrying enough about the politics of contemporary religion or about radical Islamist politics.

For myself, I live with a generalized fear of every form of religious militancy. I am afraid of Hindutva zealots in India, of messianic Zionists in Israel, and of rampaging Buddhist monks in Myanmar. But I admit that I am most afraid of Islamist zealots because the Islamic world at this moment in time (not always, not forever) is especially feverish and fervent. Indeed, the politically engaged Islamist zealots can best be understood as today’s crusaders.

Is this an anti-Muslim position, not a fear but a phobia—and a phobia that grows out of prejudice and hostility? Consider a rough analogy (all analogies are rough): if I say that Christianity in the eleventh century was a crusading religion and that it was dangerous to Jews and Muslims, who were rightly fearful (and some of them phobic)—would that make me anti-Christian? I know that crusading fervor isn’t essential to the Christian religion; it is historically

contingent, and the crusading moment in Christian history came and, after two hundred years or so, went. Saladin helped bring it to an end, but it would have ended on its own. I know that many Christians opposed the Crusades; today we would call them Christian “moderates.” And, of course, most eleventh-century Christians weren’t interested in crusading warfare; they listened to sermons urging them to march to Jerusalem and they went home. Still, it is true without a doubt that in the eleventh century, much of the physical, material, and intellectual resources of Christendom were focused on the Crusades.

The Christian Crusades have sometimes been described as the first example of Islamophobia in the history of the West. The crusaders were driven by an irrational fear of Islam. I suppose that’s right; they were also driven by an even more irrational fear of Judaism. They were fierce and frightening religious “extremists,” and that assertion is not anti-Christian.

One can and should say similar things about Islamists today—even though jihadi violence is not required by Islamic theology, even though there are many Muslim “moderates” who oppose religious violence, and even though most Muslims are quite happy to leave infidels and heretics to their otherworldly fate. I know that there is a “jihad of the soul” in addition to the “jihad of the sword,” and that Mohammed famously declared the first of these to be the greater jihad. And I recognize that the Islamic world is not monolithic. Reading the daily newspaper, anyone can see that even Islamist zealotry is not all of a piece. Al Qaeda, the Taliban, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Hezbollah, Hamas, and Boko Haram, to take just a few leading examples, are not the same; there may well be significant theological disagreements among them. I should note, also, that the many millions of Muslims in Indonesia and India seem relatively untouched by zealotry, though Jemaah Islamiyah, a Southeast Asian Islamist network, has followers in Indonesia and has been accused of significant terrorist attacks there. Despite all these qualifications, it is true without a doubt that the “jihad of the sword” is very strong today, and it is frightening to non-believers, heretics, secular liberals, social democrats, and liberated women in much of the Muslim world. And the fear is entirely rational.

But again, I frequently come across leftists who are more concerned with avoiding accusations of Islamophobia than they are with condemning Islamist zealotry. This is an odd position with relation to the Muslim world today, but it makes some sense in Western Europe and possibly also in America, where Muslims are recent immigrants, the objects of discrimination, police surveillance, sometimes police brutality, and popular hostility. I have heard Muslims called the “new Jews.” That’s not a helpful analogy, since Muslims in today’s Western Europe have never been attacked by Christian crusaders, expelled from one country after another, forced to wear distinctive dress, barred from many professions, and slaughtered by Nazis. In fact, right now, some Muslim militants are among the chief purveyors of anti-Semitism in Europe (they get a lot of help from neo-fascists in France and Germany and other countries, too). In America, the “new Jews” label clearly doesn’t work. According to FBI statistics, between 2002 and 2011, there were 1,388 hate crimes committed against American Muslims and 9,198 against American Jews—and 25,130 against black

Americans.² We should defend all victims of hatred, but it isn't wrong to recognize where the greatest dangers lie.

It's true that Europe's Muslims (and America's too, to a lesser extent) are a harassed minority; they rightly receive sympathy and support from the left, which also hopes, rightly again, to win their votes as they become citizens. There are many right-wing groups that campaign against Islam—not only far-right splinter groups like the English Defense League in the UK or Die Freiheit or Pro-Deutschland in Germany, but populist parties that command considerable electoral support, like the National Front in France or the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands. Since the political leaders of all these groups claim to fear the “rise” of Islam in Europe, Islamophobia has become for everyone on the left politically incorrect; more important, it is morally incorrect.

Islamophobia is a form of religious intolerance, even religious hatred, and it would be wrong for any leftists to support bigots in Europe and the United States who deliberately misunderstand and misrepresent contemporary Muslims. They make no distinction between the historic religion and the zealots of this moment; they regard every Muslim immigrant in a Western country as a potential terrorist; and they fail to acknowledge the towering achievements of Muslim philosophers, poets, and artists over many centuries. Consider, for example, the Dutch nationalist Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom, who describes the Koran as a “fascist book” and calls for it to be outlawed (as *Mein Kampf* is) in the Netherlands.³ Or Hans-Jurgen Irmer, deputy floor leader of the Christian Democratic Union in Hesse, Germany, who claims that “Islam is set on global domination.”⁴ There are indeed Islamists with global ambitions (even in Germany—remember Mohammed Atta), but it is wrong to hold all Muslims responsible for Islamist zealotry, which the greater number by far of German Turks, for example, certainly reject. People like Wilders and Irmer, and there are many others, go a long way in explaining the left's aversion to Islamophobia.

But we have to be careful here. There are perfectly legitimate criticisms that can be made not only of Islamist zealots but also of Islam itself—as of any other religion. Pascal Bruckner argues that the term “Islamophobia” was “a clever invention because it amounts to making Islam a subject that one cannot touch without being accused of racism.”⁵ The term was first used, he claims, to condemn Kate Millett for calling upon Iranian women to take off their chadors. I don't know who “invented” Islamophobia, but it is worth repeating Bruckner's key point: there has to be room for feminists like Millett and for all the militant atheists and philosophical skeptics to say their piece about Islam—and also about Christianity and Judaism—and to find an audience if they can. Call them to account for bad arguments, but their critical work should be welcome in a free society.

