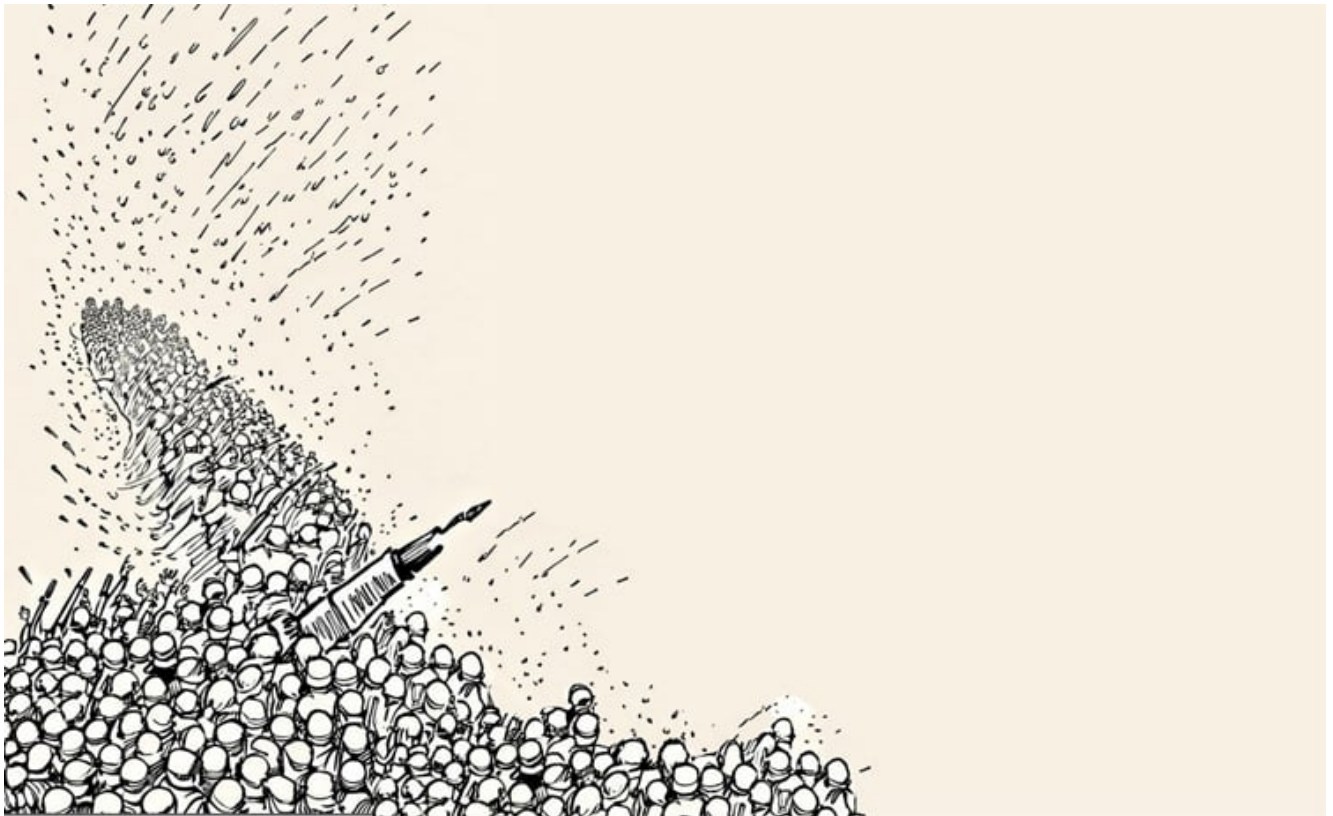


Hamas, Hezbollah, and Diffusing Radical Religion

The West fails to understand religious radicalism, even though we invented it.

by [Stephen Baskerville](#) (May 2024)



Radical religious movements have been a decisive feature of the political landscape for decades now: the recent Hamas attack on Israel; wars with Hezbollah (who could drag Iran and the United States into war); years of war and terror with ISIS and the Taliban; the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

So what is religious radicalism and why does it arise? Do not bother researching it, because western scholars and pundits will tell you little. They neither understand it nor expend much effort to do so. They dislike it, and that is what matters. To simplify: leftists dislike religious radicalism because it is religious, and rightists dislike it because it is radical. Between them, they are unhelpful in understanding one of the most consequential and dangerous political dynamics of our time.

