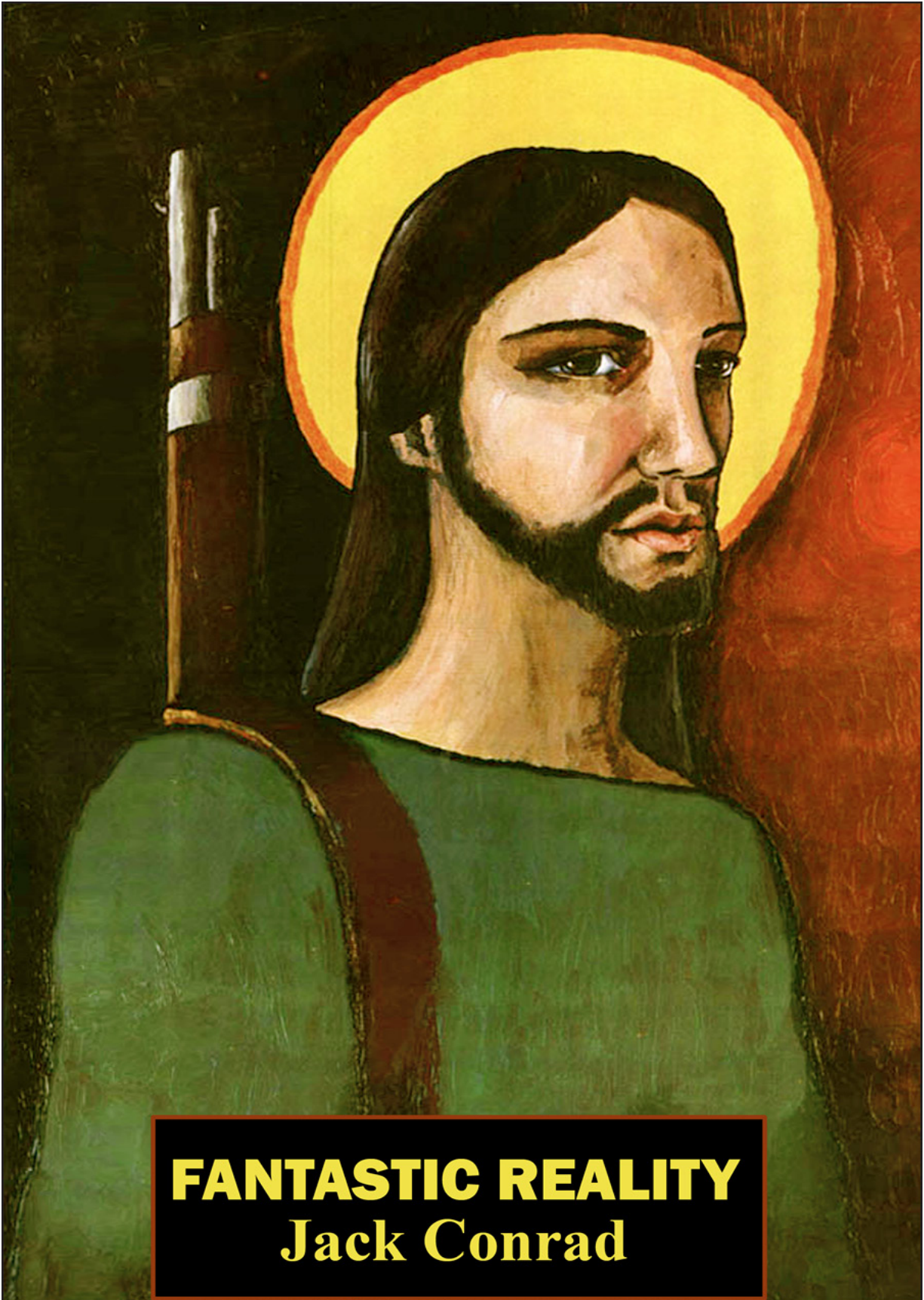


FANTASTIC REALITY
Jack Conrad



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Marxism and the politics of religion

For Lisa

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The name of god has fenced about all crime with holiness, Himself the
creature of his worship - Whose names and attributes and passions
change, Seeva, Buddh, Foh, Jehovah, God, or Lord, Even with the human

dupes who build his shrines, Still serving o'er the war-polluted world
For desolation's watchword; whether hosts Stain his death-blushing chariot
wheels, as on Triumphantly they roll, whilst Brahmins raise A sacred
hymn to mingle with the groans; Or countless partners of his powers
divide His tyranny to weakness; or the smoke Of burning towns, the cries
of female helplessness, Unarmed old age, and youth, and
infancy, Horribly massacred, ascend to heaven In honour of his name; or,
last and worst, Earth groans beneath religion's iron age, And priests dare
babble of a god of peace, Even whist their hands are red with guiltless
blood, Murdering the while, uprooting every germ Of truth,
exterminating, spoiling all, Making the earth a slaughter-house!

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1813)

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Chris Knight and Camilla Power inspired my treatment of the origins of religion and the human revolution. They also put up with my often naive cross-examinations, provided valuable pointers and always generously urged me onwards. The chapter dealing with the Neolithic counterrevolution is much indebted to Lionel Sims. Ian Watts kindly forwarded extensive notes on the probable location of the first modern humans, the use of red ochre by contemporary African tribes and the ecological impact of the initial colonisation of Australia. That after a brief discussion at the social origins of language conference hosted by University College London in February 2010 (I was glad to be included amongst the invited observers).

Attending the regular Radical Anthropology Group lectures given by Chris Stringer has always been a privilege and I would like to thank him for emailing me advice about our Neanderthal cousins and the complexities of human evolution. Anas Altikriti and Norman Finkelstein readily answered email questions too. Given that they did not know me from Adam - a model for public intellectuals.

Over the last 20 years Hillel Ticktin has shaped my ideas in a big way; and despite neither Roman decline nor popes and liberation theology being his speciality, his influence is surely unmistakable. Chris Gray favourably reviewed the first edition; more than that he went to the trouble of sending

me a list of my dyslexic typos and misspellings, in particular when it comes to the ancient world. Moshé Machover has long been the source of profound insights into the politics of the modern Middle East. I know he might not agree with everything in my chapter 17 - ie, the 'Forty-one theses on the Arab awakening and Israel-Palestine'. Nevertheless, I think it is fair to say that our viewpoints on the Middle East are close. He was also responsible for spotting some of my silly typos and misspellings.

Since we first published in 2007 I have given quite a few talks on Marxism and religion. Almost without exception the response from those attending has been remarkably positive. This encouraged me no end to put in the hours needed to produce the second edition.

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Preface to second edition

Readers may be interested to know about the changes made with the second edition. I decided to drop two chapters in their entirety - 'Strategy and tactics' and 'Two peoples, two states'.

The subject matter of 'Strategy and tactics' might seem pretty self-evident. But as well as discussing the relationship between strategy and tactics in general the main target was the gross opportunism of the Socialist Workers Party when it was in charge of Respect.

By design Respect was a popular front party intended to unite "secular socialists and Muslim activists". In the first edition I predicted, amongst other things, that there would be a split. Well not only did the SWP stage a pretty messy breakaway in 2007 but Respect soon became little more than a one man band. So, given this and the fact that I deal with the SWP's record elsewhere in the book, and the second edition was in danger of becoming

far too long, I decided on some radical surgery. Hence also the decision to remove the chapter on Palestine and Israel. I have substituted the much shorter 'Forty-one theses on the Arab awakening and Israel-Palestine'.

I wanted the second edition to be more centred on history. Towards that end there are four new chapters. The first deals with the human revolution and the origins of religion. The second with the Neolithic counterrevolution and the corresponding invention of a solar-lunar religion. Then there are two additional chapters on ancient Israel. Besides that I have made numerous changes to every other chapter, some significant, some less significant.

JC

London February 2012

Introduction

Why write yet another book about religion? Well, amazingly, though our world still groans beneath religion's "iron age" - the US Christian right, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Europe's Islamophobia, Russia's reinstalled Orthodox church, Turkey's Justice and Development Party, India's saffron communalism, the pernicious evangelism sweeping Africa, Latin America and southern Asia, Saudi Arabia's puritanical Wahhabism, al Qa'eda's terrorism of spectacle, the Iranian theocracy and almost everywhere, or so it is claimed, a revived religion, reinforcing the "clash of civilisations"¹ - many, far too many, leftwing activists almost pride themselves in giving a 'don't bother' answer. To all intents and purposes taking their cue from Henry Ford, they casually brush aside religion: "It's mostly bunk," they say ... or words to that effect.

That religion still flourishes - despite the left's Fordist put-downs - in good part explains this study. My aim is to critique the politics of religion *and* the politics of the left. That said, I readily confess, I am a committed Marxist and, though I often find my comrades blinkered, overexcitable, pig-headed and unnecessarily fractious, I also happen to believe that, if humanity is to transcend a declining, crisis-ridden, over-ripe capitalism, the left will have to be thoroughly reorganised, reorientated and rearmed.

Almost needless to say, those who are determined to change the world, especially nowadays, are surely well advised to first see, or at least try to see, things for what they are, and that means conscientiously studying, hypothesising, developing theories about how things came into being, and from those foundations drawing practical conclusions that correspond to, engage with, help along, what has been called the "*real* movement which abolishes the present state of things".² After all, the past not only flows into the future. It shapes the future too. In that sense the past, including the constantly passing present, is not dead, buried and gone. The past lives. Hence, paradoxical though it may seem, making future times rests on former times.*

*. Or, as George Orwell put it, "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." He alluded to the importance of wide-ranging historical thought elsewhere in

1984. "The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental modes of habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted ... a heretical thought should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words" (G Orwell 1984 Harmondsworth 2003, pp198-200).

True, class struggles in the past sometimes succeeded in spite of the fact that the social actors had only the haziest idea of the society in which they lived. Heralded by Descartes, Rousseau and Voltaire, the French Revolution of 1789 was the "first occasion in history when men deliberately and consciously formed themselves into a nation, and then consciously and deliberately set out to mould other men into it".³ Such self-construction became *possible* with the rise of the capitalist mode of production (and hence the modern sciences, including, of course, classical political economy). Before that there was feudal myopia, parochiality, fragmentation and decomposition. Not that we should underestimate our difficulties. The social relations of mature capitalism were typically simple - at least when compared with the kaleidoscopic transitional forms which mark out the present-day period.

That is why to give up on history - ie, historical inquiry - not only increases the likelihood of all manner of mistakes being repeated. Surely it carries the distinct danger of yet new catastrophes. Therefore anyone committed to the cause of human freedom will, or at least should, regard with contempt the superficialities of spin, the obsession with short-term advantage and the daft notion that a week is a long time in politics. While not for a moment ignoring the need for the quickest tactical turns and shifts, there must be thinking in decades, centuries and epochs.

With the ever widening gulf separating the super-rich and the mass of the world's population; with a visibly shrinking US superimperialism; with the increasing number of failed states; with mounting ecological degradation; with the relentless growth of state intervention, bureaucracy and corruption; with the obscene waste of advertising, banking and arms spending, it is ever more clear. A complete transformation of all existing conditions is required. It might take 10 years, it might take 100. But alone the working class - which is rooted in, is constantly augmented by and is uniquely opposed to capitalism - constitutes, at least in my opinion, the only viable force capable of carrying through such a momentous task.

Anything else, in terms of a proposed agent of social transformation, is either silly or dangerous nonsense. Usually just silly. That said, those who invest their hopes in socialism - and, thankfully, our influence is on the rise once again - are obliged to reject the narrow-minded, the self-defeating viewpoint which considers gradual reform, routine trade unionism and auto-Labourism the epitome of working class politics. The foremost representatives of the labour and trade union bureaucracy - always prone to nationalism because of a close identification with the state and fixed capital - betray their members, voters and supporters repeatedly and almost compulsively. Substantial gains there have been, but socialism has been delayed and at huge cost in terms of death, destruction and loss of human potential. By the late 1970s, however, the politics of gradual reform, routine trade unionism and auto-Labourism met their limits. The ruling class pulled the plug on Keynesianism, began to roll back the social democratic settlement, allowed unemployment to soar and turned to financialisation. After the foot-dragging of James Callaghan, Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock, Tony Blair and New Labour embraced the new consensus.

Not that we should seek salvation through relying on ephemeral single-issue protest campaigns, riotous nihilism or making revolution without a revolutionary party. In the mind of their advocates such approaches avoid the *real* problem of bureaucracy and elitism. But the *real* problem of bureaucracy and elitism cannot be avoided through self-disorganisation. Not only does structurelessness produce its own, often hidden, tyranny.⁴ Common sense alone should warn against going into battle without an agreed programme, without having combined and trained many millions, without the highest levels of discipline, without an extensive educational and publicity apparatus, without many dedicated and talented full-time workers, especially against an experienced, highly organised and massively resourced class enemy. Hence, I would suggest, strategies based on spontaneity are ill-considered, naive, debilitating and border on the plain irrational.

Actually the same goes for calls to return the left to some uncorrupted, largely imaginary, golden age. Neither the addresses of the First International, the decrees of the Paris Commune nor the demands of the *Transitional programme* should be treated as holy writ. None are free from error, complete or timeless. Attempts at resurrecting an unsullied past often

turn out to be inventing “energising myths” (Georges Sorel). When it comes to the socialist project, the idea is to concoct a picture of the past that not only nourishes “hate” and the “spirit of sacrifice” in the working class, but motivates a “leap into the open sky of history”.⁵ Sometimes touted in the name of Marxism, sometimes in the name of anarchism, sometimes in the name of something else. Such approaches are, however, united by a reliance on philosophical idealism, substitutionalist manipulation and outright voluntarism. Stalin’s first five-year plan, Mao’s cultural revolution and Pol Pot’s year zero being particularly ghastly forms.

Something more humane, more grounded, more rigorous, more sober, more rational is urgently needed. To begin with, as already touched upon above, the past must be explained.⁶ This can be done, for example, by diligently searching out fresh source materials so as to allow new, deeper insights; by re-examining accepted accounts to correct national, class and sectional biases; by developing theories which are more rigorous, elegant, plausible and closer to the observed facts, when compared with the standard paradigm.

From simple inference to the most sophisticated dialectical analysis, this delving back shows how the past, present and future are connected. The past can certainly be used to rouse intense passions by exposing the abominable cruelties of the ruling classes and the endless sufferings of the masses. However, the past can also be used, arguably to much better effect, to reveal underlying processes and predictable repetitions and lines of development. Revolutionary practice can that way be planned and given the widest context. That hardly guarantees success. But it does allow tasks to be clearly located, and risks and likely consequences weighed up. If knowledge, a grasp, of historical laws, even in broad outline, is internalised, made into the common property of those committed to, organised for, social transformation, it surely imparts, builds, a self-confidence which allows all defeats and partial victories to be properly evaluated. And, suffice to say, fighting to avenge crimes perpetrated against past generations and fighting for the security, the happiness, the full development of generations yet to come are hardly counterposed.

Goalposts of religion

For Marxists the immediate aim ought to be clear: the working class must be equipped with the theoretical and strategic understanding needed to make it capable of *ruling* society. History, as informed by this agenda, thereby goes from being a dry, fact-grubbing academic pursuit to providing masses of people with one of the most potent weapons in the struggle to transform the world. This, I would argue, applies to investigating the *social and political* history of religion too.

At this juncture, we must necessarily ask what is meant by religion. The answer is not as easy as it might first appear. For example, when the goalposts of definition are sneakily moved to include a vague 'philosophy of life', it can - as intended - catch Marxism in the net. Hence, before pursuing religion qua religion, we must take a slight detour. After all, some religious people try to counter Marxism with a 'you tooism'. If religion is antiquated and evidently false in terms of the claims it makes about the world, then you are guilty too - after all Marxism has been dismissed and disposed of by various academic opponents through the simple device of categorising it as a religion. Let me explain why the 'you tooism' does not work.

Taking as their starting point the highest achievements of classical British political economy, Hegelian philosophy and French socialism, the Marx-Engels team developed an unsurpassed body of theory - consistently stimulating, hugely expansive and emotionally satisfying to boot - it not only explains, but provides an essential programmatic tool if society is to be fundamentally transformed. To state the obvious, carrying through the communist revolution is a task which depends on mass action on a global scale. Therefore, unsurprisingly, Marxism does not require adherents to be born of a Marxist mother, swear obedience to some fixed Marxist creed or agree with a long list of infallible Marxist doctrines. Stalinism, Maoism and the more outlandish versions of Trotskyism are another matter - when they claim to represent Marxism I can only but protest.

The central tenet of Marxism can be summed up in a couple of short sentences. Firstly, to achieve universal human liberation it is necessary to form the working class into a party. Secondly, through a qualitative development of democracy, the rule of capital must be replaced by the rule of the working class. So, when it comes to their party, communists are surely required to *accept* the programme - not *agree*. A vital distinction.

And, of course, the programme can be added to, altered or updated, according to needs and circumstances. All it should take is a simple congress vote.



Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels: a team which produced a thoroughly coherent but open ended body of theory.

There is nothing in authentic Marxism seriously comparable to the 10 commandments purportedly brought down from Mount Sinai by

Moses; or the pettifogging purity rules set down in Leviticus; or the 114 *suras* of the *Koran* recited by Mohammed after his trance-induced communications with Allah; or the 2,865 clauses of the Catholic church's catechism. I readily admit, no matter how original, rich and far-sighted, our back catalogue - from the *Communist manifesto* to *Capital* and from Lenin's *Two tactics of social democracy* to Trotsky's *The permanent revolution* - all carry the concerns, features and limitations of their time. To ignore or to casually abandon them would amount to a total surrender

before the dominant, bourgeois ideology. However, to uphold every detail as an eternal truth is nothing short of mummery.

Marxism combines the strong theoretical framework needed to give coherence with the open-endedness that keeps the mind of any serious proponent in a state of constant exploration. Eg, it is quite possible to legitimately call oneself an orthodox Marxist and reject specific proposals, predictions or even premises contained in the Marx-Engels legacy. Albeit for the “sake of argument”, Georg Lukács went further. Say “recent research” had disproved “all of Marx’s theses *in toto*”; despite that, he insisted, Marxists would still be able to accept all such “modern findings” without having to renounce Marxism. Why? Because Marxism “does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the result of Marx’s investigations”. Nor is it the “belief ” in this or that sacred book, text or set of resolutions. Marxism fundamentally refers to *method*. It is the conviction that dialectical and historical materialism is the “road to truth” and that this method can be “developed, expanded and deepened” only long the lines laid down by its founders. Anything else, Lukács insists, leads to “over-simplification, triviality and eclecticism”.⁷

Of course, in the real world, if “recent research” had literally disproved “all of Marx’s theses *in toto*”, then it would be more than reasonable to conclude that Marxism is worthless. But, in fact, the opposite is the case. While secondary conclusions and minor aspects of the Marx-Engels corpus have proved inadequate, or have been shown to be simply wrong, the basic propositions have been amply confirmed. The universality of matrilineal clans in pre-history; the applicability of the dialectic to nature, social development and thought; labour and nature as the ultimate source of all wealth; class struggles as a key social determinant; the contradiction between the increasing socialisation of production and the increasing centralisation of capital; the role of the proletariat as the foremost champion of democracy; the reversibility of reforms gained under capitalism; the inevitability of recurring crises of overproduction; the impossibility of socialism in one country; etc. That is surely why, when Marxism is really “developed, expanded and deepened” along the lines laid down by its founders, it has produced results and developments that are both intellectually profound and politically powerful.⁸ Obviously then, there are far more, far wider and certainly far more worthwhile differences within

Marxism than are found within religion. That is only to be expected - after all Marxism is a *scientific* method. So, to underline the point, Marxists - once again, authentic Marxists, that is - are always ready to modify or reject established ideas in light of new findings and developments.

Three examples will suffice for purposes of illustration.

- Marx and Engels had long held that Russia was a frozen bulwark of reaction. They advocated revolutionary war against Russian absolutism. However, in the early 1880s they arrived at another conclusion. Russia was changing. It was ripe for its 1789. More than that, Russia had become the world's revolutionary centre. Their political strategy towards Russia changed accordingly.⁹
- Not least in light of the above, both Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (Lenin) rejected the standard Marx-Engels demand for an independent and reunified Poland. Instead of breaking apart the tsarist empire there should be a united effort by all forces of the working class in order to overthrow it. Poles and Russians should therefore join together in a single party.
- In the 1980s I argued for a political revolution in the Soviet Union. My theoretical model essentially derived from Leon Trotsky's.¹⁰ After the 1991 collapse I undertook a radical rethink. I came to the conclusion that with the first five-year plan in 1928 there had been a social counterrevolution and that this produced an ectopic social formation that was inherently unviable. Hence, in retrospect, what was needed was a thoroughgoing social revolution.

Constant questioning, the tireless search for objective reality and changing operative conclusions are, needless to say, not features normally associated with the church, mosque, synagogue or temple and their holy doctrines.