Critiques of Islam are inhibited not only by the fear of being called Islamophobic but also by the fear of “Orientalism.”⁶ Edward Said's book by that name provides many examples of both scholarly and popular arguments about Islam that contemporary writers will rightly want to avoid. But his own argument about the future of Islam and the Arab world (he was writing in the late 1970s), missed the mark by a considerable distance. Said thought that, with only a few honorable

exceptions, Orientalism had triumphed in the West; he also believed that it had been internalized in the East, so that Arab and other Muslim writers were now producing Orientalist—that is prejudiced and stereotyped—accounts of their own history. “The Arab world today,” Said wrote, “is an intellectual, political, and cultural satellite of the United States.” Islamic revivalism is nowhere anticipated in Said’s book. Indeed, he takes Bernard Lewis’ insistence on the “importance of religion in the current affairs of the Muslim world” to be an example of Orientalism. And a year later, in *The Question of Palestine*, Said calls “the return to ‘Islam’” a “chimera.”⁷ It would be difficult for anyone to say that now, but it is still rare for writers on the left to address the “chimera” head on.

So the critique of Islamism from the left is constrained these days; Islamophobia, however, seems to be growing, and not only on the populist or nationalist right. Why is this happening? The new *Islamophobia Studies Journal* (a bi-annual publication sponsored by Berkeley’s Center for Race and Gender), in an editorial in its second issue, identifies the source of the trouble:

For some, rising anti-Muslim sentiments are immediately explained away as a “natural” outcome of the many violent events in the Muslim world and “terrorism” in general. However, we maintain that the rising negative sentiments may have to do with the presence of a well-organized and well-funded Islamophobic industry that has managed to invade and capture civil society and public discourses without serious contestation. Up to this point, anti-racist and progressive voices have not been effective in challenging this industry, nor have they been able to provide the needed resources to mount regional and national responses.

This is nicely self-serving: more resources for the *Journal* would certainly be a big help in combating the Islamophobic industry. But notice the reluctance to engage with “the many violent events in the Muslim world.”

One can find a similar reluctance in a series of otherwise excellent articles published in a special issue of the *Nation* in July 2012. Jack Shaheen’s “How the Media Created the Muslim Monster Myth” is an example of an argument very much like that of the editors of the *Islamophobia Studies Journal*. The novelist Laila Lalami in “Islamophobia and its Discontents” recognizes that “retrograde blasphemy laws” and “unfair divorce laws” may have something to do with hostility to Islam but rightly refuses to treat these as excuses for the harassment she has lived with here in the United States. Nor would “violent events in the Muslim world” provide any such excuse. Islamist zealotry should never be used to justify or “explain” European and American prejudice. But the entirely legitimate desire to avoid prejudice isn’t a reason to avoid those “violent events.” I don’t mean to single out the *Nation* here, whose editors organized that useful special issue; so far as I can tell, no leftist magazine or website has attempted a serious engagement with Islamist zealotry.

Most leftists, whatever problems they have understanding religion, have no difficulty fearing and opposing Hindu nationalists, zealous Buddhist monks, and the messianic Zionists of the settler movement (the phrase “no difficulty” is a gross understatement in this last case). And, of course, no one on the left makes common cause with Islamist militants who kidnap schoolgirls, or murder

heretics, or tear down the ancient monuments of rival civilizations. Acts like these, insofar as they are noticed, are routinely condemned. Well, not quite routinely: Nikolas Kozloff, in an excellent article, “A Tale of Boko Haram, Political Correctness, Feminism, and the Left,” has documented the strange unwillingness of a number of leftist writers to blame Muslim zealots for the kidnapping of the Nigerian schoolgirls.⁸ Less outrageous, but bad enough, is the unwillingness of many more leftists who do recognize such crimes to attempt a generalizing analysis and an encompassing critique of Islamist zealotry. What stands in the way of analysis and critique?

Deepa Kumar’s book, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*,⁹ suggests one possible answer to this question: what stands in the way is the fact that Islamists today are opponents of “the West,” that is, of Western, really American, “imperialism”—bases in Saudi Arabia, the two Iraq wars, the Libyan intervention, support for Israel, drone strikes in Somalia, and so on. I would argue that this list requires a selective response: opposition in some cases, certainly, but also agreement in others. I dare say that the overthrow by Islamist zealots of the regimes the United States has supported in the Middle East, bad as some of them are, would not be terribly helpful to the people of the region. But leftist opponents of imperialism don’t usually make selective judgments, and neither do the Islamists. So “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” We watched this maxim being acted out in last August’s demonstration in London, sponsored by the UK Stop the War Coalition, which was attended by vocal supporters of Hamas including secular leftists and religious Muslims (some of them fundamentalist, some not). The secular leftists were fierce opponents of Islamophobia, though they were not entirely free of other phobias.

But there is another reason for the reluctance to condemn Islamist crimes, and that is the great eagerness to condemn the crimes of the West. The root cause of religious zealotry is not religion, many leftist writers insist, but Western imperialism and the oppression and poverty it has bred. So, for example, David Swanson, first on the *War Is A Crime* website and then on the *Tikkun* website (with a nervous but only partial disclaimer from the editor), asks “What to do about ISIS?” and answers: “Start by recognizing where ISIS came from. The U.S. and its junior partners destroyed Iraq . . .”¹⁰ That’s right; there would be no ISIS in Iraq without the U.S. invasion of 2003, although if Saddam had been overthrown from within, the same religious wars might well have started. For ISIS doesn’t “come from” the U.S. invasion; it is a product of the worldwide religious revival, and there are many other examples of revivalist militancy. Swanson might offer a similar explanation for all of them, but the explanation loses plausibility as the instances multiply.