Leftists try to shoehorn it into their own Marxist paradigm, though it does not fit, as their contortions testify. Temperamentally, they are attracted by its militancy, but when it comes to the particulars—a supernatural God, restrictions on sexual freedom—that is not their cup of tea. Leftist journalists wiggle out of their perplexity, register their disapproval, and tarnish the Right by labeling militant revolutionary movements as “conservative.”^[1] Conservatives—including Christians—also keep their distance, even though some features (precisely those the Left detests) parallel their own values and sometimes their own past ways of presenting them.

Radical religion is disorienting because it fits awkwardly into our preconceived categories and combines grievances we associate with the Left with authoritarian features of the Right. Today’s versions inherited the resentments of anticolonialism (“imperialism,” “capitalism”) previously expressed through nationalist and socialist liberation movements. But to this they add scriptural literalism, divine vengeance, and accusations of western cultural and sexual decadence. The [sexual preoccupations](#) even suggest an ironic affinity with secular ideological fashions current in the West.^[2]

This willful ignorance is ironic, considering that westerners invented radical religion. It was [English Calvinists](#) who first

carried religious dissent to the point of inventing modern revolutions.^[3] Some Americans are uncomfortable when reminded that religious radicals founded what became the United States. Puritans began populating New England as their comrades back in Old England were perpetrating the [world's first revolution](#). Their successors agitated for the West's next major revolution in America, far surpassing in numbers (and possibly influence) the Enlightenment intellectuals we venerate as our "Founding Fathers."

So, given its current resurrection in some nasty politics outside the West, perhaps it is time we started taking it seriously.

Is Religion Always Conservative?

Religion is usually conservative. It tends to discourage the discontents and grievances that define radical politics. More largely, it represses what is perhaps the most dangerous emotions in politics: resentment.

Political grievances change with the historical setting and vary with the ideology or belief, but resentment is ubiquitous (as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and others understood).^[4] For resentment can be elusive and deceptive, and the grievances that fill our ears at any given moment may not be the most important ones.^[5]

Resentment itself is universal, and all societies have multiple sources. Those that become visible on the political radar screen and command the attention of scholars and journalists are only the tip of the iceberg. Most are never politicized or elevated to media or historical visibility. We resent not only social superiors or political figures. We can also resent our fellow citizens, neighbors, colleagues, family members: anyone who does us injustice (as we perceive it), or

those who threaten to do so; those who thrive and prosper in ways we consider unfair or unjust or undeserved, especially when we ourselves do not thrive or fear that we may not. Whether this is because of our choices, or our scruples, or our opportunities, or our abilities, or other circumstances—in other words, whether the resentment is justified—all this is secondary. We naturally resent those with more power or privilege or wealth or admiration or ... whatever. Resentment is destabilizing and potentially explosive because it combines, often indistinguishably, moral righteousness with petty selfishness: indignation arising out of genuine concern for the greater public good mixed with the wounded pride of those who lose out in the scramble.

Religion tries to mitigate such enmities. Thus the constant warnings against “pride” and “envy.” Religion has a reputation for conservatism, because it prevents discontented individuals and groups from fomenting chaos and destabilizing society.

Why Religion Becomes Radical

But such frictions and social resentments can become more acute and socially destructive in some circumstances and in need of more vigilant controls. These are usually periods of rapid change, when old certainties are questioned, when old ways of life disappear and new ones are not yet understood or established, when status is fluid or uncertain, when hierarchies are changing, new opportunities for advancement open up, new methods of acquiring status or wealth or power emerge and lead to new practices, often without corresponding controls or moral norms to temper or regulate the new opportunities. Objectively, some take advantage of these opportunities, thrive, and prosper (at least relatively), while others fail to do so, fall behind, and suffer. But subjectively, all fear that they could lose out and seek various ways to get ahead or at least stay afloat. Everyone is

anxious.

When the resentments are routine, then the standard religion may be adequate to contain them. Established religious authorities tend not to care about whether the people's grievances are justified. Complaints and injustices that can be sorted out by established legal means should be, but religious authorities often insist that justice is not perfect in this life and that beyond a certain point we must simply accept this and leave ultimate justice to God. For once given vent, resentments are dangerous and can easily breed further injustices of their own.^[6]

But when dislocations take new form and resentments become acute, we might expect more extreme forms of religion to arise in order to confront them. This is where radicalism arises. At first, it may appear as simply a more fervid or "intense" version of the conservative religion from which it originates, expressing intensified efforts to control the new discontents, and initially its rebukes may well be directed not to those in power but to those without it. Or it may take new, seemingly apolitical forms, such as cults and secret societies, before developing more coherent, independent, and politicized forms directed against the larger existing order.