Enriching, expanding and deepening various aspects of the Marx-Engels theoretical legacy, of course, comes in many guises and forms. There are corrections and additions. Eg, the work done by Rudolf Hilferding and Lenin on imperialism and finance capital usefully adds to the Marxist theoretical framework. However, there are detractions and damaging

diversions. As exhaustively shown by Hal Draper, a sadly impressive array of 20th century Marxist greats either consciously or more commonly because of political expediency, and therefore largely unconsciously, lent an altogether different meaning to the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ compared to Marx and Engels. Where the latter simply, straightforwardly, meant the democratic rule of the majority, thinkers of the stature of Lenin, Trotsky and Kautsky - not to mention Plekhanov, Bernstein and Zinoviev - made a complete hash of the whole thing. They counterposed dictatorship to democracy.¹¹ Subsequently, in the course of an epochal political struggle, one camp of Marxists forthrightly came out for the Bolshevik regime - and therefore minority rule - that is, Marxism with various ifs and buts. The other camp, however, upheld a totally abstract democracy. In practice that translated into supporting the rule of the bourgeoisie; albeit through a social settlement which concedes a raft of working class rights and gains. Here we reach the boundary where ‘Marxism’ becomes not only distorted, but dishonest and fake. German social democracy had the good grace to officially admit this - though it waited till 1959 to remove Marxism from its programme!

Yes, some Marxists have talked of Marxism as their religion. In most cases, thankfully, upon investigation this turns out to be nothing more than heightened language. Rhetoric designed to show the speaker’s sincerity and burning commitment to the cause. A Bill Shankley-type quip - “Football is not a matter of life and death. It’s much more important than that.” For example, Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826-1900) told the Reichstag that social democracy was not the religion of popes, “but the religion of humanity”.¹² Along the same lines Joseph Dietzgen wrote six articles, “six sermons”, for *Vorwärts* under the title of *The religion of social democracy* (1870-75). Unfortunately, repeating the naive claims of Claude Henri Saint-Simon and Wilhelm Weitling, he seems to have taken for granted that Jesus was the first communist! Certainly, the “true Christianity” of the “lord himself” was equated with communism.¹³

However, there are ‘Marxists’ who have inexcusably sought to reconcile Marxism and religion and who even categorise Marxism as a religion and thereby discredit it, as if from within. The Austro-Marxist, Max Adler, based himself on the widely held Kantian idea that science (including

Marxism) and religion dealt with completely separate spheres.^{**} Hence in order to give Marxism *values* it was vital to bring it into “coherence” with religion.¹⁴ Humanity could not do without religion, albeit conceived of by Adler as little more than a rather conventional morality. During the cold war ‘Marxists’ such as Lucien Goldmann and Ernst Bloch maintained that Marxism is the “religion of humanity”¹⁵ or a “religious criticism of religion” in the non-rhetorical sense.¹⁶

^{**}. Stephen Jay Gould wrote in similar Kantian terms. In his last book he insists on religion and science being two separate magisteriums. Coining the acronym ‘Noma’ - non overlapping magesteria - he argues that science and religion should observe a sort of non-aggression pact. Scientists cannot adjudicate on god’s possible superintendence of nature. By the same measure, religious people should not interfere with sciences such as biology. In the context of the US and the role of the religious right in promoting the intellectually barren nonsense of ‘intelligent design’, Noma is clearly an understandable but misguided stance adopted by the overly-defensive. Of course, the religious right does not observe Gould’s concordat. But nor should scientists. Marxists certainly think it is necessary to show that there is no serious, no worthwhile, no physical or even logical evidence that god exists. Certainly, if it were the case that scientists (not prostituted scientists) had discovered, or said they had discovered evidence to the contrary, that god or the supernatural had been found, we would not allow Noma to hold us back from urgently investigating such a monumental claim and making the necessary adjustments to our theory and programme (see SJ Gould *Rock of ages: science and religion in the fullness of life* London 2001).

Not that establishment academics need leftwing confusionists to make the exact same claim - except, of course, that in their hands the notion of Marxism being a religion became a damning accusation. Naturally, against the Marxist foe ‘religion’ carries entirely negative connotations (something the paid persuaders of the bourgeoisie usually do not maintain nowadays, at least when it comes to *real* religions). Karl Popper insists upon the religious character of Marxism on the basis of calling it an “oracular philosophy”.¹⁷ Yes, Marxism predicts capitalist crises, wars and revolutions - surely the 20th century provided abundant confirmation. Joseph Schumpeter emphatically declares: “Marxism *is* a religion.”¹⁸ For him that explains its popular success. By implication, ordinary people cannot grasp anything more sophisticated. Robert Tucker finds parallels between Marxism and post-Augustinian Christianity: “Like medieval Christianity, Marx’s system undertakes to provide an integrated, all-inclusive view of reality, an organisation of all significant knowledge in an interconnected whole, a frame of reference with which all questions of importance are answered or

answerable.”²⁰ Such descriptions would, in fact, include many other ‘isms’, and are obviously - as readily admitted by the Christian Marxologist, David McLellan - “coloured by political or religious prejudice”.²¹ In short, to say that Marxism - which is scientific, materialistic and atheistic - is a religion, is therefore manifestly to reverse the accepted meaning of the term.

So what is religion? Well, a common definition is a belief in a god or gods. However, that would immediately exclude most varieties of Buddhism. Then there are self-help/self-improvement movements such as transcendental meditation and its yogic flying (which does not class itself as a religion) and Scientology (which does). The fact of the matter is that, apart from implying some kind of belief in the supernatural, theological and academic definitions of religion are often rather confused. That is bound to be the case with anything so highly contested, variegated and long established.

Religious ideas and practices vary to a tremendous degree from country to country and often crazily overlap and interweave within countries and even within individuals themselves - a baptised, church-going Christian in Nigeria might well also perform rituals to placate ancestral spirits. Needless to say, I reject as false and artificial the distinction frequently drawn between religion and magic. Opposition to magic is historically opposition to other, or unofficial, religions. Magic was, at best, a primitive form of science, and the medieval church at its worst undoubtedly “permitted” its own version of magic - holy water to drive out demons, prayers to cure the sick, consecrated bells to ward off storms, etc.²²

Marxism has a great advantage. Being a totalising, but open-ended world view, it is able to undertake an ongoing investigation into the specific human origins of the supernatural and in turn use ideas of the supernatural to cast a light on humanity itself. Religion, as defined by Marxism, is *fantastic reality*.

Religion is fantastic, not in the trite sense that the claims religion makes are untrue, unreal or unverifiable, but in the sense that nature and society are reflected in exaggerated form, as leaping shadows, as symbols or inversions. Obviously, religion should therefore not be dismissed as “mostly bunk”. But there is more to it than that. Religious ideas are not only determined by reality: they can themselves “become materially

effective”.²³ The ideas people have in their heads - especially when mediated through powerful institutions such as churches, mosques, synagogues and temples - no matter how wrapped up in the godly, impact on their surroundings. After all, everything which moves people into action must first go through their minds; and therefore what people have in their minds must feed back into, and thereby interpenetrate with, material conditions. Grasping this unity of opposites, Marxism is able to analyse the true content and significance of religion with unsurpassed insight.

We can, following Karl Kautsky, categorise religion under two headings.²⁴ Firstly, there is religion as a personal experience, a personal morality and a personal way of behaving. In the *Bible*, those who wrote James say: “If anyone thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man’s religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before god and the father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world”.²⁵ Tom Paine (1737-1809), the revolutionary democrat and deist, derided organised religion and the “strange fables of the Christian creed”; instead of relying on “faith”, people should marvel at “creation” itself.²⁶ The first Catholic president of the US, John F Kennedy (1917-63), likewise upheld, albeit in far milder terms, the essentially private nature of his religion: “What church I go to on Sunday, what dogma of the Catholic church I believe in, is my business, and whatever faith any other American has is his business.”²⁷ So religion can be approached in terms of the inner-self - an introspective belief in one’s own righteousness, a means to transcend the stultifying drabness of everyday life and which supposedly puts the devotee in touch with the divine.

Secondly, according to Kautsky, there is religion as a means of social control, an institutionally embodied and evolved system of doctrines which purports to depict creation and the whole subsequent course of the universe and which demands human obedience to a supernatural power or powers. Sigmund Freud, not without justification, describes this as “forcibly fixing” people into a “state of psychical infantilism ... by drawing them into a mass delusion”.²⁸

These two categories recommended by Kautsky share the same name - religion. Despite that, while the first involves some degree of self-motivation, self-consolation and self-delusion, the second requires that the inner-self is subordinated to an external authority which is supposedly divinely sanctioned. Clearly we are dealing here with related, but distinct phenomena. Religion that is a private matter and the mass religions - developed systematically over the course of centuries, though not without manifold contradictions - are not only different in terms of approach, but are frequently conflictive. Personal religion is guided by conscience; religion as a means of social control demands the submission of conscience. Yet, though Kautsky chose not to stress it (he perhaps even skirted around it), personal religion is always socially determined and lived through society. Therefore the study of any particular human being and their private beliefs, up to and including those who imagine they have an inspired mission, is inseparable from the study of society.

Clearly the gods never made humanity. Rather humanity made the gods ... and made them in their own image. And as society comes to be cleaved into classes - oppressed and oppressor, slave and master, serf and lord - these antagonisms *in all their complexity* find their evolving expression in heaven (albeit a necessarily lagging and therefore a conservative one). The struggle of one religion against another is therefore also the struggle of one class against another. Besides being an ideology of social control made from above, religion serves as an ideology of comfort, resistance and even revolution made from below. In the highly contested collective imagination - or imaginations - the uncontrollable forces of society itself are projected into the skies by those who suffer and strive in this world. Everything from social decay and the unequal relationship between men and women to the structure of the state and the despair of the masses finds its fantastic reflection.

Marx wonderfully sums up the results of this comprehensive process of transference: "Religion," he writes in his introduction to the *Critique of Hegel's philosophy of law*, "is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source for consolation and justification."²⁹ A superb passage

which I shall elaborate upon - Marx shows profound insight and certainly more than hints at why a social study of religion can be such a rewarding exercise. Reality can be discovered in part through the fantastic.

During antiquity the keenest minds - intellectuals from those classes which possessed sufficient time in which to think, write and freely debate - came to deride the eternal truths of established religion. In *Prometheus bound* Aeschylus has his eponymous hero contemptuously shout: "I hate all the gods."³⁰ Besides qualitatively expanding the fields of mathematics and geometry, developing formal and dialectical logic, meticulously categorising society and nature, the most advanced Greeks carried their philosophy and speculative sciences to the point of atheism or materialist conclusions that amount to virtually the same thing. Humanity finds itself as what it is not - aristocratic and almost exclusively male.

With the decline of slavery as a system and the eventual sealing of the historic compromise between the Roman emperor and Christian church, a suffocating intolerance became the norm. Questioning was forbidden even by the privileged and well connected. Heretical Christian sects and independent thinkers alike were tortured and put to death. Intellectual life shrivelled and a dull and forbidding scholasticism reigned. Truth was to be found in the *Bible*, not life itself. Even the rediscovery of Aristotle's teachings by theologians such as Thomas Aquinas saw a sophisticated emasculation of Aristotelian materialism.

The fitful eclipse of feudalism and the growing importance of money relations, the print revolution, water-driven machine production, long-distance seaborne trade and oceanic navigation melted the frozen verities of the church's teachings. Scientific thinking began to reappear. The papacy fought an ever more desperate rearguard action. Anything threatening dogma was condemned as blasphemy. Hence Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) was forced to renounce his agreement with Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543) that the earth orbits the sun^{***} It was supposedly only a 'theory' (shades of 'intelligent design' versus Darwinism in the more far-out schools and colleges in the US *Bible* belt today). The pope outlawed all works supporting Copernicus and Galileo, till the ban was reluctantly lifted ... in 1835! It was not only the Catholic church. Martin Luther and John Calvin denounced Copernicus too because the solar system contradicted the *Bible*.

Both Lutheran and Calvinist authorities sent thousands to be burnt at the stake.

***. Writing in *The Guardian*, Timothy Garton Ash offered the crazily off-beam opinion that John Paul II was “the greatest Pole in history” (April 21 2005). Clearly, in the midst of the holy hysteria surrounding the dead pope he lost all sense of proportion. It is rather doubtful that John Paul II deserves such an elevated ranking. Leave aside the towering *internationalist* figure of Rosa Luxemburg - who as well as being Polish could equally be regarded as being a Russian and a German - there is Copernicus. He surely has a far better claim than John Paul II. After all, he profoundly altered the way we *all* see the universe. Albeit that the Catholic church took over 300 years after Copernicus published his *De revolutionibus* - which proved that the earth orbited the sun and not the other way round - to finally concede that it had lost the argument. An argument in which the Catholic church had deployed not only its intellectual elite, but its much more convincing thumb-screws, whips, brands, racks and, as a clincher, the blessed flames which finally, if agonisingly, silenced heretics.

Where Copernicus and Galileo blazed the trail, the French philosophical materialists of the 18th century eagerly followed and duly went to war on a much broader front. No religious authority was recognised and the truth was to be found through life and reason, not the devious Thomist attempt to reconcile reason with faith. While most of them were deists - believing in a creator, but not the Christian doctrines of purgatory, prayers for the dead, the community of saints, etc - Paul Henry Holbach (1723-89) and Denis Diderot (1713-84) arrived at more or less explicit atheism.

Inevitably their materialism was limited and one-sided. It could not be otherwise. French philosophical materialism was predominantly mechanical, because sciences such as electromagnetism, Darwinism and sub-atomic physics were yet to come. Theirs was the age of Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz. God might have given the universe a little shove to start the whole thing moving, but the French materialists saw subsequent events as endlessly repetitive and circular, and extended that paradigm into the realm of history and the human condition itself. God and human self-determination were both discounted in terms of explanation.

Nevertheless, the French materialists approached organised religion, especially Christianity, with both freshness and audacity. Much fun was had in mocking the countless contradictions. They also delighted in showing how the *Bible* was full of holy excuses for murder, rape, robbery and oppression. God’s instructions telling the Hebrews to crush, exterminate or enslave their enemies - which pepper the *Old Testament* - were excoriated. Such bloodthirsty passages were still on occasion used by Europe’s Christian rulers to justify their wars of colonial plunder and conquest.

French materialists also came to speak out against the tyranny of absolute monarchs - and their writings found practical followers in the form of Thomas Jefferson, Georges-Jacques Danton and Tom Paine.

Not surprisingly the Marx-Engels team saw the French philosophical materialists as being amongst their intellectual precursors. Despite the limitations of mechanical materialism, both Karl Marx and Frederick Engels were full of admiration. So too was Lenin, incidentally. Indeed the achievements of the French materialists, crucially in terms of their scathing criticisms of organised religion, remain relevant today and will remain relevant as long as there is organised religion. Hence I can only but consider the Italian ‘official communist’ leader, Palmiro Togliatti (1893-1964), a toadying embarrassment. Cutting a final tie with his radical past, Togliatti announced to a smirking bourgeois press that the “old atheist propaganda is of no use”.³¹ The “old atheist propaganda” had become, one presumes, inconvenient historical baggage. He was making a desperate - despicable - bid to attract Catholic votes. By contrast Marx and Engels recognised the revolutionary logic of French philosophical materialism. To struggle against religion is at least *indirectly* to struggle against the world of which religion is the “spiritual aroma”.³² If consistent, the struggle against religion must lead to humanity finding itself: ie, *practical* liberation - not merely from superstition and ignorance, but from all social circumstances which imprison, demean and brutalise.

Chapters

Fittingly, the attitude Marx and Engels held towards religion forms the subject matter of chapter 1. Naturally the early works of Marx himself receive particular attention. For instance, Marx’s doctoral thesis the *Difference between the Democritean and the Epicurean philosophy of nature*, finished in March 1841, skilfully highlights the superiority of the materialism propounded by the ancient Greek atheist, Epicurus, compared to that of Democritus. Marx’s introduction includes the “confession” made by Prometheus: “In simple words, I hate the pack of gods.”³³ The Marx-Engels team, young and old, it hardly needs adding, dealt with religion not

in terms of theology and the search for transcendental meaning, but in terms of history and the needs of political practice.

Aristotle remarked, opening his *Politics*: “We shall, I think, in this as in other subjects, get the best view of the matter if we look at the natural growth of things from the beginning.”³⁴ With the same objective of getting the “best view of the matter”, I map out the evolution of religion “from the beginning”. The prehistoric origins of religion forms the subject matter of chapter 2. Engels and his *Origin of the family, private property and the state* (1884) provided a brilliant reference point. However, most of what I have written here rests on Chris Knight and his groundbreaking theory of the human revolution. This female-led overthrow of alpha-male domination happened in Africa maybe 180,000 years ago, maybe further back than that, and ushered in a system of primitive communism and the benign conditions of abundance.^{****} Religion was invented by these people, the first communists, and it helped them to understand their environment, transmit knowledge from one generation to the next, as well as serving as an unwritten rule book governing social relations.

^{****}. Sir James Frazer (1854-1941), authored a 12-volume study in which he meticulously catalogued the world’s preliterate religions and their myths and traditions. Widely regarded as one of the founders of anthropology, Frazer haughtily disparaged primitive communism. It was not a golden age for humanity. Rather democracy and community “dragged down” the so-called “superior talent” to the level of the “weakest and dullest”. Class society, even with the “whims and caprices of a tyrant”, was a blessing in disguise. According to this eminent bourgeois, “The rise of one man to supreme power enables him to carry through changes in a single lifetime which previously many generations might not have sufficed to effect” (J Frazer *The golden bough - a study in magic and religion* Ware 1993, p47).

I treat the evolution of religion as a *social* phenomenon. Needless to say, I reject the approach which abstracts religion from society, which treats the evolution of religion, typically from animism to monotheism (but sometimes to atheism), as if dealing with the passage from infancy to adulthood. That is, religion as supposedly synonymous with the progressive gaining of knowledge. Religion as a logically unfolding idea. Religion as a thing-in-itself. But religion, as a form of consciousness, is part of the evolution of society and cannot be separated from society. In and of itself religion can have no history because it has no content. In a couple of simple lines, John Lennon, neatly summed up this essential emptiness in his

beautiful communist anthem, 'Imagine' - "No hell below us, Above us only sky".

The Neolithic forms the subject of chapter 3. I show that women's oppression, class, organised religion, war and private property are not natural. Beginning around 10,000-8,000 BCE, the Neolithic revolution - a term coined by V Gordon Childe - saw the adoption of a whole package of new technologies, such as sowing and farming cereals, breeding cattle and sheep and a sedentary life-style. The Neolithic revolution was simultaneously a counterrevolution. The health and fitness of the population plummeted. Human remains show signs of stunted growth, tooth decay and rickets. There was also the historic defeat of the female sex discussed by Engels in his *Origin*. By far the most interesting contemporary writer on the subject that I have come across is Lionel Sims.

Class societies erected gigantic stone buildings and monuments, produced bureaucratic writing and record-keeping, and oversaw long-distance trade in luxury goods, but they were riven with crippling internal contradictions. Extreme fragility was the corollary. Dramatic territorial expansion by this or that dynastic state formation was just as often followed by an equally rapid collapse. In line with this oscillating pattern, small states lost or gained their independence. One of them was ancient Israel, the subject of chapters 4, 5 and 6.

In the main I base my conclusions on the writings of Norman Gottwald, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman. I show that Israel first emerged with the general crisis of the Bronze Age. The resulting power vacuum not only triggered intense class struggles in Palestine: it saw the formation of an egalitarian society. This peasant socialism did not go hand-in-hand with Yahwehite monotheism. There was a persistence of polytheism. Babylonian conquest had a profound impact on Israel and it was the royalist nationalism of ambitious kings such as Hezekiah and Josiah that was associated with attempts to impose the cult of Yahweh.

As class states rise, the mass of the population is reduced to endless toil and a condition of serfdom or slavery. Society no longer protects against exploiters external *and* internal. Of course, given the underdevelopment of the productive forces it should be emphasised that the existence of the state remains an absolute necessity. Armed bodies of men were needed for internal cohesion *and* protection from outsiders - invaders thought it their

right to loot and rape; sometimes they would even massacre everyone in sight. Hence, under those conditions, drained, confused, pulverised, the common people look for solutions in an alternative power, which, in proportion to their weakness in this world, tends to the superhuman and otherworldly. Ordinary human action does not seem enough. Altered gods arise, flourish and grow in terms of popular expectations ... one of them was the *inverted* Yahweh of the first century.

Christianity is covered by chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10. I begin with the highly contested image of Jesus himself. The different ways he is glorified, dismissed, misunderstood and exploited are sampled. Surely we want the truth. That requires historical research and analysis. Therefore, in chapter 8, I examine the slave system, the rise and decline of Roman society and what led it to adopt Christianity as its official religion. Then, backtracking, in chapter 9, I attempt to locate the historical Jesus. He was not only a Jew but a fanatically devout Jewish-Jew. His meteoric career as an apocalyptic king-saviour is discussed in light of the best evidence and theorisation. Next, in chapter 10, I trace the growth of the post-Jesus Jesus party and detail how Christianity emerged with Paul's *split*. He, not Jesus, was the founder of a new pro-Roman, collaborationist religion. Viewed from this angle, Christianity marks a qualitative rupture with what went before.