The left has always had difficulty recognizing the power of religion. Aren’t all religions the ideological tools of the ruling class? And aren’t all millennialist and messianic uprisings the ideologically distorted response of subaltern groups to material oppression? Religious zealotry is a superstructural phenomenon and can only be explained by reference to the economic base. These ancient convictions are particularly obfuscating today. Parvez Ahmed, a Florida professor who is fully cognizant of the “scourge” of Boko Haram, provides a typical example in a

recent blog. He argues that “much of the violence [committed] in the name of Islam is less motivated by faith and more so by poverty and desperation.”¹¹ Similarly, Kathleen Cavanaugh from the National University of Ireland, writing on the *Dissent* website, insists that “the violent and oppressive actions [of ISIS] have little to do with religion per se,” but rather are “underpinned” by material interests.¹² But is this right? Why don’t poverty, desperation, and material interests produce a leftist rather than an Islamist mobilization? In fact, the religious revival, not only among Muslims but around the world, among Jews and Christians, Hindus and Buddhists, has enlisted supporters from all social classes, and the driving motive of revivalist activity seems, incredibly, to be religious faith (Fawaz Gerges’s *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* provides ample evidence of religion’s power).¹³

There are also people on the left who believe that Islamist zealotry is not only produced by Western imperialism but is a form of resistance to it. Whatever groups it actually attracts, it is fundamentally an ideology of the oppressed—a version, though a little strange, of left politics. Think of the leftist writers who described the Sunni and Shi’ite militias fighting against the U.S. occupation of Iraq as “the resistance”—deliberately invoking the French Resistance to the Nazis in the Second World War. But nothing about the Islamist militias was leftist except for the fact that they were fighting against Americans. This example was featured by Fred Halliday in a 2007 article in *Dissent* called “The Jihadism of Fools.”¹⁴ That’s a good tag, but it didn’t stick, as we can see from Slavoj Žižek’s claim the following year that Islamic radicalism is “the rage of the victims of capitalist globalization.” I have to acknowledge that Žižek is not afraid to be called Islamophobic; he advocates a “respectful, but for that reason no less ruthless” critique of Islam and of all other religions.¹⁵ But he won’t get the critique right so long as he thinks that the object of Islamist rage is the same as the object of his own rage.

Judith Butler makes a similar mistake when she insists that “understanding Hamas [and] Hezbollah as social movements that are progressive, that are on the left, that are part of a global left, is extremely important.”¹⁶ She said that in 2006 and then repeated it with interesting amendments in 2012: Hamas and Hezbollah belong to the global left because they are “anti-imperialist,” but she doesn’t support every organization on the global left, and she specifically doesn’t endorse the use of violence by those two. I am grateful for that last amendment, but the left identification was as wrong in 2012 as it was in 2006—usefully wrong, perhaps, since it helps explain why so many leftists support or won’t actively oppose groups like Hamas and Hezbollah. The only thing that makes these organizations “leftist” is that they are fighting against Israel, which stands in here for imperial America.

The postmodernists haven’t done any better than the anti-imperialists with regard to Islamist zealotry. Remember Michel Foucault’s apology for the brutality of the Iranian revolution: Iran doesn’t “have the same regime of truth as ours.”¹⁷ This version of cultural relativism has become a commonplace, as we can see in the case of Azar Nafisi, the author of *Reading Lolita in Tebran*, a lovely account of cultural subversion in an Islamist state. In exile in the United States,

Nafisi told an interviewer in Boston: “I very much resent it in the West when people from—maybe with all the good intentions or from a progressive point of view—keep telling me, ‘It’s their culture.’ . . . It’s like saying, the culture of Massachusetts is burning witches. . . . There are aspects of culture which are really reprehensible. . . . We shouldn’t accept them.”¹⁸ Those well-intentioned and progressive people were probably advocates of a radical multiculturalism, which might well allow the burning of witches so long as it didn’t happen in Massachusetts.

The strongest postmodern defense of Islamic radicalism comes from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who argue that Islamism is itself a postmodern project: “The postmodernity of fundamentalism has to be recognized primarily in its refusal of modernity as a weapon of Euro-American hegemony—and in this regard Islamic fundamentalism is indeed the paradigmatic case.” And again: “Insofar as the Iranian revolution was a powerful rejection of the world market, we might think of it as the first postmodern revolution.”¹⁹ Is it cruel of me to point out how eager the Iranians are these days to rejoin the world market?

All these left responses to Islamist zealots—identification, support, sympathy, apology, tolerance, and avoidance—look very strange if we consider the actual content of their ideology. Jihadi opposition to “the West” should provoke serious worry on the left before any other response. Boko Haram began with an attack on “Western-style” schools, and other Islamist groups have undertaken similar attacks, especially on schools for girls. Values that the zealots denounce as “Western” are very much in contention here: individual liberty, democracy, gender equality, and religious pluralism. No doubt, Westerners don’t always live in accordance with these values and often fail to defend them when they need defense, but these are values to which Western hypocrisy pays tribute—and which some of us Westerners struggle to uphold. In recent years, Russia and China have sometimes claimed to oppose both Western imperialism and Western values, but these two countries look more like rival imperial powers than opponents of imperialism. While their leaders occasionally resort to value arguments (as when Chinese rulers endorse the Confucian ideal of “harmony”), they don’t seem strongly committed to the values they proclaim. But the Islamists are definitely committed. They have their own large ambitions, but these are highly idealistic ambitions, which leave little room for material interests. Their zealotry is a value zealotry, theologically driven, and it is a real challenge to “Western” values.