In this sense, all religion—both conservative and radical—can be said to thrive on resentment, not necessarily in the sense that it expresses or encourages it, for again it apparently tries to discourage and suppress it, at least initially. But in the very process of controlling and managing social discontents, radical tendencies arise that absorb, monopolize, discipline, organize, direct, channel, and otherwise transform the enmity into a force for their own ends. They take what was disorganized and directionless and infuse it with political purpose.

The Appearance of Puritanism

This is the role of “puritanism” (with a lowercase “p”) in the largest sense. All effective radical movements contain puritanical elements: demands to repress immediate impulses and selfish, short-term desires—including petty, purely personal resentments and grievances—and to postpone gratification (including desires for revenge) and direct their aspirations into more important, long-term goals.

So while radical religion also discourages resentment, it simultaneously channels it into other ends. Put away your private resentments—against your neighbors, family members, those who are richer or more powerful or more fortunate in whatever way than you are. But as you suppress your malice against your private enemies, learn to divert it into collective animosity against the public enemies of God and of “God’s people”.

Secular radicalism is not so different in this respect. Individuals are encouraged not simply to overcome their personal discontents but to direct them instead into the “cause,” the “movement,” the “party.”^[7]

All this suggests that the visible manifestations of radicalism that we see on our television screens are in part a function of the underlying social tensions experienced by the radicals.^[8]

So What Can We Do?

It would be nice to think that we could diffuse the radicals’ appeal by alleviating the underlying social stresses, but this is seldom practical. Today’s obvious and simplistic attempts—social welfare and development aid—are almost [guaranteed to make it worse](#) (for various reasons).^[9]

More plausible—and historically successful—is the possibility of replacing destructive ideologies with more benign beliefs that appeal to the same needs.

Though religious radicalism historically preceded secular radicalism in the West, today it usually attracts militants following the failure of secular radicalism. Marxists may like to see jihadists become secular revolutionaries, but that is unlikely, given that they turn to religion after finding the secular version inadequate. In the Middle East, this transition is represented in the displacement of Yasser Arafat's PLO and Fatah with Hamas and Hezbollah. The PLO arose among the anti-colonial ideologies, such as Arab nationalism and Arab socialism. Those ideologies often procured independence (which would have been achieved anyway), but they did not build stable and prosperous societies.

The first impulse of most radicals, when faced with failure, is to double down with still more extremism. Eventually something may trigger a reassessment of their basic assumptions. Some then turn to Islamism or other religious versions whose moral claims render them more attractive for reasons that are not difficult to imagine and which seem more effective in instilling moral discipline.

Yet Islamism and jihad have proven no more successful in building societies of stability, prosperity, and freedom. Some radicals may then look further for alternatives.

Years ago, an Egyptian gentleman wrote to me because he had been a postgraduate student at the London School of Economics in the 1980s, when I was there. He had imbibed the secular ideologies still popular at the time: Marxism, Arab nationalism, Arab socialism. Now he had left all that behind, but he also confessed to me, "If I had not become a Christian, I would have become a terrorist." It is not difficult to imagine his thought process. The failure of secular leftism throughout the global South rendered Islamic jihadism an

attractive alternative for someone of his cultural background, with its spiritual dimension and its path of personal purity. Yet, going further, one discovers that Christianity today fulfills the same needs without violence. Understanding the origins of modern Evangelicalism in a (violent) revolutionary political movement makes this all the more plausible.

Missionary Religions: All the Same?

If we want to diffuse radical Islam, substituting a form of Christianity with some connection to its radical past may be one option. That does not mean resurrecting Puritanism in all its militancy, but modern liberal Christianity, including most western forms of Evangelicalism now on offer, are unlikely to fit the bill. Outside the West, radical Evangelicalism is now exploding, often in direct competition with Islam in Africa and elsewhere. It is not liberal in the least, especially on matters of the family and sexuality, and that is precisely its appeal.^[10] We in the West may underestimate just how illiberal it must be to compete successfully with Islamism.