After the Pauline split, Christianity successfully spread throughout the Roman empire to the point where it counted as a physical power, almost a state within a state, and therefore a potential theocratic rival to the emperor and his authority. In step with Christianity's growth, traditional religious toleration was abandoned. Starting with a deranged Nero and systematised by Diocletian, bouts of bloodthirsty persecution followed before emperor Constantine opted for assimilation as the best policy. My contention is that the role of Constantine and his adoption of a Hellenised Judaism was essentially accidental. The Roman empire required, was ripe for, a monotheistic and universal religion. Constantine himself simply swapped a remote and unpopular solar monotheism, the cult of the unconquerable sun, for an increasingly popular and eminently corruptible Christianity. In the last analysis I locate that adoption of monotheism in the crisis of slavery. The slave system, the dominant mode of production under classical antiquity, had long before encountered its limits. New, highly contradictory,

and often anticipatory, constitutional and military forms had already begun to emerge three centuries earlier with Augustus and the principate.

Besides that underlying theme I cannot but comment on the effect Christianity had on the Roman empire and its class relations and antagonisms. Did Christianity lessen the oppression of the poor and preach equality? Did Christianity represent a bastion of civilisation? Was Christianity opposed to exploitation, slavery and torture? In other words did Christianity usher in humanitarian values?

In all of this, Karl Kautsky's *Foundations of Christianity* still provides many profound insights, as it has on the subject of ancient Greco-Roman society in general. My chapters dealing with the origins of Christianity are an attempt to critically update Kautsky's argument. (He was, to state the obvious, no mechanical Marxist nor a crude evolutionist - an oft repeated accusation.) Anyone who has read Kautsky's eminently readable tome will appreciate that what success I have had is due to two main factors. Firstly, I stand on his broad shoulders; secondly, knowledge about the ancient world has increased hugely since he published in 1908. Over the last 50 years or so there has been something of a revolution in historical writing, biblical theory and archaeological discoveries. The key books that provided my stepping stones are the two main works of Geoffrey de Ste Croix, Hyam Maccoby's *Revolution in Judea* and Robert Eisenman's monumental and thoroughly convincing *James the brother of Jesus*.

The odd, but stimulating, theory of decline presented by the outstanding Russian historian, Michael Rostovtzeff - ie, that Rome fell into decay due to the revolutionary insubordination of the peasant army - rates a special mention, if only because it spotlights the autonomy achieved by the empire's state machine, especially pronounced after its adoption of Christianity. Rostovtzeff, it should be noted, fled Russia following the October 1917 revolution and hated with a passion the proletarian-soldier Bolshevik state and its terrorism.

Actually, a not unassociated observation can be found in Edward Gibbon's classic, multi-volume study (published over 1776-88). Strange though it may seem for a Church of England minister, he thought the Roman empire underwent decline in no small part due to a moral degeneration brought about or accelerated by Christianity. Gibbon (1737-94) was a product of the Enlightenment, but he was also a social and

political conservative. Britain had gained a far flung empire because of agrarian and industrial capitalism; and yet Gibbon feared a fate similar to Rome. His 1783 preface explicitly analogises the fall of Constantinople with the “revolutions in modern Europe” in his own time.³⁵ The loss of the American colonies harbingered the loss of the British empire. By equal measure, peasant revolt in Russia harbingered barbarian invasion. *****

*****. Eg, when the anonymously written novel *Primary colors* was riding high on the bestsellers’ list, speculation ran riot about the identity of the author. The *New York Magazine* engaged Don Foster, a Shakespearean professor at Vassar College, to see if he could determine who it might be. Foster studied various samples of published writings, and finally concluded that Joe Klein, a columnist at *Newsweek*, was the man in question. He had incidentally never heard of Klein before he began his investigation. Klein went on TV on February 15 1996 and emphatically denied that he had written the book. Foster, however, refused to budge. He was finally vindicated when on July 17 1996 Klein admitted that he was indeed the writer. Foster was completely sure of his case because of his textual analysis of *Primary colors*. He had located particular words, phrases and punctuation usages that recurred throughout the book; invariably they constitute “telltale” signs of authorship. Clearly the work of scholars such as Foster confirms that textual criticism is a valid science. It has been used to conclusively prove that Shakespeare was the author of Shakespeare and that the *Bible* is full of the “linguistic signs of forgery, interpolations, multiple authorships, and such like” (www.infidels.org/library/magazine/tsr/1998/4/984.front.html).

Naturally, in terms of ancient texts, I have turned to Flavius Josephus and the Dead Sea scrolls (which despite being famously discovered in 1947 were first made available in a popular translation only in the early 1960s). Then, of course, there is the Jewish-Christian *Bible* - the Collins 1973 edition of the revised standard version is used throughout. Both testaments, it has to be said, and as I shall show, contain little more historical truth than other similar epics: eg, the Babylonian *Gilgamesh*, the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* or Homer’s account of the Trojan war in the *Iliad*. That does not imply they are worthless. Quite the reverse. From them we can gain a unique insight into the social conditions and thought world of their writers/editors. “I would rather have the *Iliad* than a whole shelf of Bronze-age war-reports, however accurate,” says one noted translator.³⁶

Marxists approach the two testaments of the *Bible* in a similar fashion. Each and every one of their books is a palimpsest. Shameless and systematic alteration is ubiquitous. Texts that contradicted orthodoxy or became otherwise painful were either guiltily discarded or sneakily reworked. There were also convenient additions of supposedly prophesised historical events in order to lend authority and plausibility for propaganda

purposes. The words and deeds of Jesus have certainly been mercilessly distorted and in many instances turned into their diametrical opposite by Paul's followers and the succeeding redactors of the *New Testament*. Obviously a process of *falsification* enormously facilitated by the absence of mass literacy and the necessity of laboriously copying - ie, rewriting - each book by hand. Nonetheless every deletion and embellishment leaves its significant social or ideological thumb-print. Thus from these heavily edited writings, if approached thoughtfully and critically, it is possible to discover both the society and the contending ideas that produced both Jesus and the Pauline faction of his party.

Chapter 11 begins with the funeral of John Paul II - and thanks are due to both Cameron Richards⁴³ and Eddie Ford for their commentary around this event.³⁷ I go on to deal with the role of the modern Catholic church, in particular John Paul II and his claimed hostility to war and capitalism. Some on the left made much of this. Too much.

The birth, growth and nemesis of liberation theology constitutes a particular theme. The original dynamism of liberation theology is located in the world situation of the 1960s and the huge popular upswell that was taking place in Latin America. That gave courage and inspiration. Clearly liberation theology was influenced by Marxism. But to what extent? Did it successfully marry Christianity and Marxism? I show why liberation theology was intellectually flawed - it was, after all, a theology. Liberation theologians were committed to maintaining organic ties with the autocratic Catholic church - a fatal weakness that inevitably brought about the downfall of all good intentions. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger - Benedict XVI - played a leading role in the Vatican's assault on liberation theology. I discuss the famous 'Ratzinger letter'. The 'Instruction on certain aspects of the "theology of liberation"' was issued in August 1984 after being approved by John Paul II. I go on to examine Benedict XVI's Eurocatholic programme and contrast it to the Marxist approach to European unity.

Engels remarked in 1882 that Christianity cannot be disposed of intellectually simply by "declaring it to be nonsense". It can only be overcome if first we succeed in "explaining its origins and development from the historical conditions from which it arose".³⁸ Excellent advice, which I have done my best to follow. And not only when it comes to

Christianity, but Islam too. Chapter 12 deals with its origins. My intention is to question some widely held notions about Islam. To say the least, I regard the thesis promoted by Samuel Huntington with a combination of derision, anger and repugnance: "The fault lines between civilisations will be the battle lines of the future."³⁹ So he pronounces. Yet obviously, behind national rivalries and the 'clash of civilisations' there lies class and class interests - whether consciously understood or not.

By equal measure I want to show that the fundamental texts of Islam are not divine in origin. They are thoroughly human and can only be properly explained in historical and materialist terms. That is no insult to Islam. On the contrary, it is to fully appreciate Islam's significance and contribution to human culture. Of course, for orthodox Muslims the *Koran* is the word of Allah, who spoke through the angel Gabriel directly into the ear of Mohammed: "That is the book, wherein is no doubt," the *Koran* declares unequivocally (I use the Oxford 1998 edition and Arthur J Arberry's translation throughout).⁴⁰ Academics, journalists, politicians and artists who venture to disagree with this fearsome certainty often find themselves targeted with earthly threats of retribution, even death. This is especially the case in Muslim countries, where threats become all too real. However, even so-called liberal Muslims are outraged when the uniqueness, authorship and historical truth of the *Koran* is doubted, mocked or disproved.

Such an intolerant atmosphere hardly encourages serious koranic scholarship. Indeed it is no exaggeration to say that the critical study of the *Koran* is decades behind what has been achieved in terms of both the Jewish and Christian books of the *Bible*. Nevertheless, despite that, and the fear that palpably exists, a few brave souls have pressed ahead and investigated the origins of the *Koran*.

In part I adopt the thesis developed by Maxime Rodinson.⁴¹ He perceptively examined the psycho-social personality of Mohammed and mapped out the particular historical conditions that gave rise to Islam. There have been, though, some other notable scholarly contributions. The work of John Wansbrough of the School of Oriental and African Studies broke the mould as far back as 1977. He was perhaps the first to subject the *Koran* to a thoroughgoing linguistic analysis using the scientific techniques first developed for the *Bible* and Shakespeare - and such techniques have

proved remarkably powerful.^{*****} Wansbrough insisted that the *Koran* has not one, but many authors, and was compiled over decades, if not centuries. Following him, others have suggested that the *Koran* was unlikely to have been the work of a semi-literate Arabian merchant living in Mecca and then Medina. Instead, it has been argued, the *Koran* was composed in Mesopotamia following the Arab conquest. Even if all this is completely off the mark, as I think, such theories at least have the virtue of provoking thought, demanding as they do a comprehensive re-examination of received wisdom. The same certainly goes for the work of Christoph Luxenberg (a pseudonym). Luxenberg argues, this time far more persuasively, that the *Koran* has been misread almost from the start. Indeed much of Islam, he says, is based on mistranslated texts.

^{*****}. Eg, when the anonymously written novel *Primary colors* was riding high on the bestsellers' list, speculation ran riot about the identity of the author. The *New York Magazine* engaged Don Foster, a Shakespearean professor at Vassar College, to see if he could determine who it might be. Foster studied various samples of published writings, and finally concluded that Joe Klein, a columnist at *Newsweek*, was the man in question. He had incidentally never heard of Klein before he began his investigation. Klein went on TV on February 15 1996 and emphatically denied that he had written the book. Foster, however, refused to budge. He was finally vindicated when on July 17 1996 Klein admitted that he was indeed the writer. Foster was completely sure of his case because of his textual analysis of *Primary colors*. He had located particular words, phrases and punctuation usages that recurred throughout the book; invariably they constitute "telltale" signs of authorship. Clearly the work of scholars such as Foster confirms that textual criticism is a valid science. It has been used to conclusively prove that Shakespeare was the author of Shakespeare and that the *Bible* is full of the "linguistic signs of forgery, interpolations, multiple authorships, and such like" (www.infidels.org/library/magazine/tsr/1998/4/984.front.html).

Of course, Islam constitutes one of the main religions in the world today, with some one billion adherents. Yet Islam is a continent with many climates. It justifies almost everything. There are incidental Muslims of the Yasser Arafat, Saddam Hussein and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk variety. At the other extreme there are Osama bin Laden, Ahmed Yassin and Ruhullah Khomeini. Meanwhile in the west, rightwing politicians and their baying media pack denounce Islam as uniquely backward and murderous. Certainly the horrors of September 11 2001 gave the excuse needed for the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. George W Bush's first and second term cabinets represented an uneasy alliance between the half-crazy Christian right and the pure cynicism of the neoconservatives. Tony Blair, in his turn, desperately tried to link Iraq with al Qa'eda, and his government enacted 'anti-terrorist' legislation which even Britain's top lawyers found

hard to stomach. Undoubtedly London's July 7 2005 suicide bombings strengthened his hand. In both the US and the UK, unsurprisingly, Muslims find themselves at the sharp end of stop and search, raids, arrests, detention orders, etc.

In chapter 13 the lessons found in the writings of Lenin and the history of Soviet Russia are presented. Lenin argued that religion should be a private matter *as far as the state is concerned*. Not the Communist Party. Some have misrepresented that vital distinction. I examine the difficult course plied by the Soviet regime after the October 1917 revolution and show how in the mid-1920s Joseph Stalin used a war on religion as a leftist smokescreen for his imminent counterrevolution within the revolution.

Not surprisingly I feel obliged to comment on the Muslim Brotherhood. Chapter 14 deals with the historical evolution of the MB as well as the present-day reality of the Muslim Association of Britain. The next three chapters deal with different aspects of Zionism - a nationalist ideology, nowadays with an ever increasing religious coloration. Chapter 15 touches upon the nature of medieval Judeaophobia and shows that modern Zionism is a reactionary response to the decline of capitalism and the failure of the working class to go beyond capitalism. The warnings of Zionism appear to have been horrendously confirmed by Hitler's 'final solution'. A widely accepted notion which I question in chapter 16, as I do the use made of the Nazi holocaust by Israel and Zionism. I include a discussion of the controversy that still surrounds Norman Finkelstein. Zionists have accused him of being "slime", along with other equally choice insults.

My penultimate chapter is devoted to free speech and the religious hatred laws in England and Wales. These laws were never designed to protect Muslims. In fact they were an integral part of the post-9/11 attack on the freedom of expression and 150 years of always contested democratic advance. Shamefully, George Galloway and the Socialist Workers Party sided with Tony Blair and the New Labour warmongers on this occasion. Lastly, in chapter 19, secularism is discussed. As already mentioned, the best representatives of the ancient Greek intelligentsia rejected organised religion and often argued for something approximating to secularism. Constitutionally, secularism enshrines the equality of believers and non-believers. In Britain secularism therefore means the immediate demand for

a democratic republic that separates church and state. No compromise should be brooked.

Of course, many capitalist countries are today supposedly secular. Yet, as I show, this is not the case in practice. State and religion poisonously intertwine. Necessarily, in the democratic spirit of secularism, Marxists reject all wars on religion; criminally, in the case of France, it is a war against the Muslim minority blessed by some sections of the left. Just as criminally, there are those who abandon secularism by treating it as an awkward shibboleth.

A necessary disclaimer. This book makes no claim to be a work of original scholarship. The intention is to popularise and synthesise. Nor, despite the subtitle, is it intended to deal with religion as a whole: ie, each and every religious belief system. Hinduism, Buddhism and the Japanese and Chinese state cults are left unexplored. So too are the pre-Columbian religions of the Americas and much more besides. Even the rise of protestantism gets only the barest passing mention. That despite the existence of an abundant literature, triggered first surely by Marx's penetrating, typically brilliant, observations about protestantism's correspondence with the genesis of capital - the Catholic church being the religion of money, protestantism being the religion of credit, etc. My treatment of the subject is not intended to be comprehensive.

CHAPTER ONE

Sigh of the oppressed creature

In the *Communist manifesto* (1848) Karl Marx and Frederick Engels pour vitriolic scorn on those attacking communism from “a religious, a philosophical and, generally from an ideological standpoint”.¹ Eg, communism was charged with acting in “contradistinction” to all “past experience” by seeking to abolish “eternal truths” such as religion and morality. That said, the more liberal-minded will readily concede that religious, philosophical and juridical ideas have “constantly been modified” during the course of history. Nonetheless, their survival is celebrated as proving the “eternal truth” underlying religion and morality. Marx and Engels effortlessly brush aside such bourgeois metaphysics: class antagonisms simply assume “different forms at different epochs”.²

Obviously, communism involves the “most radical rupture” not only with existing property relations, but “traditional ideas” too. False claims made by bourgeois ideology, including those of religion, must be overcome, if the working class is to raise itself to the “position of the ruling class” and the “battle of democracy” won.

In that light, communists - whose highest goal is the realisation of a truly free society, in which human beings, liberated from the shackles of alienation, develop their potentialities to the full - flatly reject each and every charge that they want to abolish morality.

General expectations and interests - spontaneously generated through mass evaluation, example and habit - are expressed through the often perverse stipulations of morality. True, of course, in a class-divided society the morality of the ruling class is the dominant morality. Nevertheless, the codes, norms and beliefs of the ruling class always confront, vie with and often partially accommodate other, oppositional, moralities. Hence changes in morality broadly reflect the balance of class forces. Eternal verities often

turn out to be, therefore, nothing but a means of maintaining the status quo and sanctioning the exploitation of the many by the few.

It is a leftwing commonplace to reject the whole notion of ethics. Not only is there the all too blatant bourgeois hypocrisy. The Marx-Engels team were at pains to distinguish their practical, scientific world outlook from utopian and other non-proletarian forms of socialism; that included, needless to say, opposing gushy moral appeals designed to pave the way for the new Jerusalem. “Communists preach no morality”, Marx and Engels emphatically declare in *The German ideology* (1845-46).³

Unlike many of their fellow German radicals, they rejected all thought of adopting the Jesus commandment: “Love one another.”⁴ Indeed throughout their political lives Marx and Engels strenuously objected when philanthropic social improvers recommended that the programmes of the workers’ party should be based on stirring phrases such as ‘love’, ‘justice’, ‘peace’, ‘equality’, ‘respect’, etc. Marxism, by contrast, modestly contents itself with the real movement of the working class and painstakingly showing how communism is immanent within capitalist society.

Remarks dismissing the moralistic banalities of petty bourgeois socialism have been, though, read as Marx and Engels dismissing morality *per se*; leading to the conclusion that there is no place in Marxism for a specifically communist or proletarian ethic. An elementary misunderstanding of the Marx-Engels world outlook, a world outlook clearly motivated by what can only be called heartfelt moral indignation. Capitalism, and class society in general, is roundly condemned by Marxism because it violates, degrades, contradicts human nature. And, of course, the vision of a future communist society, where war, class exploitation and oppression have been abolished, where people can be fully social and fully free, where the antagonism between humanity and nature has been resolved, is unquestionably moral.

Youthful road

Whether or not Marx entertained any religious feelings as a child is unknown and is quite frankly unimportant. School essays surely cannot be counted as evidence one way or the other: eg, ‘The union of believers with

Christ according to John xv' (1835).⁵ Pupils typically conform to their teacher's wishes. We also know that his father, Heinrich, counselled his son that he should base his morality on a "pure faith in god" and that "everyone can ... submit to" what "Newton, Locke or Leibniz believed".⁶ But was this advice needed, was it ever heeded? On present evidence it is impossible to tell.

At university, Marx was counted amongst the Young Hegelian atheists grouped around Bruno Bauer (1809-92). That is for certain. Another was Engels. Despite coming from a conservative and pious Lutheran family, he thirsted for the most revolutionary ideas. As for Marx, he was by all accounts, a "lively and central figure" in their so-called Doctors' Club in Berlin.⁷ Engels, together with Edgar Bauer, younger brother of Bruno, gave an amusing account of the Young Hegelians in a long, anonymously published satirical poem, *The insolently threatened yet miraculously rescued Bible* (1842). The description of Marx is unmistakable:

Who runs up next full of wild impetuosity? A swarthy chap from *Trier*, a marked monstrosity, He neither hops nor skips, but moves in leaps and bounds, Raving aloud. As if to seize and then pull down To earth the spacious tent of heaven up on high, He opens wide his arms and reaches for the sky. He shakes his wicked fist, raves with a frantic air, As if ten thousand devils had him by the hair.⁸

After graduation Marx remained politically and personally close to Bruno Bauer and suffice to say his "atheism was of an extremely militant kind".⁹ The two spoke about setting up a review entitled *Atheistic Archives*.^{*}

^{*}Marx may well have collaborated with Bruno Bauer (1809-82), albeit as a junior partner, in writing *The trump of the last judgement on Hegel the atheist and anti-Christ* (1841). *The trump*, published anonymously, purported to be an attack on the godless philosopher, Georg W Hegel. He was, in fact, a practising member of the Lutheran church. Despite that, and the irony-laden religiosity of *The trump*, it was a militant advocacy of atheism. The two intended to produce a jointly written sequel. However, for various reasons Marx was unable to write his contribution and Bauer published *Hegel's hatred of religious and Christian art and his destruction of all the laws of the state* (1842) under his name alone. Bauer was Marx's teacher and mentor. Till their break in early 1840s they were also close friends. The 'religious' attacks on communism contained in the *Communist manifesto* arguably bear a resemblance to *The trump*. Unfortunately little from Bauer's large corpus of works is published in English. *The trump* is one of the few exceptions. See L Stepelevich (trans) B Bauer *The trump of the last judgement on Hegel the atheist and anti-Christ* New York 1989.