But individual liberty, democracy, gender equality, and religious pluralism aren’t really Western values; they are universal values that first appeared in strong, modern versions in Western Europe and the Americas. These are the values that pretty much define the left, which also first appeared in its strong, modern version in Western Europe and the Americas. The left is an eighteenth-century invention, an invention of the secular Enlightenment. There were, of course, people who held potentially leftist positions in all the major religious traditions—pacifists, communitarians, proto-environmentalists, advocates for the poor, even people who believed in equality or, better, who believed in the equal standing before God of all believers (I should probably say, of all male believers). But

nothing like the classic left ever existed among Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, or Christians. And the values of the left are those “Western” values, taken very seriously. So the opposition to those values is really something that the left should confront—and the strongest opposition right now comes from Islamist radicals. And this is the very reason that many leftists are reluctant to confront the Islamist radicals.

What would a genuinely leftist movement against oppression and poverty look like? First of all, it would be a movement of *the oppressed*, a mobilization of men and women, previously passive, inarticulate, and frightened, now able to speak for themselves and defend their human rights. Second, its aim would be the liberation or, better, the self-emancipation of those same people. And its driving force would be a vision, no doubt partially shaped by the local culture, of a new society whose members, men and women alike, would be more free and more equal and whose government would be responsive and accountable. That’s not an unusual description of left aspiration. So it’s a mystery that anyone anywhere can seriously believe that any Islamist group belongs to the global, or any other, left.

How should the left respond to those Islamist groups—assuming, as I believe, that a critical response is necessary? I am not going to consider military responses here. There is an international brigade of Islamist zealots fighting in Iraq and Syria, but there is no chance of recruiting an international brigade of leftist fighters, so there is no point thinking about where we might send them. Leftists will have to support (though many won’t) military efforts specifically aimed at stopping the massacre of infidels and heretics. After that, I am more inclined to consider a policy focused on the containment of Islamism rather than a war (or a series of wars) to destroy it. This is a fever that will have to burn itself out. But there is a deep difficulty with this view: many people will suffer in the burning, and leftists ignore that suffering at our moral peril. How to help those who are targeted by Islamist forces is a question that we will have to address again and again. But we should begin with the ideological war.

In that war, we need first to distinguish between Islamist zealotry and Islam itself. I doubt that we will get any credit for doing that. Writers like Paul Berman and Meredith Tax have made the distinction with great care in everything they have written against Islamism, and their critics have mostly managed not to notice. No one else’s care is likely to be noticed, but the distinction is still important. We should insist particularly on the difference between the writings of zealots like Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb in Egypt or Maulana Maududi in India and the work of the great rationalist philosophers of the Muslim past and the liberal reformers of more recent times. We should do this in exactly the same way as we would distinguish between the preachers and sermons of the Christian crusades and Scholastic theology.

We should also engage cooperatively with Muslim, and also lapsed Muslim, opponents of zealotry—and give them the support they ask for. There are a lot of these anti-zealots, and some of them, like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, started on the left and then moved rightwards in part because they found so few leftist friends. Paul

Berman has written a withering critique of the treatment of Hirsu Ali by leading liberal/left intellectuals,²⁰ and Katha Pollitt, writing in the *Nation*, wondered, courageously, whether “we leftists and feminists need to think a bit more self-critically about how the AEI [American Enterprise Institute, a neo-conservative think tank] . . . managed to win over this bold and complex crusader for women’s rights.”

We needn’t imitate Hirsu Ali’s fierce anger, which reaches from Islamism to Islam itself and derives from experiences none of us have had. But we would benefit greatly from a study of her trajectory, in which the left’s fear of Islamophobia played a large part. There is a strange unwillingness among leftists to welcome atheists emerging from the Muslim world in the same way we would welcome atheists emerging, say, from the Christian world.

Second, we have to acknowledge that the academic theory (which was also a left theory) that predicted the inevitable triumph of science and secularism isn’t right—at least, its time horizon isn’t right. Leftists have to figure out how to defend the secular state in this “post-secular” age and how to defend equality and democracy against religious arguments for hierarchy and theocracy. The appeal of religious doctrine and practice is obvious today, and we need to understand it if we are to persuade people that religious zealotry is frighteningly unappealing.

Third, we should recognize the power of the zealots and the extent of their political reach. We should clearly name the zealots our enemies and commit ourselves to an intellectual campaign against them—that is, a campaign in defense of liberty, democracy, equality, and pluralism. I am not arguing that leftists should join the famous “clash of civilizations.” All the great religious civilizations are capable, and probably equally capable, of producing violent fanatics and peace-loving saints—and everything in between. So we shouldn’t think about the struggle with Islamists in civilizational but rather in ideological terms. There are many devout Muslims who support the universal values of the “West” and the left, and who search in Islamic texts, just as other religious leftists search in Hindu, Jewish, and Christian texts, for alternative sources and buttressing support for these values.