One need not be a Christian believer to recognize the value in this, and it is more than cynical to suggest that grasping even this political utility renders the religion itself more impressive and plausible, especially given religion's longstanding and inevitable interaction with politics. If nothing else, it would seem to make some serious discussions of comparative religion an imperative, for both believers and unbelievers. It could replace the largely discarded "Religious Education" curricula without infringing anyone's sensibilities, sacred or secular.

This might seem to be a call to renew Christian missions. Those who belittle such notions should realize that of all aspects of colonialism, it is religion that has left the most enduring impression on the post-colonial societies and the one

they themselves most willingly perpetuate. Today it is missionaries from the global South who are re-evangelising the West. Whatever their historical limitations, missionaries understood one truth that we seem intent on denying to our cost: that religion is an inherent and unavoidable part of the human condition, and if it is suppressed in one form it will arise in another.

[1] This spin is belied by the “politically articulated accommodation between Islamism as a political force and many groups of the Left.” Fred Halliday, “The Vagaries of ‘Anti-Imperialism’: The Left and Jihad,” in *Political Journeys* (London: Saqi, 2011), 77.

[2] While the “conservative” spin is rationalized mostly by the sexual controls, the affinity with the Left includes feminism. Stephen Baskerville, “The Sexual Jihad: The Global Rise of Sexual and Religious Radicalism,” *New Male Studies*, vol. 7, issue 1 (2018).

[3] Suggestions that modern secular ideologies emerged from the radical religious movements of late medieval and early modern Europe are commonplace: Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (Oxford University Press: 1970) makes this explicit in its original subtitle: “Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements.” Eric Voegelin famously suggests something similar in *The History of Political Ideas*, vol. 6, *Revolution and the New Science*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 24, ed. Barry Cooper (University of Missouri Press. 1998), 131-214. Yet few have examined the details to elucidate precisely how this happened. The exception is Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Harvard, 1965), but the exception that proves the rule. Openly leftist himself, Walzer’s approach is ignored by other leftist scholars (and rightist ones). The case is further documented in Stephen Baskerville, *Not Peace But a Sword: The Political Theology of the English*

Revolution (Routledge, 1993; full edn., Wipf & Stock, 2018).

[4] Bernard Meltzer and Gil Richard Musolf, "Resentment and Ressentiment," *Sociological Inquiry*, vol. 72, issue 2 (Spring 2002).

[5] Which may explain why attempts to appease militants' demands are doomed to failure, and why even the subtlest recognition that their grievances "have validity" seldom satisfies and usually irritates.

[6] As Cohn's accounts in *Pursuit of the Millennium*, and others plainly demonstrate.

[7] An illustrative paradox is the "puritanism" of successful Communists, in contrast to the bohemianism of their less disciplined predecessors. The repression may even be sexual, with striking parallels to religious radicalism. "Drown your sexual energy in public work," urged Nicolai Semashko, the first People's Commissar for Health. "If you want to solve the sexual problem, be a public worker." Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 188. Likewise Lenin himself: "The revolution demands concentration ... It cannot tolerate orgiastic conditions ... Dissoluteness in sexual life is bourgeois, is a phenomenon of decay ... Self-control, self-discipline is not slavery, not even in love." Clara Zetkin, "Reminiscences of Lenin" (1934; Marxists' Internet Archive, 2012),

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1924/reminiscences-of-lenin.htm>.

[8] This may sound Marxist, but while I share the view that social trends underlie radicalism, my approach here differs from Marxists who want to argue that the radicals are those who are either losing or winning (depending on whether the Marxists sympathize with them) or those with some self-interest in either advancing or resisting the underlying social trends. The trends are too confusing for anyone to calculate that. (See the next note.)

[9] Stephen Baskerville, "Toxic Western Wokeness Exacerbates Middle East Conflict," *Chronicles*, 26 December 2023. The

liberal approach, to attempt this through welfare and development aid, is based on the vulgar Marxist presumption that what I am calling the “underlying social tensions” are reducible to the exploitation of the poor by the rich. The moral faults are always more complicated.

[\[10\]](#) “Most of the reasons for this involve disputes over gender and sexuality,” writes Philip Jenkins, of the differences between liberal and conservative Christians in the global South. “These have provided the defining issues that separate progressives and conservatives, ecclesiastical left and right.” Philip Jenkins, *The New Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 246.

[Table of Contents](#)

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