Marx's commitment to the freedom, solidarity and dignity of humanity was matched by a loathing of subservience of any kind. Once asked, what "vice you hate most", Marx snappily replied - "servility".¹⁰ No surprise then: he singled out Christianity as one of the most immoral of all religions. After all, by tradition, Christianity preaches reconciliation, passivity and humbleness, in short the moral attributes of the defeated, the freeloader, the servile. Saint Peter taught that slaves were bound by Christian duty to be submissive to their owners: "not only to the good and gentle, but also to the overbearing" (ie, sadists and rapists).¹¹ Supposedly that was to "imitate Christ" - he too suffered [unjustly](#).¹²

A prime example of Marx's youthful antipathy towards religion can be found in the *Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean philosophy of nature* submitted as his PhD dissertation in April 1841. Marx had an eye on publication (he woefully failed on this score - the full text was first published only in 1927).

In terms of morality Marx clearly employs the mythical Prometheus to express his own distinct standpoint:

Philosophy, as long as a drop of blood shall pulse in its world-subduing and absolutely free heart, will never grow tired of answering its adversaries with the cry of Epicurus: 'Not the man who denies the gods worshipped by the multitude, but he who affirms of the gods what the multitude believes about them, is truly impious' ... Philosophy makes no secret of it. The confession of Prometheus 'In simple words, I hate the pack of gods' is its own confession, its own aphorism against all heavenly and earthly gods who do not acknowledge human self-consciousness as the highest divinity.¹³

Marx's exaltation of the role of "philosophy" (almost as a persona in itself) betrays the youthful provenance of this passage; nevertheless the Promethean motif was a recurring theme. Prometheus's theft of fire from the gods of Olympus and his bestowal of this gift on humanity can be seen as a prototype of a revolutionary rejection of divine rule, a vital step towards emancipation. Of course, Prometheus was vengefully punished for his treacherous rebellion by Zeus, the top god. Chained to a rock, each day

Prometheus had his liver ripped out and devoured by an eagle. Despite that ghastly torture he defiantly cried out: "Understand this well: I would not change my evil plight for your servility."

Submission ran counter to Marx's psychological make-up. And it is belligerent, obstinate, unyielding emotional defiance, rather than abstract philosophical/theological considerations, that surely constitutes the bedrock of his hostility towards religion. After all Marx's "idea of happiness" was "to fight."¹⁴

Despite their closeness, Marx broke with Bauer over his support for the Berlin group of Young Hegelians known as The Free (successor to the Doctors' Club). As editor of *Rheinische Zeitung* Marx decided against publishing further articles by them. Their sloppy submissions were "free from all thought". More than that, Marx worried that frivolous attacks on religion played straight into the hands of the censor. Marx, it should be noted, was conducting a desperate rearguard battle to preserve what remained of press freedom against the creeping repression of the autocratic Prussian state.

On November 30 1842 he wrote to Arnold Ruge, then a key collaborator, explaining his demand for serious, well researched articles, instead of atheist verbiage. Marx insisted that religion should be "criticised in the framework of criticism of political conditions" - as opposed to political conditions being criticised "in the framework of religion". After all, according to Marx, "religion in itself is without content, it owes its being not to heaven but to the earth, and with the abolition of distorted reality, of which it is the theory, it will collapse of itself."¹⁵

The final rift with Bauer came after the suppression of the radical press by the Prussian authorities - *Rheinische Zeitung* being a prime target. Bauer discounted active political resistance and retreated into the protective shell of abstract theorisation. Between 1843 and 1846, having teamed up, Marx and Engels settled their accounts. As well as firing off journalistic articles, they authored two landmark works, the *Holy family* (1844) and the *German ideology* (1845-46). Not only was Bauer *et al* clinically dissected and mercilessly lampooned. Marx and Engels laid the foundations of historical materialism.

They then rapidly moved on. Engels, let it be noted, showed the way. He made the first attempt at critiquing political economy and grappling with the writings of Thomas Malthus, Adam Smith, David Ricardo, etc. He was also the first to appreciate the centrality of the working class to any realistic project of universal human freedom. Engels collaborated with the Chartists in Britain and was, of course, based in Manchester from 1842 - the epicentre of the 19th century industrial revolution. Having begun to develop their new viewpoint, Marx and Engels could put both religion *and* atheism into their proper place. Writing in the *Economic and philosophic manuscripts* (1844), Marx provides the following argument:

But since for the socialist man *the entire so-called history of the world* is nothing but the creation of man through human labour, nothing but the emergence of nature for man, so he has the visible, irrefutable proof of his *birth* through himself, of his *genesis*. Since the *real existence* of man and nature has become evident in practice, through sense experience ... the question about an *alien* being, about a being above nature and man - a question which implies the admission of the unreality of nature and of man - has become impossible in practice. *Atheism*, as the denial of this unreality, has no longer any meaning, for atheism is a *negation of god*, and postulates the *existence of man* through this negation; but socialism as socialism no longer stands in any need of such a mediation. It proceeds from the *theoretically and practically sensuous consciousness* of man and of nature as the *essence*. Socialism is man's *positive self-consciousness*, no longer mediated through the abolition of religion.¹⁶

Not that this should be taken as Marx rejecting atheism. Rather Marx was rejecting the *theological* atheism of Bauer and the Young Hegelians. An easy target. Bauer criticised religion and theology in a religious and theological manner. However, when it came to the non-existence of god, Marx himself could take what might appear to be an almost existentialist approach. If god existed, then humanity could not be truly free, nor could its purposes be entirely its own:

A being only considers himself independent when he stands on his own feet; and he only stands on his own feet when he owes his existence to himself. A man who lives by the grace of another regards himself as a

dependent being. But I live completely by the grace of another if I owe him not only the maintenance of my life, but if he has, moreover, created my life - if he is the source of my life. When it is not of my own creation, my life has necessarily a source of this kind outside of it.¹⁷

The supreme being people call god is therefore domination and predetermination to the power of infinity. If god exists, then the 'meaning' of the world must by definition come from this entity and not from humanity. But Marx consistently maintained that "for man the root is man himself ... The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest being for man".¹⁸

Marx's insistence on explaining religion in naturalistic, historical and social terms owes an undoubted debt to Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72). Though a senior member of Bauer's circle, Feuerbach - a former pupil of Hegel himself - bluntly announced his "direct opposition to the Hegelian philosophy".¹⁹ Instead, he expressed loyalty "only to *realism*, to materialism"; albeit a materialism which, showing he really remained fundamentally rooted in idealism, managed to deify love.²⁰

Despite that, perhaps because of that - the Young Hegelians were a motley crew - his best known work, *The essence of Christianity* (1841), had an electrifying effect. Writing decades later, Engels gives this testimony: "Enthusiasm was universal: we were all Feuerbachians for a moment."²¹

Interestingly, David McLellan registers a minor disagreement. Marx, McLellan says, was not over-impressed by *The essence of Christianity*. It was Feuerbach's *Preliminary theses for the reform of philosophy* (1842) which had the "immediate and important influence".²² Here, in this compact monograph - the argument is presented in an aphoristic and cryptic style - Feuerbach seeks to dispose of speculative philosophy - ie, Hegelism because it is, he argued, as great a mystification as theology. Mainstream religion was busily consigning god and the supernatural to mere allegorisation, moral instruction and the safe remove of an ethereal heaven. Remorselessly, enlightened thinking, science and biblical criticism marched ever onwards. Hegel, by contrast, managed to smuggle god and the

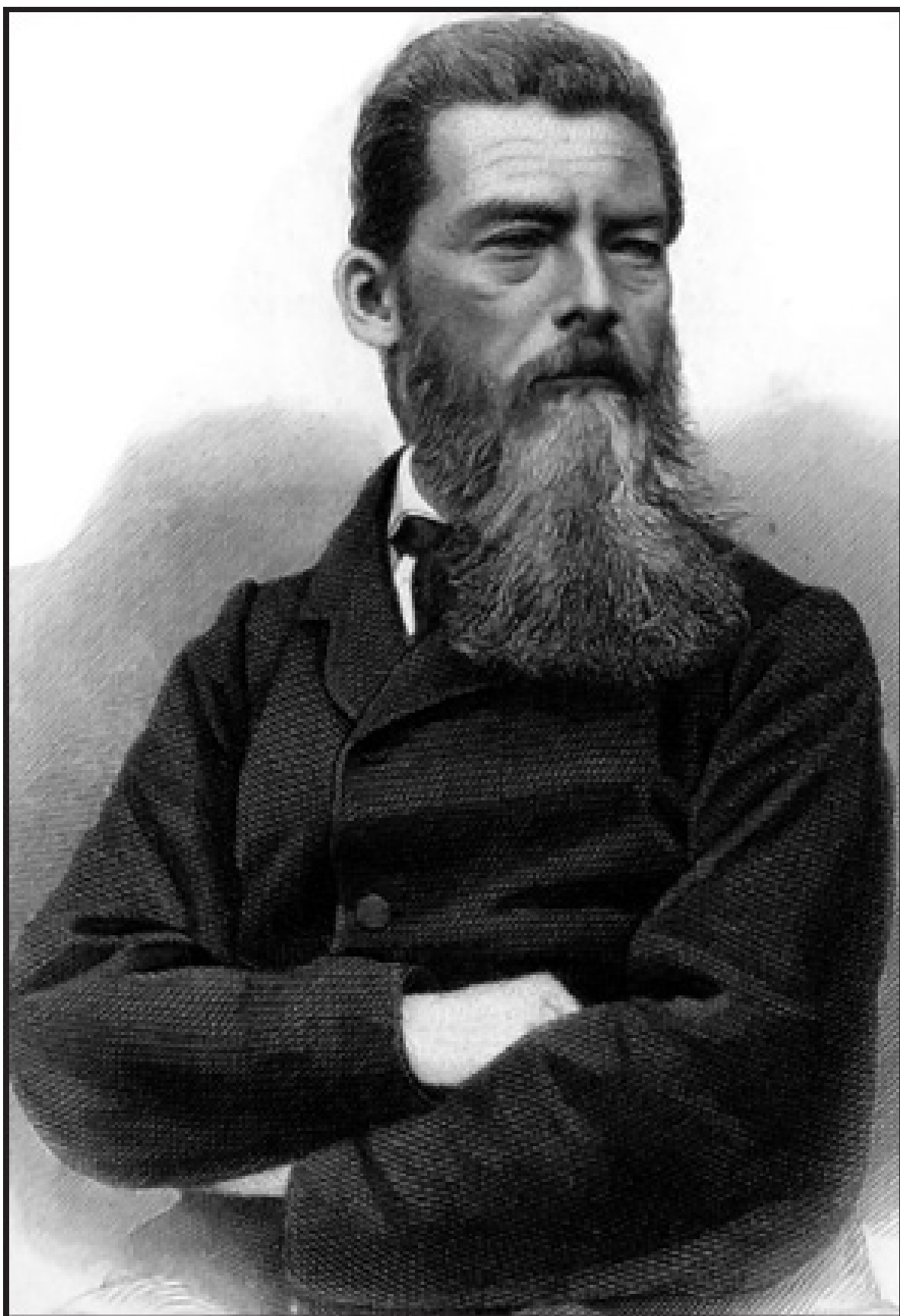
supernatural back onto planet Earth under the cover of a monumental, wonderfully complex and brilliantly organised objective idealist system.

For what it is worth, Feuerbach trumpets the birth of a “new philosophy”. It will not concern itself with abstract concepts, but will strive to fuse with the natural sciences. In the name of “man” it will “contain within it the essence of Christianity” and realise a “new truth - a new autonomous deed of mankind”.²³

Anyhow, put aside which particular book inspired Marx. In the early 1840s Feuerbach was *the* philosopher for the Young Hegelians. Abundant evidence exists to prove this contention. Feuerbach certainly established the correct approach to religion as far as Marx was concerned. Feuerbach’s more worthwhile propositions were recognisably continued by Marx. Arguably, his “inversion principle” allowed Marx to put Hegel’s dialectic onto its feet and reveal it as the general law, or underlying pattern, of matter and thought in motion.²⁴

Eugene Kamenka (1928-94), is right then, at least on this score: an “understanding of” Feuerbach’s earlier works “forms an indispensable precondition for appreciating Marx’s aims and methods”.²⁵ Anyone who calls themselves a Marxist should feel obliged to at least take a look at Feuerbach’s *The essence of Christianity*.²⁶ True, the failure to construct a serious history, the absence of political economy, the lack of a viable agent for social change, the tiresome sentimentalism, etc, are all too apparent. What needs appreciating, however, is the role of *The essence* as an intellectual portal. Engels again manages to convey the mood, albeit on this occasion in an uncharacteristically clumsy manner: “One must have experienced the liberating effect of this book for oneself to get an idea of it” (though it could just be bad translation).²⁷

A short biographical aside. While Feuerbach recoiled from political



Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72), German materialist philosopher and atheist.

His ideas on religion paved the way for Marx and Engels. He joined the Social Democratic Party in 1870, though never accepting Marxism.

activity after the failure of the 1848 revolution and in latter life authored nothing of significance, in 1870, having read *Capital*, he joined the newly founded Social Democratic Workers' Party. Perhaps one of the reasons why an aged Engels brimmingly declared that the "German working class movement is the heir to classical German philosophy".²⁸

Let us ask an obvious question. What was Feuerbach's central thesis when it comes to religion? Put at its simplest, it is that god does not exist. The "divine being" commonly called god "is nothing more else than the human being, or rather human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective - ie, contemplated and reversed as another, a distinct being".²⁹ Attributes which people assign to god and statements they make about god are actually attributes of and statements about human nature, but in a mystified form. So the "personality of god is nothing else than the projected personality of man".³⁰

Feuerbach junks the encyclopaedic objective idealism of Hegelism and in its place puts together a rather thin materialism adapted from Diderot, Descartes, Locke and Hobbes. Nothing exists outside nature. Sense organs rely on matter. Thought is not independent of humanity, etc. To his everlasting credit Feuerbach's materialism is thoroughly anthropocentric. Everything we perceive, define and know in our thought processes is perceived, defined and known in human terms. Accordingly, in all mental acts, human beings project themselves onto the object of their thought, and in so doing endow it with objectified aspects of their own human essence.

The resulting Feuerbachian relation between subject and object is defined as reciprocal and involves identity or correspondence. Religious people gain "self-knowledge" through the object: "Consciousness of god is self-consciousness." Hence by your gods we shall know you and even your inner secrets. Not that religious people are "aware" of that identity. Ignorance is "fundamental" to the "peculiar" nature of religion.³¹

Evidently, Feuerbach retains Hegel's category of alienation. People alienate their essential being by attributing their human qualities to a god

who is then worshipped on account of these qualities. Projection into the heavens splits, divides, removes humanity from itself. God is humanity's "alter ego".³² By worshipping god, people unconsciously worship themselves. An echo of Benedict Spinoza (1632-77) and his *homo homini deus* - man is a god to man.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of mind* (1807) considers alienation under two headings: *Entäusserung* (projecting a power or attribute onto an object), and *Entfremdung* (estrangement or alienation), which follows when the mind treats its own projections as independent from and even dominant over itself. The dialectic of alienation - in either manifestation - being seen as a positive and necessary stage in historical development. 'Being' (or 'Spirit') could only realise its essence by first externalising it and then reabsorbing it; without alienation the process of gradual self-development would be impossible.

Feuerbach, however, sees alienation in an entirely negative light, because it inevitably gives rise to an inverted relation between subject and object, which radically distorts humanity's self-consciousness. It is not god who creates humanity in his own image, but humanity who creates god in humanity's own image and then bows down before his own creation: "Man - this is the mystery of religion - projects his own being into objectivity and then again makes himself an object of this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject, a person; he thinks of himself, is an object to himself, but as the object of an object, of another being than himself."³³

Transforming theological statements about god into naturalistic statements about humanity not only corrects the inversion created by alienation. It allows humanity to establish its own essential dignity. What Feuerbach called "species-being." Whereas Hegel's philosophy involves fetishising abstract predicates such as "thought", which in the final analysis are treated as a manifestation of the absolute idea (ie, god), Feuerbach inverts Hegel's subject and predicate. By so doing he restores them to their proper relationship. Eg, instead of establishing the predicate "thinking" as an agent, Feuerbach transforms the equation and asserts that thinking is the activity of existing individuals. Thought comes out of being, not being out of thought.

In decoding religion's statements about god, Feuerbach usefully adds a specifically social dimension: "Man has his highest being, his god, in himself; not as an individual, but his essential nature, his species."³⁴ It is precisely the ability of humanity, the species, to achieve a collective identity as *universal beings* that allows the individual to rise above the consciousness of religion and realise its species-being.

Feuerbach was sensitive to the accusation that he was merely an atheist and, in denying the charge, he raises themes that, as we have argued, are repeatedly found in Marx:

He who says no more of me than that I am an atheist, says and knows nothing of me. The question as to the existence or non-existence of god, the opposition between theism and atheism belongs to the 16th and 17th centuries but not to the 19th. I deny god. But that means for me that I deny the negation of man. In place of the illusory, fantastic, heavenly position of man which in actual life necessarily leads to the degradation of man, I substitute the tangible, actual, and consequently also the political and social position of mankind. The question concerning the existence or non-existence of god is for me nothing but the question concerning the existence or non-existence of man.³⁵

It is, therefore, mistaken to view Feuerbach's *anthropocentrism* as a mere denial of religion. The genuineness and fervour of his humanism is beyond doubt. Feuerbach's critique of the *anthropomorphism* which is inherent in almost all religions is equally driven by his profound commitment to humanity. Be it animism, polytheism, henotheism or monotheism, the supernatural has been personified. However, what is particularly characteristic of monotheistic religions is a dismissal of rival gods as mere wooden or stone idols. Their deity is alone claimed as true:

What was at first religion becomes at a later period idolatry; man is seen to have adored his own nature. But every particular religion, while it pronounces its predecessors idolatrous, excepts itself - and necessarily so, otherwise it would no longer be religion - from the fate, the common nature of all religions: it imputes only to other religions what is the fault of religion in general.³⁶

The “malign principle” of persecuting and destroying heretics depressingly follows.³⁷

Some of the more esoteric chapters of *The essence of Christianity* consist of reinterpretations of Christian theology in terms of anthropomorphism. Eg, god’s supposed nature as an absolutely necessary being, an *ens realissimum* (most real being - reflecting the doctrine, that as goodness comes in degrees, so there must be an ultimate, real, entity). Feuerbach interprets this as mere objectification of human reason itself.

Similarly, the all-powerful, all-wise god is, according to Feuerbach, an inverted projection of human poverty. “The more empty life is, the fuller, the more concrete is god. The impoverishing of the real world and the enriching of god is one act. Only the poor man has a rich god. God springs out of the feeling of a want; what man is in need of, whether this be a definite and therefore conscious or unconscious need - that is god.”³⁸

Insofar as Feuerbach considers history, religion is depicted as the “child-like condition of humanity”.³⁹ By exposing the mystified nature of religion, the alienated subject-object relation can be reversed. God, he concludes, must be brought down to earth and humanity made whole. Indeed, the whole Feuerbachian project can be summed up as putting humanity, social humanity, in its rightful place at the centre of things.

Settling accounts

Any attempt to analyse Marx’s break with the Young Hegelians solely, or even mainly, in terms of some deep-seated neurosis is obviously deeply unsatisfactory. Intentionally or unintentionally, those who adopt such an approach ignore or downplay the originality, grandeur and specific historical context of Marx’s achievement. For example, it has been argued that Bruno Bauer, Edgar Bauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, etc, “overcompensated” for previous religious beliefs by violent, hate-filled attacks on Christianity.⁴⁰ Marx, supposedly having never gone through a period of religiousness, was not subject to the same demonic drives. How Engels fits into this schema need not worry us here.

Suffice to say, we know precious little about Marx's childhood. But we do know that his mother, Henrietta, descended from a long line of rabbis and she, unlike her husband, appears to have tenaciously clung to the religion of her forefathers. Usually mothers exert some considerable influence over their sons and there is every reason to believe that Henrietta did just that. So Marx's *immaculate atheism* is at the very least problematic. Henrietta could be possessive, controlling and disapproving. Relations between mother and son certainly became strained during adulthood. Pitifully, there are those who explain Marx's so-called "gross anti-Semitic statements" by invoking a "love-hate" relationship with his mother.⁴¹ A combination of character assassination and quackery.

In the exact same dismal spirit, though with diametrically opposite conclusions, the Catholic-Freudian Paul Vitz explains away Marx's irreligion as an Oedipal overthrow of fatherly authority. The learned professor turns mundane what he calls "intense atheism" by insisting that almost all famous atheists had a strained, damaged or venomous relationship with their fathers: eg, Paul-Henri Thiry, Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Feuerbach, Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. By way of contrast, Jesus can be nicely upheld as the "anti-Oedipus" because, of course, he had a tender, loving, perfectly balanced relationship with his father in heaven.⁴²

Searching out the limitations of the Young Hegelians in religious upbringing is banally ahistorical. The Young Hegelians were an unmistakable product of early 19th century Germany and articulated - despite the gag imposed by censorship - the strivings of the German radical bourgeoisie against feudal fragmentation, economic stagnation, bureaucratic corruption and autocratic arbitrariness. Biblical criticism provided one of the few publishable avenues open to anti-establishment intellectuals. But, when put to the test in the 1848 revolution, the Young Hegelians, indeed the whole of the German bourgeoisie, proved feeble, inept and cowardly. Alone the working class was consistent, bold and determinedly revolutionary.