The organization Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML), which works in many Muslim majority countries, is effectively engaged in just this search, with special regard to gender equality. These women are our friends, and some of them have shown remarkable strength in what are often hostile environments; they deserve more support than they have gotten from today’s leftists. Consider the following statement of WLUML at the 2005 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre:

Fundamentalist terror is by no means a tool of the poor against the rich, of the Third World against the West, of people against capitalism. It is not a legitimate response that can be supported by the progressive forces of the world. Its main target is the internal democratic opposition to [its] theocratic project . . . of controlling all aspects of society in the name of religion . . . When fundamentalists come to power, they silence people; they physically eliminate

dissidents and they lock women “in their place,” which, as we know from experience, ends up being a strait jacket.²¹

This sounds like an appeal against Halliday’s “jihadism of fools,” and I would bet that there were foolish people at the World Social Forum who accused WLUML of Islamophobia. The secular left responds with appropriate hostility to some forms of religious extremism, but its response to Islamist extremism has been weak. Let me ask again and for the last time: why is this so? The terrible fear of Islamophobia is the first reason, and I have suggested a paired set of additional, related, reasons: because Islamists oppose the West, and because we have to respect the way “they” do things over there (no matter what they do). There are probably other reasons. This question should be of critical interest to leftists wherever they live, but it hasn’t received anything like the attention it deserves. A number of secular feminists in the United States and the UK have mobilized against religiously motivated misogyny—including the Islamists’ irrational fear of women: see, for example, the website of the Center for Secular Space. The Italian left magazine and website *Reset* has also been intelligent, informative, and critical in its discussions of the Muslim world. Here are voices that the rest of the left should listen to and join.

As I’ve already acknowledged, there is no chance that an international brigade of leftist fighters will join any of today’s military battles. My friends and neighbors are not ready to enlist; many of them won’t acknowledge the dangers posed by Islamist zealotry. But there are dangers and the secular left needs defenders. So here I am, a writer, not a fighter, and the most helpful thing I can do is to join the ideological wars. I can claim comrades in many nations, but not yet anywhere near enough of them. There is an international brigade of left intellectuals still waiting to take shape.

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To read a response by Andrew F. March, along with Michael Walzer’s reply, click [here](#).

1. Cohen, *What’s Left: How Liberals Lost Their Way* (London: Fourth Estate, 2007), 361.
2. *National Review Online*, January 2013. I haven’t seen these figures on a leftist website.
3. *The Telegraph* (website), August 2007.
4. Euro-Islam Info, April 2010.
5. Bruckner, *The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 48.
6. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 322, 318.
7. Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 184.
8. *Huffington Post*, May 2014.
9. Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012).
10. *Tikkun* website, September, 2014.
11. *Huffington Post*, July, 2014.

12. *Dissent* blog, September, 2014
13. Fawaz Gerges's *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006) provides ample evidence of religion's power.
14. *Dissent*, Winter, 2007.
15. Zizek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 187, 139.
16. Mondoweiss, August 2012.
17. Quoted in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 125.
18. identitytheory.com, February 2004; I thank Nick Cohen for this reference.
19. Hardt and Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 149.
20. Berman, *Flight of the Intellectuals* (New York: Melville House, 2010), chapter 8.
21. Quoted in Meredith Tax, *Double Bind: The Muslim Right, the Anglo-American Left, and Universal Human Rights* (New York: Center for Secular Space, 2012), 82.

ISLAMISM AND THE LEFT: AN EXCHANGE (ONLINE ONLY)

Andrew F. March and Michael Walzer ■ Winter 2015

Andrew March responds to "Islamism and the Left"

Michael Walzer has taught multiple generations of political theorists about the importance of belonging and connection in political judgment. Although in this essay he is eager to stress that "individual liberty, democracy, gender equality, and religious pluralism aren't really Western values; they are universal values," the distinctive feature of Walzer's political theory is its distrust of abstract political justification and its celebration of political struggles that transform communities from within. For Walzer, the moral hero has always been the prophet who speaks his tribe's own idiom in an effort to remind his people not so much of the best of which they are capable as rational beings, but the best that they have already committed themselves to.

In one sense, "Islamism and the Left" can be read as an exercise in this mode of political argument. We can hear in Walzer himself the voice of the anguished and disappointed critic. He is not speaking to the demagogues of Fox News or to the even more belligerent purveyors of anti-Muslim racism. He is speaking to the tribe he still claims as his own—the global left. But his alienation from that tribe is much more palpable than his connection. Walzer is addressing the left, but neither sharing in its anxieties nor moving with its moral and emotional rhythms. Two aspects of Walzer's essay bear observation here. First, Walzer does not seem to disagree with a particular judgment made by particular segments of the left. He does not think that in their efforts to balance multiple ends—supporting equality and opposing imperialism—certain leftists have simply failed to weigh

one of them enough. He thinks that they (we) are operating in *bad faith*—at least those “leftists who are more concerned with avoiding accusations of Islamophobia than they are with condemning Islamist zealotry.” He doesn’t think that leftists are actually sympathetic to Islamists; he just thinks that because they must have no good reasons for not speaking about the Islamist threat in the way that he does, they must be motivated by something other than reason.

Second, Walzer accuses leftists of being so afraid of appearing Islamophobic that “they have difficulty explaining what’s going on in the world,” but his own analysis of what’s going on in the world is both thin and self-contradictory. On the one hand, he thinks that leftists can’t take the revival of religion seriously in its own terms (since “the left has always had difficulty recognizing the power of religion”) and so can’t see Islamism as the return of the left’s traditional enemy. But then he wants to assure us that it’s not “religion” we should be afraid of (“Islam itself”) but the perverted ideology of Banna, Qutb, and Mawdudi. Moreover, while claiming to take the power of religion more seriously than others on the left, his only political proposal is “to figure out how to defend the secular state in this ‘post-secular’ age.”

More troublingly, not only does he fail to offer a non-tautological analysis of the rise of Islamism—something other than “radical Islam is the return of religious militancy”—but the goal of his essay practically forbids it. To provide a historical, *political* analysis of the rise of radical Islamism in particular countries and particular times would, Walzer implies, run the risk of suggesting causes or explanations other than the moral threat of Islamism itself, and that would be to somehow apologize for Islamism. But how can it be a left response to the rise of global Islamism to say that the study of colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism (words that appear in Walzer’s essay only as evidence of *others’* analytical failures) must play only the smallest possible role in explaining what is going on in the world? Is it really helpful to speak about “the left’s” attitude toward Islamism in such general terms, without looking at specific left debates about Syria, Turkey, Tunisia, or Iran? Something unhelpful is going on when we are asked for the umpteenth time to panic about the moral pathologies of a group of writers in the West rather than focus on specific struggles for justice in the world.