And it was this class to which Marx and Engels were inexorably drawn, both in terms of actuality and future potential. A journey which commenced with a settling of accounts with the Young Hegelians. Eg, when it came to the practical task of making revolution, the weapon of biblical criticism

was, Marx and Engels argued, woefully inadequate. There would have to be criticism *by* weapons.

Psychoanalysis at a 150-year remove can only have extraordinarily limited value. Moreover, diagnosis, at the same historical remove, when it comes to the influence of mothers and fathers, about whom we are largely ignorant, amounts, surely, to pure chicanery. On the other hand, we have an abundant evidence showing how Marx and Engels threw in their lot and came to identify with the working class movement, and how they quickly emerged as its foremost international representatives. An orientation, destination and arena of struggle, I would humbly suggest, which was doubtless influenced by all manner of formative childhood experiences and youthful assertions of independence from parents, teachers, etc.

Nevertheless, taking such a route could only have happened with the maturing of definite historical conditions. Before the rise of the modern working class, whatever you call it - Marxism, scientific socialism, proletarian communism - was impossible.

But enough about ideologically driven psychobabble. I shall now proceed to show how Marx settled his accounts not only with the Young Hegelians, but Feuerbach too.

Marx was never going to be satisfied with a Feuerbachian anthropology that aspired to perfect Christianity. And the notion of overthrowing the Prussian autocracy using theological categories and theological criticisms was always going to be an absurdity as far as Marx was concerned. He soon became convinced that, while atheism was a vital intellectual premise, historic processes, developments in the means of production, social relations and crucially revolutionary practice had to be made the real starting point of “our criticism”.⁴³

Inevitably, that necessitated further, much deeper, endless investigations, but now into the “inverted reality” of the bourgeois world. With that in mind, let us turn to the first of two articles which Marx wrote in what was an extremely fruitful period spent in Kreuznach between March and October 1843 - that is, after the suppression of *Rheinische Zeitung* but just prior to Marx’s first period of exile.

On the Jewish question was published in the *Deutsch-französische Jahrbücher*. It constitutes a comprehensive rebuttal of Bruno Bauer and

unmistakably shows that Marx had already superseded the radical democratic politics of the *Rheinische Zeitung*. Leave aside Bruno Bauer - *On the Jewish question* also establishes a profound critique of the way liberals treat demands for equality, freedom, rights, etc.

Protestant Christianity was the only officially recognised religion in Prussia and Jews in particular faced a whole raft of laws which humiliatingly discriminated against them. Bauer - inexcusably barred from teaching in 1842 for daring to show that *Bible* stories were full of human invention - argued, in his book, [*The Jewish question*](#) (1843), that Jews can achieve political and civic emancipation *only* if they abandon their religious allegiances, religious modes of thinking and religious practices.

In the meantime, by appealing to the Christian state for equality, Germany's Jews were inexcusably legitimising it. Therefore their demands for equality ought to be rejected simply because they undermined the cause of general emancipation. Bauer actually maintained that granting Jewish rights would be incompatible with either the political rights of citizens (eg, the 1787 US constitution) or general civic rights (eg, France's 1789 declaration of the rights of man).

According to Bauer, an *atheist state* was the only solution ... and for him that obviously meant Jews, Lutherans, Catholics - everyone - renouncing their religion. Note, however, for Bauer, the Christian religion was considerably superior to Judaism. And after the failure of the 1848 revolution he swung violently to the right and began to promote an ever more vile anti-Semitism.

In the name of human liberation Marx rejected Bauer's 'solution' as theoretically flawed and totally inadequate. Bauer was trying to solve a social question as if it were a purely theological one; he failed to see that religious inequalities were not the cause of social inequalities; merely their symptom. Bauer's critique was misdirected because it was aimed at the *Christian* state, and not at the state as such.

Bauer's problem (and that of bourgeois radicals in general) was that he mistook political emancipation, embodied in declarations of human rights, constitutions, etc, for human emancipation. Simply decreeing the separation of church and state, while needed, could not ensure the disappearance of religion (and its associated prejudices). The original American states, for example, had written separation from organised religion into their

constitutions, yet the US remained “pre-eminently the country of religiosity”.⁴⁴

Bauer was still using the criticism of religion as his basis for the criticism of politics, but, as Marx insisted, “the existence of religion is the existence of a defect ... We no longer regard religion as the cause, but only as the manifestation of secular narrowness ... History has long enough been merged in superstition; we now merge superstition in history. The question of the *relation of political emancipation to religion* becomes for us the question of the *relation of political emancipation to human emancipation*.”⁴⁵

So it is not that Marx rejects demands for political and civic equality. Of course not. He sees such demands as eminently supportable, but not sufficient for human emancipation. The principal defect of political emancipation in and of itself is that it is purely formal. Taking issue with his own earlier reliance on universal suffrage, for example, Marx points out that various American states had abolished property ownership as a qualification for participation in elections. From the liberal standpoint, it could be said that “the masses have thus gained a victory over the property owners and moneyed classes”, that the “non-owner had become the law-giver for the owner”.⁴⁶ This victory, however, was only apparent, not real, because there is a world of difference between giving everybody a vote, desirable and necessary as that is, and giving everyone real and effective power over their lives:

The perfect political state is, by its nature, man’s *species-life*, as *opposed* to his material life. All the preconditions of this egoistic life continue to exist in *civil society outside* the sphere of the state, but as qualities of civil society. Where the political state has attained its true development, man - not only in thought, in consciousness, but in *reality*, in *life* - leads a twofold life, a heavenly and an earthly life: life in the *political community*, in which he considers himself a *communal being*, and life in *civil society*, in which he acts as a *private individual*, regards other men as means, degrades himself into a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers ... he is the imaginary member of an illusory sovereignty,

deprived of his real individual life and endowed with an unreal universality.⁴⁷

Counterpoising humanity's "heavenly" and "earthly" existences in a "double life" is, of course, a borrowing from Feuerbach. As already noted, Marx's approach to religion was grounded in a Feuerbachian rejection of the way in which religion demands subservience to a fantastic being who is no more than a projection of authentic human sovereignty in alienated form.

Hence the parallel which Marx draws between Christianity and political democracy:

Political democracy is Christian since in it man, not merely one man but every man, ranks as sovereign, as the highest being, but it is man in his uncivilised, unsocial form, man in his fortuitous existence, man just as he is, man as he has been corrupted by the whole organisation of our society, who has lost himself, been alienated and handed over to the rule of inhuman conditions and elements - in short, man who is not yet a *real* species-being. That which is a creation of fantasy, a dream, a postulate of Christianity, ie, the sovereignty of man - but man as an alien being different from the real man - becomes in democracy tangible reality, present existence and secular principle.⁴⁸

Yet, while Marx might have described himself as a 'Feuerbachian' for a brief period in the early 1840s, it is clear that he developed increasingly profound disagreements with Feuerbach's philosophy, and specifically with his materialism.

The problem with Feuerbach's naturalistic materialism, for Marx, was that on investigation it was annoyingly elusive, abstract and theoretical. A necessary though not sufficient step towards understanding our relationship with the natural environment. Feuerbach forever remained one-sided. Why? Because he conceived of things in passive, intuitive terms. His conception of the sensuous world was "confined on the one hand to mere contemplation of it and on the other to mere feeling".⁴⁹

Nature, for all the importance which Feuerbach attached to it, remained something 'out there', something dissociated from humanity, to which he related in essentially theoretical terms. In the memorable words of the

Theses on Feuerbach (1845): “The chief defect of all previous materialism - that of Feuerbach included - is that things, reality, sensuousness are conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively.”⁵⁰ Marx believed that Feuerbach’s failure derived from his lack of an historical approach. In *The German ideology*, he argues that Feuerbach did not grasp that “the sensuous world around him is not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and the state of society”.⁵¹

Similarly, the problem with Feuerbach’s attitude to science was that he consistently identified it with observation and description of natural phenomena, not realising that ‘pure’ physics, chemistry and biology are inadequate to account for our human species-being:

Feuerbach speaks in particular of the perception of natural science; he mentions secrets which are disclosed only for the eyes of the physicist and chemist; but where would natural science be without industry and commerce? Even this ‘pure’ natural science is provided with an aim, as with its material, only through trade and industry, through the sensuous activity of men ... This activity, this production [is] the basis of the whole sensuous world as it now exists.⁵²

Perhaps most seriously of all, in terms of Marx’s own political agenda for the self-liberation of the proletariat, Feuerbach was certainly a “static” materialist, in that he never really went beyond the notion that freeing human beings from religious alienation would in and of itself, in some unexplained way, simply usher in a society which expressed the ‘communist’ species-being of humanity. The writings of Marx we are discussing here were intended specifically to counter the “static” approach to religion. Together with the *Theses on Feuerbach*, not to mention the scintillating first hundred or so pages of *The German ideology*, this constituted a devastating critique of the Young Hegelians. That said, there can be no doubt, in its essentials, no matter how enriched and modified, Marx’s understanding of religious alienation remains firmly within the framework established by Feuerbach. It was this that Marx was surely referring to in his *Contribution to Hegel’s philosophy of law* (1843), when

he declared that, "For Germany the criticism of religion is in the main complete."⁵³

Anyhow, *On the Jewish question* reiterates the ethical postulate Marx presented in 'Debates on freedom of the press' - a six-part supplement carried in the *Rheinische Zeitung* in May 1842. Here Marx excoriated Prussian press censorship - "a perfumed abortion", he called it. Prometheus-like, he defiantly proclaims: "only that which is a realisation of freedom can be called humanly good".⁵⁴

Since organised religion, by its very nature, makes human beings into slaves of an imaginary deity, conceding them merely a specious sovereignty in alienated form, it cannot, in Marxist terms, be a force for human good in any meaningful sense. Religion and 'morality' (ie, bourgeois morality) exist in the abstract sphere of 'public life', the realm of illusory collectivity and illusory sovereignty represented by the state, whereas the concrete sphere of 'everyday life' - civil society - remains dominated by individual antagonisms and by all the kinds of inhuman domination, bondage and debasement implicit in the category of alienation.

Bruno Bauer's mistake was to imagine that religious emancipation in and of itself could free humanity, whereas, for Marx, even the most far-going version of (bourgeois) political emancipation cannot succeed in achieving freedom. Religious emancipation gives freedom of religion but it does not give freedom from the rule of religion, property or trade: it just gives us the right to profess the religion of our choice, hold property and practise trade as individuals in a civil society dominated by the *bellum omnium contra omnes* (war of all against all).

Just as religion, though constituting an illusory collectivity of humanity in relation to god, actually renders us into alienated, atomised individuals in relation to an imaginary creator, so political emancipation, while endowing us with an illusory sovereignty as citizens of the state, renders us into alienated, atomised individuals in a civil society dominated by property and the power that flows from it. Genuine, human emancipation can happen:

Only when the real, individual man reabsorbs in himself the abstract citizen, and as an individual human being has become a *species-being* in everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation, only

when man has recognised and organised his own '*forces propres*' [own powers] as *social forces*, and consequently no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of *political* power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished.⁵⁵

The commanding idea is that humanity can achieve real emancipation by rediscovering its identity in and through community, but not through the imaginary community represented by either religion or the state.

In the second part of *On the Jewish question*, the category of religious alienation appears in another guise, strikingly adapted in order to illustrate the significance of money and commodities in capitalist society, in a way that foreshadows some of Marx's fundamental ideas about commodity fetishism and the alienation inherent in the capitalist mode of production.

While Bauer argued in terms of the emancipation of "the *Sabbath Jew*" - Jews seen purely in terms of their religion⁵⁶ - Marx extends the notion of emancipation by focusing on the oppression of Jews in actual socio-economic context:

Let us not look for the secret of the Jew in his religion, but let us look for the secret of his religion in the real Jew. What is the secular basis of Judaism? Practical need, self-interest. What is the worldly religion of the Jew? Huckstering. What is his worldly god? Money. Very well then! Emancipation from huckstering and money, consequently from practical, real Judaism, would be the self-emancipation of our time.⁵⁷

Why, for Marx, is "Emancipation from huckstering and money, consequently from practical, real Judaism" rated as the "self-emancipation of our time"? Because it is money that dominates all social relations, money and the power that flows from it is that constitutes the material base of capitalist society:

Money is the jealous god of Israel, in face of which no other god may exist. Money degrades all the gods of man - and turns them into commodities. Money is the universal, self-established value of all things. It has therefore robbed the whole world - both the world of men and nature - of its specific value. Money is the estranged essence of man's

work and man's existence, and this alien essence dominates him, and he worships it.⁵⁸

Anti-Semitism

Biased or simply uninformed opinion - including some leftish academics, journalists, bloggers, etc - react in horror to such passages, denouncing them as clear evidence of anti-Semitism. In other words Marx was a 'self-hating' Jew. However, such an assessment is quite clearly wrong. Few of Marx's detractors go to the bother of explaining that he was actually advocating Jewish emancipation. Fewer still show any appreciation of the fact that it is thoroughly misleading to read post-1945 sensibilities back onto the language of the 1840s.

By contrast Hal Draper convincingly shows that Marx was merely following the near-universal practice of his day. One could make the same point about his male-dominated language: ie, the word 'man' is used more or less unremittingly as synonymous with 'humanity'. Ditto, 'Jew' is treated as synonymous with '*usury*'.⁵⁹ In this case a join with well recognised material roots in the economics of feudal society. Other contemporary Jewish progressives wrote in exactly the same terms: eg, Ferdinand Lassalle and Henrich Heine. And the fact of that matter is that Marx was criticising not Jewry alone, but what he saw as a "Judeo-Christian complex" which elevates money-making above every human value, relationship and instinct.⁶⁰ No, in truth, for hatred of Jews of a kind that does resemble the Nazis, you must look not to the writings of Marx but Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-65). The father of anarchism advocated the physical extermination of the Jews.⁶¹ Mikhail Bakunin (1814-76) held similar views.⁶²

Leave aside Marx's own Jewishness and his rabbinical ancestry: a good case can be made for his communism being connected, consciously or unconsciously, with messianic *Old Testament* prophets such as Amos, Micah and Habakkuk.⁶³ Possibly this came directly through his acquaintance with the proto-Zionist Moses Hess (1812-72), who likewise condemned the "Judeo-Christian huckster world"; almost certainly it came

indirectly through Spinoza, Goethe and Hegel. Their passionate commitment to human freedom recognisably descends from the Christian utopias of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Not that I would go along with Eric Fromm when he describes Marx's communism as "the most advanced form of rational mysticism".⁶⁴ Such a paradoxical formulation, while having the merit of counteracting the dismal technological determinism of the Stalinites, runs the risk of appearing to reconcile Marxism with religion.

Anyhow, having allowed ourselves a short detour, let us get back to *On the Jewish question*. For Marx, money was the god of the bourgeois and the worship of money was their religion. Hence the following passage:

Selling is the practice of externalisation. Selling is the practical aspect of alienation. Just as man, as long as he is in the grip of religion, is able to objectify his essential nature only by turning it into something alien, something fantastic, so under the domination of egoistic need he can be active practically and produce objects in practice, only by putting his products, and his activity, under the domination of an alien being, and bestowing the significance of an alien entity - money - on them.⁶⁵

Feuerbach's 'inverted reality', a world in which the essence of everything is externalised (*entäussert*), or objectified (*vergegenständigt*) into an alien, imaginary entity, a process whereby all values are turned upside-down, could not be more clear. Both notions, of course, appear - in a richer, more profound and dialectical form - in Marx's latter critique of political economy.

But - some may ask - how can the social role of money and commodities be equated with religion? Is this not stretching a point? No, it is not, for by 'religion' and 'religious' in this context, Marx refers not to the cultic beliefs or observances of this or that religion, but the subordination of human beings to a thing of their own making. Hence, in *Capital* Marx says "in religion man is governed by the products of his own brain". He elaborates:

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them

as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour ... [the commodity is] a definite social relation between men ... [and] assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world, the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands.⁶⁶

It is precisely the analogical, paradigmatic role of religious alienation in unravelling the "mysterious" nature of commodities, money and much else in the world of political economy that is of central importance to an understanding of the development of Marx's thought. Commodities, the products of our hands and brains which exert an alien power over us, at least exist in actuality, whereas god or gods are entirely a figment of the human imagination, with no existence in objective reality. It is precisely the 'purity' of religious alienation in this respect that endows it with a prototypical value when considering alienation in general.

The point is, of course, that the relationship between religious alienation and its 'secular' counterpart in the world of humanity's productive activity rests on the same basis of a fundamental inversion of subject and object, a radical confusion between appearance and reality at every level:

The religious world is but the reflex of the real world ... The religious reflex of the real world can ... only then finally vanish when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellow men and to nature.⁶⁷

Hence, as Marx argued, "All science would be superfluous if the manifest form and the essence of things directly coincided",⁶⁸ but, so long as the capitalist mode of production continues to exist, we all move about in forms of illusion. It was the desire to carry the exposure of religious alienation into the real world of politics and society that led Marx to write his *Contribution to the critique of Hegel's philosophy of law* (1844), which

effectively summarises his views on religion and contains his best known aphorisms on the subject. Marx begins by stating:

The basis of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. Religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being encamped outside the world. Man is *the world of man*, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, an *inverted world-consciousness*, because they are an *inverted world*. Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in a popular form, its spiritualistic *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realisation* of the *human essence* because the human essence has no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against *the world* of which religion is the spiritual *aroma*.⁶⁹

Again, Marx calls for a shift in focus - from the world of religion, the criticism of which is already “complete”, to the real world of the state and politics. In an eloquent passage, however, he frankly acknowledges why it is that the illusory world of religion can grip the human mind and heart:

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people. To abolish religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is to demand their real happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions*. The criticism of religion is therefore in *embryo the criticism of the vale of tears*, the *halo* of which is religion.⁷⁰

This passage demands careful attention. In the first place, the phrase, “Religion is the opium of the people”, is often quoted in isolation, to suggest mere contempt - religious people are just spiritual junkies. In the 19th century, however, opium, especially in the form of laudanum, was in widespread use as a primitive analgesic and tranquilliser. Had he been

writing today, Marx might well have described religion as the valium, or the prozac, of the people - ie, a means of dulling not just the physical or mental pain that is an inescapable part of the human condition, but also the anguish engendered by consciousness of the inevitability of disease, decay and death. To separate the phrase “opium of the people” from “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world ... the spirit of spiritless conditions” is to disregard the evident understanding and compassion which Marx feels towards those who have nothing else in their impoverished and alienated world from which to take comfort.

The criticism of religion, the exposure of its illusory nature, is seen by Marx as by no means merely a negative, destructive exercise, engaged in with relish by the cocksure atheist without regard to the feelings of others. In terms of his naturalistic materialism, which attaches so much significance to the needs of human beings, including their spiritual needs, Marx’s attitude is sensitive to the pain that can accompany disillusionment:

Criticism has torn up the imaginary flowers from the chain not so that man shall wear the unadorned, bleak chain, but so that he will shake off the chain and pluck the living flower. The criticism of religion disillusions man to make him think and act and shape his reality like a man who has been disillusioned and has come to reason, so that he will revolve round himself and therefore round his true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself.⁷¹

Marx believed that to discard the comforts of religion, to throw away one’s chains and come to one’s senses is a necessary part of achieving genuine human autonomy and the only way to encompass a genuine fulfilment. Nonetheless it is a painful business. The “living” as opposed to the “imaginary flowers” to which Marx refers are flowers of living knowledge. Collectively and individually, human beings have to try to pierce through the veil of illusion and come to know themselves and their world for what they really are. Armed with this knowledge, they can “fashion their own reality”, by transforming nature (and with it themselves) through their purposeful productive activity. Such knowledge cannot, however, be fully attained in a society where we all still move about in forms of illusion.

Exposing the illusory nature of religion and its comforts (the “imaginary flowers”) was, in any case, only the beginning of a much broader historical task:

The task of history, therefore, once the world beyond the truth has disappeared, is to establish the truth of this world. The immediate task of philosophy, which is at the service of history, once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked, is to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms. Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of the earth, the *criticism of religion* into the criticism of law and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*.⁷²

At the heart of this ‘new’ critique, one that moves onward from the exposure of religious alienation, while retaining its vital lessons, is the profoundly humanist notion of the centrality of the human person:

To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for man the root is man himself ... the criticism of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest being for man, hence with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being.⁷³

By 1844, when these words were first published, Marx had already been breathing the heady atmosphere of French socialist politics in Paris, an experience whose vivid impact provided the intellectual stimulus for the *Economic and philosophical manuscripts*. Within the next two years, having begun his lifelong collaboration with Engels, Marx’s approach to religion was to take a radically new direction.