It is hard to argue with someone who thinks that your judgments, your intellectual efforts, and your moral struggles are all in bad faith because you have an irrational fear of being labeled Islamophobic—who assumes you will support any force, whoever vile, as long as it is fighting Western imperialism. I understand that it is easier to diagnose *why* others have gone wrong than it is to persuade them *how* they are wrong. Yet this, rather than the practice of critique or thinking-with, is the logic of Walzer’s polemic. In fact, Walzer is quite clear that his essay is not an effort to think through a difficult problem with his intellectual companions on the left—*how* can global solidarity be achieved in the twenty-first century?—but rather a declaration of intent “to join the ideological wars.”

Worse, the charge that one does not denounce enough is notoriously slippery. Like demands for Muslims to—*finally!*—speak out and condemn terrorism, for American Jews to condemn Israeli settlements, or for black leaders to condemn inner city rage, Walzer’s essay suffers from both confirmation and selection bias. He has experienced frustration with the kinds of leftists he runs into (mostly on the internet, it appears) not saying the right things at the right time, and then extrapolates from this that the left in general has a problem with Islamism. But how many exceptions does it take until the original premise needs to be called into question? The problem is that no amount of contradictory evidence is ever good enough. The one who has moved first can always reply, “Well, yes, there are these exceptions, of course, but I still don’t have *enough* comrades declaring Islamist zealots our primary enemies.” This response is as slippery as it is disappointingly parochial. We are treated to the same old stories of the same people saying things that are supposed to shame them, but—really—how many times can we talk about Edward Said, Paul Berman, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali before we start to sound silly?

It seems much more honest for us to acknowledge that the problem is not that leftists are guilty of “appeasing” Islamists but that we have a less black-and-white disagreement about political judgment in specific contexts. The problem is not easy to resolve in practice but is quite straightforward intellectually: how should we balance criticism of Islamist practices against a concern not to bandwagon with broader right-wing demonization of Muslims? But even this question is derivative of the still broader one of how to assess Islamism as a challenge for left politics in the twenty-first century. Instead of listing all of the times people on the left have proved their moral decency by condemning Islamism, I would like to try to discuss how we might think about Islamism as an intellectual and moral problem for the left.

1.

A first dimension is a consideration of the way the Islamist challenge to post-Enlightenment left principles might cause those on the liberal left to rethink their core commitments. The model here is Marx’s critique of bourgeois rights in “On the Jewish Question,” the ur-text for all subsequent leftist skepticism about formal rights, legal equality, and individual negative freedom. There are, of course, hard and soft versions of this. A hard version dismisses rights and parliamentary democracy *tout court* as bourgeois fictions that obstruct rather than advance emancipation. A softer version merely cautions us against seeing the achievement of rights, representative democracy, and negative freedoms as the final victory rather than as a necessary first step toward deeper forms of freedom and solidarity.

Is anything like this going on with the left and Islamism? I am unaware of any committed leftists who have been moved to question the *value* of religious freedom, gender equality, and social justice merely because Islamists have called them into question from a religious perspective. No one really doubts whether Iranian women should be free to unveil or whether female genital mutilation is

an abomination. No one thinks that Yazidis and Baha'is should be subjected to persecution or slaughter.

It is true that some have questioned the universality of particular *forms* of female emancipation after hearing the views of pious, veiled Muslim women. But the critical bite here is a purely liberal one: it is on the grounds of the freedom, autonomy, and self-representation of the *women in question*—and not (as the pious themselves would assert) on the grounds of sovereign religious norms—that a strict opposition between freedom and religion is called into question. It is also true that some on the left have expressed doubts about the applicability of European conceptions of strict secularism to Muslim countries. But the critical motive here is a democratic one: it is on the grounds of the freedom, autonomy, and self-representation of the *peoples in question* that the universality of one form of secularism is called into question.

This way of thinking about politics in the Muslim world is, in fact, straight out of Walzerian political theory: political communities are responsible for developing their own norms, practices, and commitments through internal struggle, and are not just interchangeable sites for applying transcendent, a priori conceptions of justice. Many leftists, true to this spirit, realize that the advancement of democratic justice must unfold through actual local struggles in Muslim countries. One would hope that Walzer himself would appreciate this practice of contextual political analysis, rather than merely searching for the narrowest band of “good secularists” to praise.

2.

Whereas Walzer suggests that the divide on the left is between those who are faithful to left principles and those who are not, I propose that the disagreement actually lies at a second dimension of political thinking. This dimension is our judgment about which horrors and injustices in the world to *prioritize* opposition to. Walzer thinks it is the horrors caused by Islamism. But a person on the left is likely to read Walzer's essay and respond, “I wasn't aware that fierce criticism of Islamism is something the world lacks for right now. Are the powers that be—in Washington, Moscow, Cairo—really waiting for left pressure to finally *do something* about Islamists?” For my part, I doubt that future historians will look back at the period between 2001 and 2014 and remember it for its culture of appeasement, excuse, and apology toward Islamist terrorism.

The war against violent Islamism is taking care of itself. It's a little stunning to read that in the face of this massive state violence against Islamists the priority of those of us on the liberal left should be to “clearly name the zealots our enemies.” Instead, shouldn't the left reaction be to provide more hopeful, inspiring, and admirable alternatives to this ongoing war? What is the point of the left if we can't do that?