As we have seen, for Marx, the ‘purity’ of religious alienation - ie, the fact that in religion human beings submit themselves to and are dominated by entirely imaginary and fantastical entities that have no existence in objective reality - gave the category a certain paradigmatic, prototypical quality. That is why we find him throughout his life using it analogically - most notably, of course, in the final section of chapter one in the first volume of *Capital*, entitled ‘The fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof’. There he has “recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world”, in order to explain how “the productions of the human

brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race”.⁷⁴

Just as “the religious reflex of the real world can, in any case, only then finally vanish, when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellow men and to nature”, so “the life-process of society, which is based on the process of material production, does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men, and is consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan”.⁷⁵ Only communism can bring about such “perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations”, because production under communism, motivated by human needs, not by profit, will be free, collective and founded on a plan that will not only incorporate the most advanced scientific knowledge, but, more importantly still, will be characterised at every level by active popular control, thereby reintegrating human beings with themselves and one another, in a society where the gulf between appearance and reality - all the illusions and mystifications embodied in bourgeois ideology - will be left behind.

Ideology

It is to the question of ideology - specifically religion as a ‘branch’ of ideology - that we shall now turn. Here our key text will be *The German ideology*, a Marx-Engels collaboration which has raised a number of highly contentious questions within our tradition. Eg, what is the significance of ideology as a category within Marxism? Due to what I believe is a misreading of some well known aphorisms, combined with a mechanical, undialectical and fundamentally unMarxist approach to the base-superstructure metaphor, some thinkers on the left dismiss ideology as pure illusion: ie, a void, a nothingness. Economics and the means of production are everything. Religion is given the same status as a fleeting dream. All reality is external to it.

To begin with, however, let us return briefly to the *Economic and philosophical manuscripts*. True to his conviction that criticism must move from heaven to earth, and in keeping with his own naturalistic materialism,

with its emphasis on the centrality of the reciprocal interrelation between humanity and nature in the labour process, Marx gives us a new focus on alienation. While retaining the category of religious alienation as a useful analogical tool, he now stresses that, whereas this category as such occurs only in the realm of human consciousness (ie, in the inner life of humanity), economic alienation is rooted in our real, material lives. So, if we transcend economic alienation, we also transcend its religious counterpart.

Transcending economic alienation means confronting a fourfold problem arising from the relationship between human beings and the objects and institutions they have produced. Firstly, workers are alienated from the product of their labour. The existence of private property in the means of production means that workers, who must sell their labour-power in order to live, relate, as producers of commodities, to the product of labour as to an alien object that stands over and above them. They cease to be self-determining beings and become merely a moment in the objective process of production:

[T]he worker is related to the product of his labour as to an alien object ... the more the worker expends of himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself - his inner world - becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into god, the less he retains in himself.⁷⁶

Secondly, workers are alienated from the labour-process as such. No longer can the exercise of brains, nerves and muscles constitute a satisfying end in itself, but only the means to earn money essential for survival. Because labour is “*external* to the worker”, it “does not belong to his intrinsic nature ... therefore he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind ... His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it ... Lastly, the external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else’s, that it does not belong to him.”⁷⁷

Once again the analogy with religious alienation is made explicit: “Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates on the individual independently of him - that is, operates as an alien, divine or diabolical activity - so is the worker’s activity not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of himself.”⁷⁸ The dehumanisation engendered by the alienated labour-process means that “man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions - eating, drinking, procreating ... and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.”⁷⁹

Thirdly, because it is “just in his work upon the objective world that man really proves himself a species-being”, the alienation of the individual from the product of his labour and from the labour-process itself inevitably has social consequences. “When alienated labour tears from man the object of his production, it also tears from him his *species-life*, his real objectivity as a member of the species” ... and fourthly, “An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labour, from his life activity ... is the *estrangement of man from man*”.⁸⁰

Marx makes clear that it is alienated labour itself under the capitalist mode of production, rather than the existence of private property in the means of production, that is the real cause of the alienation he describes: “though private property appears to be the reason, the cause of alienated labour, it is rather its consequence, just as the gods are originally not the cause but the effect of man’s intellectual confusion. Later this relationship becomes reciprocal.”⁸¹

We have included the above passages from the *Economic and philosophical manuscripts* because, apart from the light they cast on Marx’s explanation of the categorical relationship between religious alienation and alienated labour, they are central to an understanding of the category of alienation as a whole. The question has frequently arisen as to whether this category was effectively ‘superseded’ in Marx’s later works. Can one in fact speak of a radical discontinuity (what Louis Althusser dubbed an “epistemological break”) between an early “ideological” and a later “scientific” - Marx?⁸²

Frankly, the sheer weight of contrary evidence makes Althusser's proposition simply untenable. His "epistemological break" originated as a Stalinite invention, blessed by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow, designed to belittle, dismiss, escape from the anti-statism, democratism and humanism that shines forth from Marx's early works (often little known or unpublished till the first half of the 20th century) and which, therefore, when published, proved to be deeply problematic for the bureaucracy which squatted over "really existing socialism".⁸³

However, even a cursory browse through the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* - scientific works *par excellence* - should be enough to convince the reader that commodity fetishism not only underpins Marx's mature political economy. It constitutes a concrete application of the category of alienation, or estrangement, to capitalist society. Commodity fetishism/alienation allows Marx to penetrate the fog of mystification that obscures the real nature of the capitalist mode of production. Behind the carefully constructed veil of bourgeois normalcy and equality there lies the hidden reality of unfreedom and exploitation.

Hence, far from having been dropped in favour of a more 'scientific' approach in his later work, the category of alienation constitutes the enduring core of Marx's critique of capitalism. Alienation underlies the loss, dispossession and dehumanisation inseparable from the capitalist mode of production, a state of affairs in which human beings have no chance whatever of living decent lives, let alone of fulfilling their potential. It is precisely the depth of this dispossession and dehumanisation, the apparent impossibility of escaping from it, which, Marx argued, leads people to seek in religion "the soul of soulless conditions, the heart of a heartless world" - nationalism, new ageism, celebrity worship all being attenuated forms.

István Mészáros, a leading authority on the subject, emphasises that alienation is not only the "key concept" of the *Economic and philosophical manuscripts*, but also "the central concept of Marx's whole theory"; and that "Marx's critique of capitalistic alienation and reification" is in fact "the basic idea of the Marxian system".⁸⁴

Other respected scholars agree. Leszek Kolakowski (1927-2009), when he was a Marxist, had much of value to say on the subject of alienation.

Kolakowski identified what he saw as the real question as being “whether the aspects of his early thinking which Marx subsequently abandoned are important enough to justify the idea of an intellectual break, and whether the theory of value and its consequences [expounded at length in *Capital*] are a basic innovation, either contrary to Marx’s philosophy of the early 40s or in no way anticipated therein”.⁸⁵

In answer, Kolakowski describes the *Economic and philosophical manuscripts* very appositely as “the first draft of the book that Marx went on writing all his life, and of which *Capital* is the final version”, and goes on to say that, “There are sound reasons for maintaining that the *final version* is a development of its predecessor and not a departure from it.”⁸⁶ In short, alienation is the theme which unites the successive ‘drafts’ of that body of thought of which *Capital* is not the ‘final’ but the still incomplete statement.

What does change in the way Marx handles the category of alienation has more to do with language than with substance. In the later works he abandons the philosophical idiom of Feuerbachian, anthropological materialism. The theme is transposed from a philosophical to a socio-economic key, as Marx’s focus shifts from such abstract categories as our ‘species-being’ (*Gattungswesen*) to the concrete conditions of the production process under capitalism.

In describing this shift, the academic critic, Allen W Wood maintains that in Marx’s later writings alienation is “no longer explanatory; rather it is descriptive or diagnostic. Marx used the notion of alienation to identify or characterise a certain sort of human ill or dysfunction which is especially prevalent in modern society. This ill is one to which all the various phenomena exemplifying the images or metaphors of ‘unnatural separation’ or ‘domination by one’s own creation’ contribute in one way or another.”⁸⁷

The meaning behind Wood’s language is clear enough perhaps, but by ascribing metaphorical status to the ‘unnatural separation’ and ‘domination by one’s own creation’, he seems to want to reduce to a mere notion what is a concrete historical phenomenon. For Marx, alienation was much more than an intellectual construct serving the purpose of linking together the social evils and irrationalities of modern life. Moreover, the division of his

analysis of alienation into compartments - “explanatory” in the early work; “diagnostic” in the later writings - is far too schematic.

After all, the theory of commodity fetishism expounded in *Capital* is in fact a compelling materialist account of alienation as a historically specific process, relation and condition, and commodity fetishism played a vital explanatory function in Marx’s analysis of capitalism as a whole. In short, even though there was some speculative philosophical baggage carried over from Hegel and Feuerbach in the *Manuscripts*, the category was retained *and* developed.

Nowhere, as we shall see, is this more clearly evident than in Marx’s treatment of labour: core components of his mature theory, such as the nature of labour-power as a commodity, and the difference between use-value and exchange-value, can, as we have seen, already be found in the *Manuscripts* in embryonic form.

It is through labour, “the everlasting, nature-imposed condition of human existence ... independent of every social phase of that existence or rather ... common to every such phase”,⁸⁸ that we humans express ourselves “as real, living, particular individuals”. Labour-power being defined as “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality of the human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description”.⁸⁹

For Marx, alienation is defined (primarily at least) not in terms of the subjective experience of conditions, but in terms of the objective outcome of relations. ‘Objective’ in what sense? In the sense that alienation is firstly an empirically verifiable phenomenon; and secondly, that it is concerned with the way human beings relate to the objects (in the widest sense) which they produce - not just material things, but ideas, institutions and so on.

For those who have eyes to see it, therefore, a careful reading of the *Economic and philosophical manuscripts* demonstrates the extent to which, in substance, they prefigure the historical materialist basis of *The German ideology*. Take the following example:

Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc, are only *particular* modes of production, and fall under its general law. The positive transcendence of *private property*, as the appropriation of

human life, is therefore the positive transcendence of all estrangement - that is to say, the return of man from religion, family, state, etc, to his *human*, ie *social*, existence.⁹⁰

Already, Marx sees the realm of ideology, the ideas and institutions represented by religion, morality, law and so forth - the sum of all the relations that constitute civil society - as themselves alienated products of the capitalist mode of production. The “return of man from religion, family, state, etc”, the task of understanding society, of turning inverted reality back on its feet, as it were, becomes an epistemological question, because all forms of alienation are founded on the illusion and mystification that are inescapably inherent in the capitalist form of commodity production itself.

This theme is, of course, at the centre of Marx’s break with Feuerbach, who “starts out from the fact of religious self-estrangement, of the duplication of the world into a religious, imaginary world and a real one. His work consists of resolving the religious world into its secular basis. He overlooks the fact that, after completing this work, the chief thing still remains to be done. For the fact that the secular basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must itself, therefore, first be understood and then, by the removal of the contradiction, revolutionised in practice.”⁹¹

One of the main problems with Feuerbach’s approach to alienation was that it went no further than, as it were, ‘inverting’ the idealism of Hegel, transferring alienation from the sphere of the ‘spirit’ to that of human beings. But for Feuerbach ‘man’ remained a nebulous concept, as much as ‘eternal human nature’ or ‘species-being’. What was lacking was any attempt to place ‘man’ in the concrete circumstances of what Marx calls the ‘secular basis’: ie, class society, with all its contradictions. Hence, Feuerbach’s “human essence” (*das menschliche Wesen*) is a purely abstract category: “the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations.”⁹²

Turning to *The German ideology* itself, it is essential to place this work in its historical context - it is a highly polemical and discursive attempt by Marx and Engels to settle their accounts with Feuerbach and the Young

Hegelians. The first hundred or so pages - effectively an extended elaboration of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* - contain the kernel of what was to become historical materialism: namely that social relations determine the nature of society.

It is based on a conception of history that "relies on expounding the real process of production - starting from the material process of life itself - and comprehending the form of intercourse connected with and created by this mode of production, ie, civil society in its various stages, as the basis of all history; describing it in its action as the state and also explaining how all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, morality ... arise from it".⁹³

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are real individuals, their activity and the material conditions of their life, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way Empirical observation must bring out ... without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production. The social structure and the state are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals, however, of these individuals, not as they may appear in their own or other people's imagination, but as they *actually* are, ie, as they act, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will.⁹⁴

So far as religion is concerned, Marx is at pains to stress the entirely empirical nature of its origin and development from that natural religion which constituted "consciousness of nature, which first confronts me as completely alien, all-powerful and unassailable" force. The first 'religious' impulse stemmed, therefore, from the need to propitiate the natural forces on which the very continued existence of humanity depended.

Marx recalls a time when:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men - the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the

mental intercourse of men at this stage still appears as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of the politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc, of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc, that is, real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms.⁹⁵

With the development of the division between manual and mental labour, however, a situation arises in which “consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of ‘pure’ theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc”.⁹⁶

Significantly, the manuscript of *The German ideology* has a marginal note at this point: “The first form of ideologists, priests, is coincident.” Religion, along with morality, philosophy and so forth, are to be seen as products of consciousness in the sphere of ideas, as “ideological reflexes and echoes ... phantoms formed in the brains of men ... sublimates of their material life-process ... bound to material premises ... Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology, as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their actual world, also their thinking and the products of their thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness.”⁹⁷

Marx’s language is certainly trenchant: on the one hand, the world of “real, active men” engaged in “their real life-process” in the sphere of production that constitutes the material base, “conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces”; on the other hand, “morality, religion, metaphysics and all the rest of ideology” are depicted as a superstructural realm of “reflexes”, “echoes”, “phantoms” and “sublimates”. Small wonder that many have been tempted on the basis of

these passages to adopt a crudely reductionist interpretation, in which ideology is dismissed as an epiphenomenon, or even ‘unreal’. It is, however, a temptation firmly to be resisted, because it ends in a vulgar travesty of Marx’s thinking, with many harmful consequences.

We need to remember exactly what it was against which Marx was wielding his polemical sword with such gusto - namely, the philosophical idealism that allotted to consciousness and abstract ideas, whether human or ‘divine’ in their origin, an effective primacy in the determination of history. Hence Marx’s insistence, for example, that religion and the “rest of ideology” have no peculiar history of their own as self-evolving, autonomous entities, but are human creations that can only properly be understood in the context of human productive activity as a whole.

On setting out for Paris, Marx had eagerly looked forward to undertaking a ruthless criticism of all that exists, through the analysis of mystical consciousness that is not clear to itself, whether it appears in religious or political form. But in their various ways his former allies in the Young Hegelian movement still went on believing that ideas could by themselves lead to a transformation of society. In *The holy family* Marx, on the other hand, stressed that, “*Ideas* never lead us beyond the old order of things, but only beyond the ideas of the old world order. Ideas *cannot carry out anything* at all. In order to carry out ideas men are needed who can exert practical force.”⁹⁸ As Engels wrote, also in *The holy family*, “Criticism creates nothing, the worker creates everything.”⁹⁹

In *The German ideology*, Marx denounces the idealist view of history in which the real production of life, when not altogether disregarded or treated as a minor matter, appears as non-historical, while the historical appears as something separated from ordinary life, something “extra-superterrestrial”. But giving historical primacy to the interrelationship of the development of productive forces and relations of production has nothing in common with the preposterous view that history is nothing but these things. A view of history that focuses exclusively on the material production and reproduction of life, on the self-evident necessity of securing the material means for our physical survival - a view that dismisses creativity, imagination and all that we can legitimately refer to as ‘the spiritual’ and consigns it to the periphery of human experience and activity - is profoundly unMarxist.

For Marx, truly human labour, such as can enable us to fulfil ourselves as fully rounded human beings, is inseparable from that conscious, purposive activity in which imagination, creativity and spiritual satisfaction play a vital part. It is the lack of scope for such activity in so much of the labour performed by wage-slaves under capitalism that constitutes one of Marx's main ethical objections to the system as such.

We look in vain for a firm definition of ideology as a category in Marx's work, but we can locate a consistent thread of argument in his work as a whole. In the 'mature' work, his attention is focused predominantly on the supposedly fixed, immutable, eternal categories of bourgeois political economy. The leitmotif is one of clarification, of discerning the difference between appearance and reality, of turning things the right way up so as to expose the inverted, illusory nature of the categories on which bourgeois ideology is founded:

When the economists say that present-day relations - the relations of bourgeois production - are natural, they imply that these are the relations in which wealth is created and productive forces developed in conformity with the laws of nature. These relations therefore are themselves natural laws independent of the influence of time. They are eternal laws which must always govern society. Thus there has been history, but there is no longer any.¹⁰⁰

'Bourgeois ideology' is a useful portmanteau category, but we should beware of endowing it with the character of an autonomous, intrinsically coherent body of thought. It is true, of course, that the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: that is, "the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas."¹⁰¹

But it would be a mistake to imagine that ideology is a consciously formulated, settled construct derived from real, full awareness of the

material and social circumstances on which it is founded. Ideologists are no less subject to the mystificatory impact of alienation than the rest of us. The task of the ideologist, including in Marx's view those amongst the religious ideologues who seek to present the rule of a particular class, is to persuade society that the interests of the ruling class represent the 'general interest' of all:

[E]ach new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to present its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and present them as the only rational, universally valid ones.¹⁰²

Within the ranks of the ideologists themselves, however, there are inevitably conflicting ideas about exactly what serves the best interests of their masters. If we look at insightful works such as *The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* or *The class struggles in France*, we find an account of ideology as a real, material political force, but one operating at numerous levels of awareness of reality.

The point is that Marx's principal focus was on the concrete, practical role of ideas in the class struggle. When ideas and forms of consciousness, including, of course, religious notions, play a part in the political struggle of contending classes, they become *ipso facto* 'ideological', because they serve a class interest. As Marx was to put it in his introduction to *A contribution to the critique of political economy*, "it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic - in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out".¹⁰³

Having identified the division of labour as a decisive development which allows consciousness to "flatter itself" that it is something "else other than consciousness", Marx waspishly comments that consciousness can then "emancipate itself from the world" and proceed to the formation of "pure" theory and "pure" theology, philosophy, morality, etc.¹⁰⁴

Put another way, the division of labour is ultimately based on the “natural division” in the family, where the wife and children are the “slaves of the husband”.¹⁰⁵ However, the more developed the division of labour, the more society cleaves into exploited and exploiter and hence antagonistic classes. The struggle within the state, the struggle between democracy, aristocracy and monarchy are “merely the illusory forms” in which the “real struggles of the different classes are fought out”.¹⁰⁶

Interestingly, Marx specifically points to the division of labour as one of the main causes of alienation. As long as a person’s activity “is not voluntary, but naturally, divided, man’s own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him. For as soon as the division of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape.”¹⁰⁷

The division of labour described by Marx finds concrete expression in the unequal division of property and power - derived from that, and from the power to dispose of the labour-power of others - existing in any given social formation. In these circumstances, perhaps the most important function of ideologists - the ‘mental labourers’ - is to elaborate ideas that ratify, propagate, defend and naturalise the status quo, securing and extending the property and power of the existing ruling class.

Anyone with experience of religion and the prayers and homilies coming from Church of England pulpits which ratify, propagate, defend and naturalise the status quo will be all too familiar with that. Historically religion has played a vital role as an ideological bulwark of the ruling class in every exploitative society.

The history of western Christendom certainly shows that from late Roman times the Catholic church was not merely a ruling intellectual force: it constituted a mighty temporal - ie, material - power in its own right. Despite the Enlightenment, despite all the scientific progress of recent centuries and despite the evident decay of some strata of orthodox, mainstream religion in some areas in this ‘secular’ age, religion still has a useful, ratificatory role to play on the side of the ruling class.

God as a leftist

Not that religion, even in modern times, cannot present itself as being militantly on the side of the masses. Even as a necessary means for social transformation. Religion can and does. Hence it must be appreciated that the practical struggles of Marx-Engels against religion *mainly* concerned illusion generated from within the working class.

When they first got seriously involved in socialist politics in the mid-1840s, there was already a tradition on the left, especially in France, of regarding religion not merely as philosophically compatible with socialism, but even as a positive source of inspiration. There were clerics who advocated their own brand of Christian socialism and supported workers' demands: eg, the communist priest, Hugues Lamennais (1782-1854). Most French socialist thinkers seem to have maintained that their politics were rooted in biblical notions. Henri Saint-Simon's *New Christianity* (1825), together with the writings of socialists like Étienne Cabet (1788-1856) and Pierre Henri Leroux (1797-1871) were particularly influential. Hence Engels observed in the article 'Progress of social reform on the continent':

It is, however, curious that, whilst the English socialists are generally opposed to Christianity, and have to suffer all the religious prejudices of a really Christian people, the French communists, being a part of a nation celebrated for its infidelity, are themselves Christians. One of their favourite axioms is that Christianity *is* communism, *le Christianisme c'est le communisme*.¹⁰⁸

A similar strain of thought could be found among German socialists such as Moses Hess, and perhaps most notably in the teaching of the autodidact communist artisan and preacher of the 'dictatorship of intelligence', Wilhelm Weitling (1808-71), who at one stage attracted thousands of followers in the workers' movement, and for a time worked alongside Marx and Engels in the Communist Correspondence Committee, set up to foster links between revolutionaries and advanced workers.

It was a disciple of Weitling's and a fellow member of the Correspondence Committee, the eccentric Hermann Kriege, whose

activities provoked one of Marx's early denunciations of this eclectic mix of 'communist' politics and religion.

After emigrating to America in 1845, Kriege settled in New York and established a German-language journal, *Der Volks-Tribun*, in which he began propagating a utopian kind of agrarian socialism that amounted to urging American immigrants to become farmers. According to Kriege, a beneficent state could abolish poverty for ever by allocating a smallholding of 160 acres to every family. This was bad enough, but worse was to come when Kriege, in the name of communism, began preaching a new religion of love as an antidote to all human ills. From the quotes provided by Marx it is clear that Kriege's "amorous slobberings" were the product of a deeply disordered mind - he died in an asylum. But Marx was surely using Kriege to target Weitling and in the process hoping to undermine those who in the name of communism preached the "old fantasy of religion ... the direct antithesis of communism".

By advocating the view that communism sought to bring about "the long-yearned for community of the blessed denizens of heaven", Kriege ignored the fact that "these obsessions of Christianity are only the fantastic expression of the existing world and that their 'reality' therefore already exists in the evil conditions of this existing world". It is important to note that Kriege was expelled from the Correspondence Committee, not because of his weird religious views *per se*, but because they were, as Marx put it in his 'Circular against Kriege', "compromising in the highest degree to the Communist Party".¹⁰⁹ Had Kriege been merely a private individual, his quasi-Christian effusions, had they been noticed at all, would no doubt have met with that mixture of contempt and bemused exasperation with which Marx regarded all forms of religious belief.

Marx was just as scathing when it came to attempts by Christian ideologists among the bourgeoisie to claim that their religion was in any sense compatible with the struggle for socialism. In 1847, for example, he published an article condemning the propagation of a variant of feudal, Christian socialism preached in the pages of the conservative *Rheinischer Beobachter*. The paper maintained that the social question in Germany could be resolved within the framework of the Prussian state, provided that the state put into practice what it called "the social principles of

Christianity”. Marx delivered a memorable retort in ‘The communism of the *Rheinischer Beobachter*’:

The social principles of Christianity justified the slavery of antiquity, glorified the serfdom of the middle ages and are capable, in case of need, of defending the oppression of the proletariat, even if with somewhat doleful grimaces. The social principles of Christianity preach the necessity of a ruling and an oppressed class, and for the latter all they have to offer is the pious wish that the former may be charitable. The social principles of Christianity place the consistorial counsellor’s compensation for all infamies in heaven, and thereby justify the continuation of these infamies on earth. The social principles of Christianity declare all the vile acts of the oppressors against the oppressed to be either a just punishment for original sin and other sins, or trials which the lord, in his infinite wisdom, ordains for the redeemed. The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, abasement, submissiveness and humbleness: in short, all the qualities of the rabble; and the proletariat, which will not permit itself to be treated as rabble, needs its courage, its self-confidence, its pride and its sense of independence even more than its bread. The social principles of Christianity are sneaking and hypocritical, and the proletariat is revolutionary. So much for the social principles of Christianity.¹¹⁰

Nowhere else in Marx’s writings can we find a more personal, more deeply felt and more intensely angry summary of exactly what it was in religion that he found so abhorrent. The lines just quoted constitute another Promethean declaration of the essential dignity and independence of the human person, for whom submission to the gods represents a defining act of self-abasement in the face of mere illusion and alienation.

For the *Communist manifesto*, the notion of Christian socialism was a manifestly absurd oxymoron. In the view of the Marx-Engels team, the variants of it that tried to muster support among the masses represented no more than a final, futile attempt on the part of a decadent, senescent aristocracy to stem the rising tide of the bourgeoisie:

In order to arouse sympathy, the aristocracy were obliged to lose sight, apparently, of their own interests, and to formulate their indictment

against the bourgeoisie in the interest of the exploited proletariat alone ... As the parson has ever gone hand in hand with the landlord, so has clerical socialism with feudal socialism. Nothing is easier than to give Christian asceticism a socialist tinge. Has not Christianity declaimed against private property, against marriage, against the state? Has it not preached in the place of these charity and poverty, celibacy and mortification of the flesh, monastic life and Mother Church? Christian socialism is but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat.¹¹¹

There is no room for any kind of fudge on the matter: in Marx's eyes religion was and could never be anything more than a contemptible form of self-degradation, whereby the human subject transforms itself into a cringing object by voluntarily submitting to the domination of an entirely illusory deity. Hence his anger, near the end of his life, when the German social democrats enshrined in the Gotha programme the formula that religion was a 'private matter'.

While not sharing the desire of some of his socialist contemporaries like Louis Auguste Blanqui to declare war on religion and persecute its adherents, a tactic which historically has always proved entirely counterproductive, Marx thought that any workers' party worthy of the name should not limit itself to a mere declaration of freedom of conscience. Just as he had argued against his Young Hegelian collaborators decades before, Marx maintained that the ultimate objective should not be to bring about freedom of religion, but freedom *from* religion. To argue that "everyone should be able to attend to his religious needs as well as his bodily needs without the police sticking their noses in" was not enough: "Bourgeois 'freedom of conscience' is nothing but the toleration of all possible kinds of religious freedom of conscience, and it [the workers' party] endeavours rather to liberate the conscience from the witchery of religion."¹¹²

Suffice it to say that Marx was consistently and unbendingly hostile to any suggestion that religion or religious values - of whatever kind - had anything useful to contribute to the class struggle and the fight for socialism. Indeed, where religious notions did enter into socialist politics,

whether in the form of nostrums based on biblically inspired ethical precepts underlying 'true socialism' and so forth, or simply in the form of opportunistic compromises such as those at Gotha, he regarded them in an entirely negative light. The religious beliefs of individuals appear to have interested him not at all, but, where the workers' movement was concerned, it was an entirely different matter.

Formally, in and of themselves, they were *obviously* false and irrational. And a generation before Enlightenment thinkers had *already* shot down the absurdities and logical flaws contained in the *Bible*: eg, Thomas Paine's *Age of reason* (1794, 1795, 1807).

Instead, Marx-Engels recognised that as the *subject* - ie, the active agent of history - the working class both needed educating and would itself, with each mass advance, educate the educators (ie, people like themselves). When it came to religion, that meant using what is an incredibly rich mode of thought as a window, a voice, a means of interpretation. With a proper understanding, history can reveal profound truths about society past and present. By the same measure, without a profound understanding of the past, Marx and Engels were convinced that the working class movement could achieve nothing much beyond an improved position for a slave class.¹¹³

CHAPTER TWO

Religion and the human revolution

Human beings have been the product of essentially the same genetic toolkit since the first pre-modern *Homo sapiens* emerged in Africa around 500,000 years ago.¹ Our own sub-species, modern *Homo sapiens*, also arose in Africa - some “130,000 years ago.”² In all likelihood, our *ability* to acquire and transmit abstract ideas, including religious ideas, results from the rapid growth of brain size, not least in the frontal cortex, which makes us *capable* of symbolic thought, furious creativity and “extraordinary” feats of deception.³

Some geneticists go further. They claim to have located religious beliefs in our genes and the biological mechanisms of heredity. Dean Hamer, director of the Gene Structure and Regulation Unit of the US National Cancer Institute, stunningly revealed in his book, *The god gene* (2004), how he had finally cracked the age-old enigma of religion. At least that is what his canny publicity machine declared.

Vesicular Monoamine Transporter 2, VMAT2, was confidently named the ‘god gene’ ... for pretty tenuous reasons. The VMAT2 protein is responsible for transmitting dopamines from one part of the brain to another and this induces feelings of pleasure, happiness and general harmony with the cosmos. Dopamines are released during trances and other such ecstatic religious experiences (and by psychotropic and hallucinogenic drugs).

There are two versions of VMAT2 and they “differ only in a single position”.⁴ People with one version apparently tend to score a little higher when it comes to what Hamer calls “self-transcendence”. But it hardly follows that belief in god is VMAT2-determined.

Doubleday, Hamer’s publisher, seems to have chosen the title of his book and with the same provocative certainty asserted in the subtitle that faith was “hardwired into our brains”. Good marketing, doubtless. But, frankly,

both claims have as much scientific validity as the existence of ‘gay’, ‘criminal’ and ‘xenophobia’ genes. Not surprisingly, arguments used to back up such wafer-thin propositions remain unconvincing.

Hamer’s research conclusions mainly rest on psychological questionnaires received from hundreds of siblings originally collected for a study on cigarette smoking. When it came to VMAT2 and “self-transcendence”, there was less than a 1% variation. Statistically inconclusive to the point of being irrelevant. There is, it would appear, no credible evidence of a “one-to-one correspondence” between “genotype and phenotype”.⁵ Most “complex” traits are influenced “more or less strongly by the environment.”⁶ Therefore, leave aside religion, the estimated 20,000-25,000 genes inherited from one’s parents do not directly determine “one’s height, weight, metabolic rate, sickness, health or any other non-trivial organic characteristic”.⁷

Hamer’s book was squarely aimed at a mass market and significantly he chose not to submit his findings to an authoritative, peer-reviewed academic journal before publishing. Nevertheless, under heavy fire from a wide variety of scientific critics and researchers, Hamer backtracked considerably. His book, let us note, actually made far more modest claims about VMAT2 than the publicity blurb promised. Despite that, showing how its editors rate the credulity of their readers, and greatly enhancing Hamer’s sales figures, *Time* magazine ran with the startling “god gene” news on the front page of its US edition.⁸

Not that this was connected in any way with the deal struck by Doubleday and Time Warner in 2000, which merged their two book clubs under a joint venture called Bookspan. A partnership which lasted until 2007, when Bertelsmann, the German owner of Doubleday, took over sole running.

Neo-Darwinism

The usual approach from members of the neo-Darwinist school is to explain religion - and much else besides - by extrapolating from the ways they

imagine our ancestors were evolved to behave in their ‘garden of Eden’ on the African savannah⁹ hundreds of thousands of years ago.¹⁰

Too often this simply means biologising today’s common sense by projecting it back onto the distant past. Religion is considered innate, like war, private property, sexual inequality, social hierarchies and markets in goods, labour and services: an unmistakable ideological echo of natural theology and thinkers as diverse as Thomas Malthus, William Paley and Tom Paine. I am equally reminded of Edmund Burke, the apostle of modern conservatism. “We know, and - what is better - we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society ... we know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by constitution a religious animal,” he asserted with the smug self-confidence one would expect from a man who defended the “virtues” of property, aristocracy, prejudice and the Anglican church.¹¹

Not that neo-Darwinists universally fawn before the market, advocate the strong state or extol the stabilising role of religion. A good number are militant atheists and would consider themselves to be on the left. More to the point, when it comes to explaining religion, while there is money-making charlatanry, vulgar materialism and sheer nonsense in spades, there is honest scholarship, worthwhile theorisation and genuine insight too. Wheat can be separated from chaff.

There are three main, often bitterly opposed schools. Religion as individually adaptive; religion as individually non-adaptive; and religion as benefiting the group. Not that a synthesis is impossible to achieve. After all, with the origins of religion, I am convinced that we are also dealing with the *transition* from nature to culture. A qualitative leap where we would expect laws to be superseded and yet continued.

Let us begin with religion as being individually adaptive.

Richard Klein and Blake Edgar reckon that a single, “fortuitous” genetic mutation occurred around 50,000 years ago - ie, in the Upper Palaeolithic/Late Stone Age - and that this completed the modern brain.¹² A “revolution” akin to the mental changes wrought by the mysterious crystal monolith on Moon-Watcher and other apemen in the opening chapter of Arthur C Clarke’s *2001: a space odyssey*. Klein and Edgar focus not on VMAT2, but Forkhead box protein P2 - a gene associated with vocalisation in extant human beings, apes, mice and song birds. A tiny

mutation in FOXP2 - there is a two-amino-acid difference between humans and chimps - triggered, it is claimed, the capacity for language, symbolic culture and religion, along with the ability to fashion complex tools, execute sophisticated cave paintings and mount large-scale hunting expeditions. A remarkably advantageous package which rapidly spread the altered FOXP2 gene throughout the population and allowed human numbers to increase in leaps and bounds.

In similar vein, Noam Chomsky has made the astonishing claim that the acquisition of language was instantaneous¹³ ... even that historically recent words such as 'bureaucrat' and 'carburettor' are encoded in our genes.¹⁴ In other words, Chomsky "denies the relevance of social factors even when considering language acquisition by the human child".¹⁵ Society and history are dismissed as being unimportant factors. Some kind of genetic mutation produced a language organ. Hence, as with Klein and Edgar, he sees language as essentially a function of the brain. Foolishly Steven Pinker, the experimental psychologist and highly rated popular science writer, hitched his reputation to this 'discovery'. Indeed he goes further. According to Pinker, language can be localised in a "cohesive chunk in the mind" and forms a "distinct piece of biological makeup".¹⁶ Suffice to say, what the Klein-Edgar 50,000 date meant for modern *Homo sapiens* who left Africa and probably managed to reach Australia some 60,000 years ago is left unconsidered or brushed aside. Ditto the wacky, sci-fi idea that all scientists need do is introduce the human version of FOXP2 into a chimp and that this would produce speech. However, a far bigger problem exists for the Klein-Edgar theory. As it turns out, our version of FOXP2 first appeared not 50,000, but more like 1.8 million, years ago and with *Homo habilis* or *ergaster*.¹⁷

More soundly, surely, Paul Bloom contends that children are "psychologically primed for religion" because it is advantageous in evolutionary terms to be gullible when listening to the stories (instructions) handed down to them by their parents: 'Don't stray into that forest because otherwise the jonjy wonjy who lives there will gobble you up.' Fear of imagined spirits keeps children obedient, out of trouble and alive.

In a similar vein, James McClenon argues that those possessing extra “suggestibility” had an evolutionary edge over the less suggestible. Eg, the risks of giving birth would be lessened if expectant mothers “accepted the efficacy” of the shaman’s potions, spells and spirit messages.¹⁸ Mortality rates were thereby significantly reduced. In other words, religion adds to reproductive success - and therefore the *propensity* towards religion is passed on in our genes.

Scott Atran plausibly maintains that humans were “naturally selected” for their ability to respond quickly and emotionally to the array of dangers they faced: “The evolutionary imperative to rapidly detect and react to rapacious agents encourages the emergence of malevolent deities in every culture, just as the countervailing imperative attached to care-givers favours the apparition of benevolent deities.”¹⁹ Religion is seen by Atran as a beneficial by-product of biological development - what Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin famously called a “spandrel” in an audacious borrowing from architectural terminology - that is a morphological, cognitive or behavioural contingent that acquires a rationale, momentum and consequences of its own.²⁰

Then there are those who consider religion maladaptive. Courting notoriety, as ever, Richard Dawkins goadingly likens religion to a dangerous virus. Smallpox.²¹ He also explains religion as a ‘meme’ - ideas are supposedly passed on in discrete parcels. Jokes, theories, rumours, religious doctrines, etc. Memes for him are the “new replicators”.²² Daniel C Dennett pugnaciously champions the exact same approach. Prepared to accept the role of folk religion as embodying practical knowledge, his main contention is that organised religion depends on “secrecy, deception and systemic invulnerability to disconfirmation”.²³

While harbouring a certain Pavlovian sympathy for the belligerent atheism of Dawkins and Dennett - doubtless due to a formative Church of England education - politically I recoil from their elitism. Eg, Dennett borrows the self-naming of “us non-believers” as “brights”, with, despite his feigned denials, the inescapable implication that believers are “dim and stupid” and therefore in urgent need of an emergency course of corrective

scientific instruction by an enlightened educator such as himself.²⁴ More, one has to ask, if it is maladaptive, why does religion appear throughout recorded history and in every culture, and why today are the ranks of devotees counted in their billions? The ubiquity of maladaptation and the prodigious numbers of the maladapted fails to add up in Darwinian terms.

Pascal Boyer does not necessarily accept that religion is maladaptive, but likewise explains religion through memes. Evolution gives us mental tools which serve a real purpose. However, these tools have been hijacked. Religion brilliantly connects with the brain's inference system, which makes "recall and communication very easy", triggers our mental programmes, connects with "our social mind" and even directs our "behaviour".²⁵ And, as such, religion spreads from one mind to another.

Other scientists, particularly those with a training in anthropology, take the human group as their starting point when dealing with religion. Ultra-Darwinists feel obliged to attack this as heresy. According to them, the gene and the gene alone is the unit of selection. David Sloan Wilson disagrees. He is one of those who advocate a *multilevel* theory of selection.²⁶ Equipped with a religious system of bonding, Wilson says, a group can achieve miracles, compared with one riven by chronic conflicts and exploited by freeloaders. Internal cohesion is markedly enhanced. Religious systems are passed down to succeeding generations not through genes, of course: rather stories told and retold around the campfire, adult example, childhood imitation, teenage initiation, collective dances and songs, and the thoroughly internalised habits, rhythms and tasks of daily life.

Richard Sosis sees religion as a *costly* signalling system.²⁷ In its own way a phenomenon not unlike the fitness-displaying peacock's tail or the gaudy constructions painstakingly put together by male bowerbirds. Individuals display their commitment to their fellows by being prepared to profess beliefs that are glaringly counterintuitive. The more opposed to everyday reality, the more effective. As is morally required, they also willingly undergo initiation - which can amount to torture - in order to become full insiders. Thereafter, as adults, they regularly give themselves over bodily to the collective. All in the name of the fantastic. A system of incentive and disincentive. Eg, on the one hand, only full insiders are

considered acceptable when it comes to marriage, and, on the other hand, would-be freeloaders find cheating hard to pull off. Signals demanded by the group are *very* real. Not to submit to the trials of initiation, not to join in drug-assisted, three- or four-day-long communing with ancestral spirits, not to participate in gruelling farces, not to pierce, scar or tattoo the body is to invite teasing, withering contempt, ostracism or worse. Such signals separate insiders from outsiders and therefore help reproduce social cohesion.

Robin Dunbar comes from a similar direction. Once again the crucial determinate is the group, but this time its size and complexity. Larger groups of hominids favoured larger brains to cope with the multiplying interactions and constantly shifting political alliances. Hence the “Machiavellian Intelligence hypothesis”.²⁸ Dunbar constructs an intriguing theory of what lies beyond “second-order intentionality” - states of mind such as believing, hoping and intending, and recognising this in others (and *their* recognition of it in others, and so on to the fifth or sixth degree).²⁹ In step with this expanding intentionality, he thinks we ultimately arrive at language, culture and religion. Religion, in particular, enhances group cohesion and guards against freeloading. Dunbar argues that the decisive change ought to be dated back to pre-modern *Homo sapiens*. They abandoned the time-costly social grooming of other great apes and took the road towards culture. Around 500,000 years ago there was certainly a big increase in brain size. From an average of 900cc to a near modern 1,300cc.

Apes

Let us examine matters from another angle. We shall move from abstract, sometimes highly speculative, models, and instead turn to gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos. The mental capabilities of our ancestors can surely be gleaned from scientific studies of our nearest living relatives.

Hominids are thought to have diverged from what are now chimpanzees between 4.9 and 6.6 million years ago³⁰ (it should be emphasised that all four great ape lineages continued to evolve, faster or slower, till the

present). However, biologically this divergence is quite recent. We still have some 98% of our DNA in common.

Fascinatingly - though, with a moment's due consideration, not too surprisingly - people find it possible to teach captive gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos to communicate using computer keyboards, postcard-sized pictures, plastic shapes or sign language. Our cousins lack the physical apparatus that enables us humans to speak the way we do. Their vocal cords are located higher in the throat and therefore cannot modulate sounds to the degree we humans can. Possibly the arrangement of the inner ear might also prevent them from hearing the full range of human speech. But obviously there is far more to language than physiology.

Humans regularly, almost effortlessly, deploy thousands and thousands of unique words simply by phonetically piecing together available vowel and consonant sound units (in English there are "approximately" 44 of them).³¹ A "digital system" and one which infant children instinctively soak up, master with alacrity and when necessary superbly modify. Furthermore, human speech is tokenistic because it has been decoupled from body language. True, we smile, frown, cry, laugh and sigh. Very important for inter-personal relationships. However, when it comes to communicating on an everyday level, getting over routine information, technical data, news items and in general participating in the socio-economic order, the main burden is carried by speech (and its spectacular augmentations - writing and print).

Vocalisation amongst gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos is typically spontaneous, energetically demanding and closely connected with display and emotion. An "acoustic system".³² Because they have been studied in extraordinary detail chimps can be used for purposes of illustration. Jane Goodall's books, above all *The chimpanzees of Gombe* (1986), remain of unequalled importance, in this respect.