Admittedly, these alternatives are in short supply. And it is not at all clear that people struggling for justice, equality, and democracy in Muslim (and other post-colonial) countries want the help of Westerners in supplying them. Rather, they want our help in restraining the interference of decidedly non-leftist Western power in their countries. Walzer is as aware of this as anyone else on the left. I

will not flip the ad hominem script by questioning his good faith in deploring Western imperialism. I trust that he deploras it. But I will ask this: if those of us who live, vote, and pay taxes in the West have decided that the most important thing we can do is focus on our own ongoing crimes and pernicious influences abroad, how can Walzer be so sure that this judgment is wrong? Doesn't this choice reflect the best of the critical tradition of the left—not letting your fear and disgust of the crimes of others blind you to your own? And doesn't it, furthermore, reflect the highest aspiration of Walzerian political theory—struggling within your own community to help it achieve its highest moral aspirations?

With a massive military, political, and media apparatus already doing a fine job turning Islamists into enemies—and corpses—I insist instead that we should be proud of the fact that there remains a segment of the Western public sphere determined to question this.

3.

A third dimension is the Schmittian one: who is my enemy? Walzer is unabashedly “political” in this sense in this essay. He says “we should clearly name the zealots our enemies and commit ourselves to an intellectual campaign against them.” This seems to me a little faux-heroic. I know that it is satisfying to keep writing pieces that take a stance against killing apostates, mutilating genitals, and kidnapping schoolgirls. But who doubts that we are against these things? What kind of moral courage does it really take to say this in the West? And what battles are we avoiding if we think that this is only one worth fighting? What eventually becomes apparent is that Walzer is not only not talking about, but also does not appear to have much interest in, politics in the actual Muslim world. It is not leftists *in Muslim countries* that are failing to stand up to Islamism and it is not their struggles that he really cares about (his reference to the group Women Living Under Muslim Laws notwithstanding). It is the parochial question of who did or did not embrace Hirsi Ali warmly enough, who is writing the right blog posts and op-eds, and who is signing the right petitions. Try as I might, I can't keep on getting worked up about that.

What would happen if we took a break from our self-regard and asked hard *political* questions about what it would actually take to advance left-liberal political goals in the world today (bracketing the question of how valuable it is for us here on either side of the MetroNorth to ponder how to advance those goals from Morocco to Indonesia)? Just four years ago we would have said that we should place our hopes in the wave of democratization rippling out from Tunis, Cairo, and Damascus. No one says that now that Syria and Iraq are burning, Egypt is living a retro-1960s pantomime, and the Iranian hardliners are more in control than ever. (Even Tunisia, at this time of writing, appears to be freely voting for counter-revolution.) So do we turn our hopes back to the project of spreading human rights through international legal instruments, along with some advocacy by local NGOs? I don't have the disdain for the international human rights movement that some on the left do (and that the Walzer of the

1970s and '80s might have). But I am not expecting many victories to emerge from it in the Muslim world in the near future.

I don't have a better answer than this—but neither does Walzer. I don't blame him. I don't expect him to endorse the vision of a global uprising of the excluded multitude expressed by the likes of Žižek, Badiou, Hardt, or Negri. In many Muslim countries, such a revolt today seems more likely to take the form of international jihadism than egalitarian revolution. But then I think it is only honest to say that Walzer's frustration with leftists who don't just want to declare intellectual war on Islamist zealots is symptomatic of a number of things that have nothing to do with those leftists' moral pusillanimity.

It is symptomatic of our lack of answers and our lack of power. I don't know how to stop global warming; I don't know how to reverse widening inequality and global oligarchy; I don't know whether I should put my hopes for progress in the twenty-first century in progressive struggles within existing nation-states or in some kind of transformative revolution; I don't know whether the contemporary technological revolution is a good or a bad thing. In the face of this, Walzer is offering us, more or less: "But I do know that I hate the Islamists and am not afraid to use my power of the pen against them."

It is always easier to focus on the crimes the other commits against you than on the crimes you commit, or abet. It is always easier to inflate the other's moral grotesqueness and your own good intentions. Not falling victim to the moral narcissism of nationalism and communal self-love takes enormous effort and is a precious achievement. It is hard work to ruthlessly subject your own affective feelings of disgust to the tribunal of historical perspective. But I believe it is this impulse, in the best tradition of left and liberal politics, that informs leftists in their assessment of Islamism today—not moral relativism and timid fear of the accusation of Islamophobia.

And, so, yes I am disgusted by beheadings, mass executions, and the selling of Yazidi girls into slavery, and I hope fervently for the defeat of ISIS and its associates; but I am also disgusted by my own government's use of depleted uranium in Iraq, widespread torturing of detainees, and entrenchment of an unaccountable surveillance apparatus. It would be inhuman to sit back and coldly run a tally of deaths on each side, as if the jihadis get a pass until they have killed as many on the ground as we have from the air, although as Walzer writes, "it isn't wrong to recognize where the greatest dangers lie." But it is the very least we can expect of ourselves to keep in mind that if you live in the United States you are far more likely to have appalling violence done in your name than against you. For any serious person, supporting universal equality and opposing Western imperialist violence should not be not too many balls to keep up in the air at the same time intellectually. Walzer may be right that *some* on the left do find this too much to juggle, and struggle to endorse freedom and equality just because they think the State Department wants them to. But because I consider Michael Walzer not only my teacher but also my ally, I would like to see him worrying as much about imperialist violence and the actual realities of Muslim societies as he does about Islamist zealotry.

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Michael Walzer replies

Several times in this piece, Andrew March writes that I take the leftists I am criticizing to be “operating in *bad faith*” (his emphasis). I have reread my essay several times now, and I can’t find anything that suggests bad faith; that is March’s invention. I do think that many leftists are wrongheaded, silly, politically correct, and afraid to be called Islamophobes. But I didn’t, and don’t, charge anyone with bad faith. Well, one exception: March’s flattery of me at the beginning and end of his response is certainly an example of bad faith. But for the rest, his arguments are arguments, and I will try to give them the attention they deserve.

I can see four arguments here, along with some bits of professorial pomposity (“the tribunal of historical perspective”) that I will ignore. The first argument is that I didn’t deal with efforts to explain the rise of Islamism in specific places for specific reasons—actually, not very specific reasons; this is his list: “colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism.” He is right on the first point: in my article, I didn’t discuss “Syria, Turkey, Tunisia, or Iran”—or any other of the many Muslim-majority countries. I considered Islamism as an international movement. No doubt, it takes particular forms in every country where it arises (as I said in the article), but there is a lot of theological overlap, and groups like ISIS can recruit fighters from across the Muslim world—and in the West, too. Any explanation for this extraordinary success has to be a generalizing explanation. And what about colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism? The difficulty here is that these causes are the causes of everything that happens or could happen. A leftist uprising would certainly be explained with reference to these three. So would a rightwing nationalist uprising. March wants to explain a radical religious uprising in the same way; he condemns me for assigning “only the smallest possible role” to these factors. My actual claim is that these factors don’t give us a distinguishing reason for religious zealotry. Why does Islamist theology have such great appeal and not Marxist ideology? Surely there have to be cultural and inner-religious reasons for this appeal. I didn’t explore those reasons in my essay; I only criticized writers who pretend that they don’t exist. I have a book coming out in a few months that begins an exploration: *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counter-Revolutions* (Yale University Press).

The second argument is that I did not address or engage with the real left. “How many times can we talk about Edward Said...before we start to sound silly?” March and his friends have nothing to do with “the likes of Zizek, Badiou, Hardt, or Negri.” My frustration is only with “the kinds of leftists [I] run into (mostly on the internet, it appears).” Lo and behold, I have run into Andrew

March on the internet. There is a lot going on “on the internet,” and I don’t see how any up-to-date leftist can suggest that I should be looking elsewhere. Anyway, I addressed more than a dozen left writers, and many of them write books—which greatly outsell my own and March’s books. I wrote about a very important part of the left (not the whole of it) as it actually is.

March’s third argument is the one he seems most committed to since he repeats it several times: “The war against violent Islamism is taking care of itself.” He finds it “stunning” that in the face of “massive state violence against Islamists,” I should be calling for an intellectual war against them. He thinks that I should instead be arguing against the massive violence and looking for “inspiring and admirable alternatives to this ongoing war.” (He doesn’t suggest any inspiring alternatives.) March may not be aware of how familiar this argument is to someone my age—though if I was actually his “teacher,” as he says I am, he would know this. The argument he makes here is exactly the argument that was made, again and again, against the left-wing anti-communism of *Dissent* in its early years. The United States and its Western allies were already mobilized against Soviet Communism. Did they really need leftist pressure “to finally *do something*” about communism? Shouldn’t we, “who live, vote, and pay taxes in the West,” be focused “on our own ongoing crimes and pernicious influence abroad”?

The editors of *Dissent* actually had a lot to say about American crimes abroad (and still do), but they were also interested in the moral and political health of the left. They didn’t think that leftists who were defenders of or apologists for Stalinist crimes would ever be a force for democracy. And they were right, for many of those defenders and apologists went on to defend or apologize for third-world dictators who call themselves anti-imperialists and for terrorists who call themselves liberators—and now for Islamist zealots.

But March isn’t one of those—this is his fourth argument. He is “disgusted by beheadings, mass executions, and the selling of Yazidi girls into slavery”—and so are all his friends. “Who doubts that we are against these things?” He doesn’t seem to notice that I am not a doubter; I agree that just about everyone is similarly disgusted. But I am looking for a political way of expressing this disgust, and March emphatically isn’t doing that. He is obviously a politically engaged person, as much as I am. Despite his “disgust,” however, he refuses any serious engagement with Islamist crimes; he is engaged with American crimes. It’s always easier, he says, to focus on the crimes that the others commit “rather than on the crimes you commit, or abet.” March is proud that he doesn’t take the easy way.

But then one has to wonder about the political or moral force of his disgust. For the America he excoriates is right now the only force effectively opposing or, at least, containing, the power of ISIS and therefore the beheadings and the mass executions and the enslavement of Yazidi girls. Of course, I would prefer a secularist uprising, a purely local struggle, against ISIS and against every other Islamist group. I am eager to support liberals, social democrats, and feminists in Muslim countries. March pretends to endorse my longstanding commitment to the integrity of particular communities and to the importance of political activity

from within. He apparently wants to argue that this commitment requires left-wing activists to wait for the victims of Islamist zealotry to defend themselves. But his endorsement of my political arguments is highly selective, for I am also an old-fashioned internationalist, and over many years I have supported a strongly interventionist politics in extreme cases—and mass executions and enslavement are still, even in our frightening world, extreme. They require more than disgust; they require a political response. And the left should be actively engaged in advocating such a response and in talking about its agents, its methods, and its limits.

March rejects this engagement, and he mocks my invitation to join the intellectual wars. His reason for the rejection and the mockery is “our lack of answers and our lack of power.” Except for political activity at home, he believes, there is nothing to do. I hope that March is speaking here only for himself. Those of us who are still committed to some version of the Enlightenment project have plenty to do. “Superstition sets the world in flames,” Voltaire wrote, “philosophy quenches the flames.”

Finally, I want to say something about March’s most serious charge against me—that I don’t share the “anxieties” or move with the “moral and emotional rhythms” of the left. I am out of step. Of course, there are many lefts, and one of them is mine; one of them is the *Dissent* left, where we have always marched to the rhythm of our own drum. With March’s left, I am indeed out of step and have been for a very long time.