Dominant males emit 'copulation screams' during or after mating. Often preceded by shaking nearby branches and foot-stamping. The 'pant-hoot' is the most commonly heard call and conveys food enjoyment, social excitement and sociability feelings.³³ There is extensive body grooming, especially of those at the top of the hierarchy, close allies or potential sexual partners. Frequently accompanied by lip-smacking or tooth-clacking. Then

there are the graded ‘pant grunts’ and ‘pant screams’ which submissive chimps direct towards those higher up the pecking order in the hope of warding off hostile behaviour or eliciting friendship. Simultaneously, ‘respect’ is shown by grovellingly presenting rear ends. In addition there are the excited ‘short barks’ made during hunts and the ‘tonal bark’ warning let out when sighting a large snake. Young chimps ‘whimper’ when nervous or separated from mothers. To reassure, mothers touch and embrace their offspring. Males collectively warn off other chimpanzees from the group’s territory with ‘turf screams’. At the edge of their home territory, or when raiding another group’s territory, ‘war parties’ will proceed silently. Male chimps have learnt to turn off aggression vocalisations because of well founded fears of detection. However, with very few exceptions, chimps cannot turn signals *on* without actually experiencing some underlying emotion.

Nevertheless, though restricted to some 15 distinct vocalisations and a similarly narrow range of facial gestures and body signals, chimps can problem-solve, learn to use crude tools, grasp symbols and have genuine, though rather trite, conversations with human trainers (however, and it needs to be stressed, rarely, if ever, with each other).

The Chimpanzee and Human Communication Institute at Washington University has been working with a small collection of cross-fostered, carefully humanised chimps since 1980. Individuals such as Tatu, Washoe, Moja, Pili and Dar were raised along the lines of deaf children and they managed to learn a quite impressive number of reliably observed signs - it is said around 150 of them in total. Ranging from what might conceivably be expected - colours, personal names, foods and smells - they also include ‘please’, ‘hurt’ and ‘sorry’. The chimps communicate with their handlers at a level analogous to young children. Other such attempts, experiments and projects have been organised with generally positive results.

In the wild, in their natural environment, gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos do not, of course, have benign teachers of American Sign Language available to them. As we have seen, they do have an innate mental *capacity* for language - albeit embryonic – but something blocks, discourages or diverts them from going in that direction through their own volition. So, instead of “looking for intimations” of human society amongst gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos, we must “look for its negation”,

because human society emerged out of the “consistent negation” of what existed previously.³⁴

Their brains are considerably smaller than humans - 400-500cc compared with 1,400cc on average. It hardly follows, however, that gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos should be dismissed as inherently stupid. What they need for reproductive success, what they are expert in, what they are driven by is defending territory, securing food, gaining mates, building alliances, avoiding dangers and protecting offspring ... and that most definitely necessitates a “highly developed” ability to deal with the Machiavellian politics of their own group.³⁵ Crucially the politics of sex. In short, a part-instinctive, part-learnt combination of intimidating physical force, deception, friendship, supplication, appeasement, kinship, etc.

Gorillas are organised into female troops, or harems, along with infants and perhaps a few tolerated beta males, jealously guarded, directed and ruled over by a single silverback male; chimpanzees into much larger, mixed-sex groups, with polygamous mating patterns under a constantly shifting hierarchy of dominant males; bonobos are matriarchal, with male status stemming from their mothers and internal conflict attenuated or deflected by promiscuous male-female and most crucially female-female sexual intercourse. Female pair bonding produces a powerful double act which can face down individualised males.

Despite those marked differences, males constitute the *leisured sex*. More, with the exception of bonobos, males aggressively establish their rights over fertile females and that regularly produces chaos in the group. However, once the female is no longer in estrus, the philandering male will instantly move off in search of new conquests. He will certainly not supply food for pregnant or nursing females. Nor will he provide for his offspring either. To simplify somewhat, sperm is what the male invests in the “propagation of the species.”³⁶ Females get pregnant, carry the growing foetus, give birth, breast-feed and care for the young till they are fully independent. In energy terms immensely costly. Females therefore constitute the *productive sex*.

Accumulated evidence clearly shows that the social organisation of the great apes is not an automatic product of genetics. Environmental factors play a big role - as they do with even the simplest organism. For instance,

the Congo river geographically divides what evolved to become chimps and bonobos a million years ago - with a greater abundance of food being obtainable to the south of the river's course compared with the north. The absence of gorillas in the south constitutes another factor. Evidently these two, surely related, factors had a profound effect, allowing a far more relaxed relationship between males and females in the south.

There is also well observed self-construction through sexual politics. That can certainly be said for bonobos. As a result, females lead a far less stressed existence. Even with gorillas and chimpanzees, however, the explosive power struggles between alpha males is far from the be-all and end-all. Parties of females briefly form and align themselves with related, aspirant and dissatisfied males. Bullying, faltering or otherwise unacceptable dominant males can thereby be brought to heel, overthrown or driven away.

Despite sympathetically documenting - celebrating - such counter-dominant behaviour, Christopher Boehm, an evolutionary anthropologist, concludes that gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos are "notably hierarchical".³⁷ Not unreasonably, projecting back, he makes the same claim about the "common ancestor"³⁸ of the African-based great apes (and that, of course, includes hominids).

The strong amongst the common ancestors - especially alpha males, but including high-status females - would harass, abuse and cower the weak. Moreover, male competition over food, social standing and fertile females would constantly tip over into violence and thereby disrupt, cut short or dissolve cooperation. That is certainly the case with gorillas and chimpanzees. Fieldwork leaves no doubt about it.

Boehm tellingly comments that, when it comes to history - ie, since the invention and adoption of writing - human societies have been characterised by hierarchical systems that are by "mammalian standards" staggering in their "degrees of despotism". Think Egyptian pharaohs, Roman emperors, feudal popes, Muslim caliphs, Inca god-kings, fascist dictators, Stalinite bureaucrats and billionaire capitalists. And yet, and yet ... Surviving hunter-gatherer societies show diametrically opposite features. There is what Marxists call primitive communism.³⁹ Eg, African Bushmen, the San. They are thought to have uninterruptedly inhabited the Kalahari sandveld area of

Namibia and Botswana for “up to 50,000 years”.⁴⁰ Though Bantu and white incomers have taken the best watering holes and killed off much of the game, though global capitalism surrounds and pushes in on them from every side, a fierce egalitarianism rules. Would-be despots are given short shrift. Humorous put-downs, walk-outs, constantly repeated levelling campaigns and if need be collective force to counter individual force. Those whom we should no longer call the weak *continuously* combine together to subordinate the strong to the group. Boehm calls the result “anti-hierarchy”.⁴¹

Everything tells us that the militant egalitarianism of the San and other such social fossils was once the universal human condition. And not just for some brief moment of time. But for many tens of thousands of years ... and under far better ecological conditions. Anthropologists, ethnographers, palaeontologists and other social scientists - or at least the fair-minded amongst them - share that opinion.

So we are presented with an inescapable conclusion. Put what we know about people like the San on the one side of the equation. On the other side *Homo habilis* and *Homo ergaster* and contemporary gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos. What follows? There must have been a breakdown, an overturn of the old hierarchy, a point of transition, a reorganisation that made us anti-hierarchical. What went before became something else. Boehm insists that egalitarianism had to be established in the first place through a revolution. The alpha male system was reversed. Subordinates, he reasons, rebelled against their subordination. And doubtless they had to do so in group after group and again and again till they were finally victorious. And from then on egalitarianism was maintained, or regularly re-established, through various culturally embedded mechanisms whereby the “weak combine forces to actively dominate the strong”.⁴²

Disappointingly, Boehm collapses into a technological determinism by way of explanation. Relying on teeth, kicks and fists is always going to be uncertain. Quite likely the weak would miserably fail against the strong and be humiliatingly seen off: that or they would suffer severe injuries on the road to a Pyrrhic victory. Even with overwhelming numbers it would take some 15-20 agonising, and hugely risky, minutes to finish off the group tyrant. But a well aimed spear or axe - say, while your enemy slept or was

otherwise unsuspecting - is an entirely different matter. Palaeolithic weapons shifted the balance of power against the strong. Or so Boehm contends.

Harman

Again, another angle. In *A people's history of the world* (1999), Chris Harman, editor of the Socialist Workers Party's journal, *International Socialism*, till his untimely death in November 2009, devotes his opening chapter to what he obviously considers to be the pivotal event in his epic account: the Neolithic 'revolution' which first happened in the Middle East, in the fertile crescent, some 10,000 years ago.

The quote marks are Harman's and he inserts them for good reason. The Neolithic revolution - weaving cloth, breeding cattle and sheep, cultivation of crops and a sedentary lifestyle - was, as we shall see in the next chapter, bound up with a social *counter*revolution. Technical progress contributed to the surplus product needed for the construction of gigantic monuments, professional religion and institutionalised warfare, but all this coincided with widespread regression, suffering and oppression. The health and fitness of the relevant population in general deteriorated. Human remains show signs of stunted growth, tooth decay and rickets. There was also the historic defeat of the female sex, as discussed by Engels in his *The origin of the family, private property and the state* (1884) and what we have seen Christopher Boehm call staggering "degrees of despotism".

Not surprisingly then, the "big changes in people's lives" brought about by the Neolithic and the first civilisations, are contrasted with primitive communism - a subject briefly treated within an 18-page prologue to Harman's main text.⁴³ To some considerable effect, he shows that capitalism and its warped values are a very recent phenomenon. Primitive communism is depicted as our *natural condition*. After all, as a mode of production, it spans at least 90% of human existence. During these many millennia there were, Harman says, no rulers, no bosses, no rich, no poor. People habitually cooperated, food was shared on the basis of reciprocity

and there was very little, if anything, of what could be called warfare. So no “killer imperative”.⁴⁴ We were not Cain’s children.

Nor was this egalitarianism the result of endemic scarcity, intellectual inferiority or wrenching dispossession by foreign invaders. In 1966 the American anthropologist, Marshall Sahlins, rebranded primitive communism the “original affluent society”.⁴⁵ Sahlins was, to his everlasting credit, responsible for bringing about a much needed paradigm shift. Old assumptions, including those held by Marxists, about a primitive communism of hardship, ignorance and so-called savages constantly being on the brink of starvation were overthrown. He collected, arranged and presented overwhelming counter-evidence.

Organised into small, flexible, loose, roving groups, hunter-gatherers have a lifestyle that is in many ways enviable. Necessary labour time is minimal. Say 20 hours a week. Admittedly, so too are material needs. And yet Sahlins showed that even today’s hard-pressed hunter-gatherers consume a marvellously varied, highly nutritious and well balanced diet. Above all, they have the individual challenges, sexual, kinship and friendship relationships and egalitarian disciplines that, when fused together, help make us human.

Hunter-gathering involves a broad division of labour between the sexes. Men do high-prestige, but sometimes dangerous, long-range tracking and killing of game animals (and the collection of honey). Meanwhile, women - because of their role in giving birth, breast-feeding and child-rearing - are mainly responsible for the short-range gathering of staples. Nevertheless, male supremacy is absent. Both men and women take part in making key decisions. On balance, however, women are probably the more influential sex, constituting as they do the functional and moral centre of the matrilineal family and therefore the group’s base encampments. Additionally there is collective child-rearing, cooking of food and special women’s knowledge. A multi-layered combination engendering a particularly strong female bonding.

Logically, if there was a Neolithic counterrevolutionary revolution, there must have been a revolution. And, of course, it is not just a matter of logic. A whole range of distinguished anthropologists, geneticists, archaeologists, palaeontologists, etc embrace the idea of the human revolution, according

to their own academic speciality and social outlook. See, for example, the weighty volume edited by Paul Mellars, Katie Boyle, Ofer Bar-Yosef and Chris Stringer - *Rethinking the human revolution: new behavioural and biological perspectives on the origin and dispersal of modern humans* (2007). It provides a broad overview of human origins research and, with perhaps only a single exception, its dozens of contributors are agreed: judged according to the relevant timescale, the appearance of human culture was a revolutionary event, not a gradual process.

So there is most definitely a missing chapter in Harman's account. His first chapter ought really to be his second. After all, the primitive communism that still hangs on in the 21st century, albeit by its fingernails - especially given what we know about gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos and what we think we know about our own immediate ancestors - must have had a beginning. A passing away of the old and a coming into being of something that had never been seen before: humans with language, symbolic culture and religion.

Naively - neither anthropology nor biology was his field - Harman regurgitated a stale account of increasing "cooperation" over two million years and how this slowly led to bigger brains, language, fashioning better and better tools and eventually the "ability to conceptualise about things which are not immediately present."⁴⁶ Of course, many animals are cooperative: bees, termites, ants and wasps are what sociobiologist Edward Wilson calls 'eusocial'. Added to which, they construct elaborate nests and possess displaced reference communication systems. So cooperation alone cannot provide an adequate explanation of what made pre-humans human. Nor can expanding brain size. After all, insect brains are tiny and there are relatively big-brained animals that are subsocial or semisocial. Eg, polar bears, rhinos, jaguars and leopards.

The fact of the matter is that Harman ignores, avoids, in effect denies the revolution that must surely have triggered what Engels called the "transition from ape to man". Instead Harman echoes the conventional, prosaic and thoroughly bourgeois theory of slow, cumulative, evolutionary change and ever advancing tools. Not something one would expect from a writer who established an enviable reputation for himself as a Marxist thinker.

Needless to say, there *is* slow, cumulative, evolutionary change. And that can include gradual increases in levels of cooperation and improved tool-making techniques. But, following in the footsteps of Hegel, orthodox Marxism has always emphasised that things develop through the struggle of opposites and mounting internal contradictions. Contradictions which at a certain stage reach the tipping point where an explosion, break or leap of some kind happens and qualitative change is suddenly released. Contradictions are resolved.

That is no longer a matter of philosophical argument, but hard, empirical science, which is backed up by rigorous mathematics. Hence phase transition, punctuated equilibrium, critical point, discontinuity, catastrophe theory, bifurcation theory and the like. All common knowledge amongst the educated public, not least because of countless popular science books. Harman's attitude towards the human revolution therefore constitutes what lawyers call a significant silence.

The anthropologist and political activist, Chris Knight, has written a book called *Blood relations: menstruation and the origins of culture* (1991). In this or that respect it is outdated - eg, subsequent to publication there have been further archaeological discoveries which push Knight's dating of the human revolution considerably back and away from Europe to Africa. Nevertheless, *Blood relations* is bold, panoramic and, in my opinion, easily the most persuasive account of the human revolution. A second, revised, edition is more than overdue. That or a reissue with an extensive preface. Like any great work there are gaps and unfinished lines of thought - doubtless they will stimulate scholars in the years to come. However, Knight has made the decisive breakthrough which anyone who wants to be taken seriously must develop ... or decisively disprove.

Building on the twin pillars of Lewis Henry Morgan and Frederick Engels, and owing an acknowledged debt to Robert Briffault (1876-1948), *Blood relations* synthesises many diverse ideas: Marxism, Darwinism, the encyclopaedic structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss, classic colonial anthropology, especially research into African and Australian social fossils, human origins studies and the insights of evolutionary biologists as well as the moralities and experiences of modern class struggles. Not that I buy into the sociobiology that Knight celebrates as the acme of scientific

achievement.⁴⁷ Specifically the proposition that animals are ‘gene machines’, mere carriers or servants of their genes (a proposition popularised, of course, by Richard Dawkins with his 1976 book *The selfish gene*).

Only a fool would deny the crucial, foundational role of genes when it comes to evolution. That goes without saying. But surely there is “hierarchical selection” at the level of organism, deme, species and clade too;⁴⁸ and other determining factors, such as random genetic drift, environment, structural constraints, contingency and interaction.⁴⁹ However, that quibble does not detract from my admiration of Knight’s book.

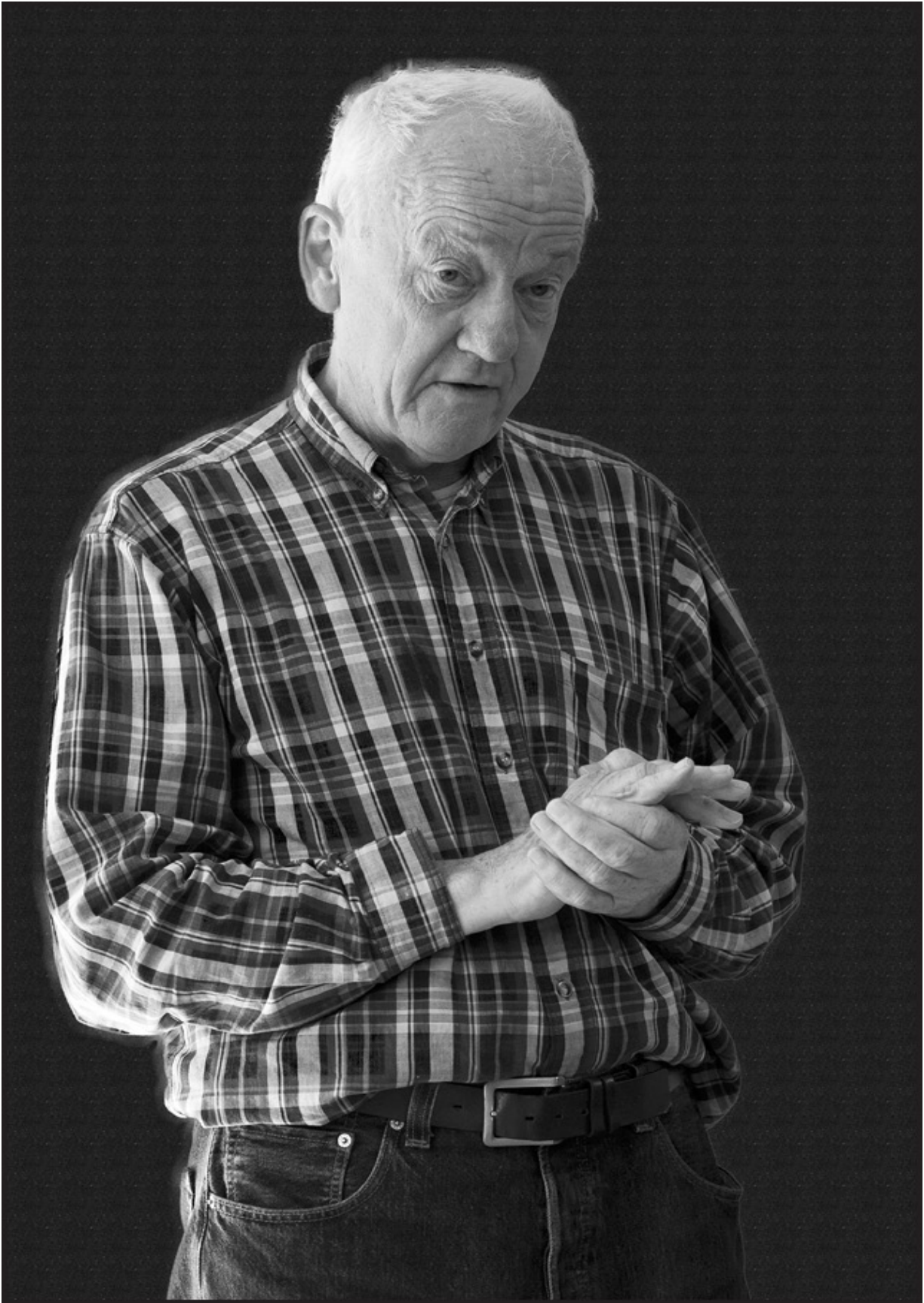
A short aside. Furiously rejecting Knight’s innovative application of Marxist theory, and definitely behaving as if some holy creed had been scandalously violated - and not just because of Knight’s praise for sociobiology - Harman decided that before the “rise of agriculture 10,000 to 5,000 years ago”, change was essentially “cumulative” and reliant on new tools.⁵⁰ Social labour is equated with tool-making by Harman. A technological, not a social determinism. And making worse what was already bad, his version of history was enshrined as mandatory doctrine - for any of the SWP’s ‘red professors’ to openly disagree in the 1990s was to risk or actually incur expulsion. A Lysenko-type moment.

Having silenced, driven away or purged its feminists, who were organised around the journal *Women’s Voice* a decade before, the SWP’s leadership did not take kindly to Knight’s *Blood relations*. Determined to draw an uncrossable political line against their feminist opponents, Chris Harman, Tony Cliff and Lindsey German stubbornly maintained that there was in effect nothing specific about women’s oppression. There was only class. In her article, ‘Theories of patriarchy’, German insisted that men do not “benefit from women’s work in the family (rather the capitalist system as a whole benefits)”; and nor is it true to claim that “men and capital are conspiring to stop women having access to economic production”.⁵¹ Doubtless such desperate constructions explain why Harman felt he had to flippantly write off “absurdities” like “class conflict ... between the genders”.⁵²

In his *Origin* Engels does, of course, compare the situation of women within the Victorian family to that of the proletariat and men to the bourgeoisie. He also stresses the importance of the biological production and reproduction of the species and the necessity of our ancestors overcoming male jealousy. Not that anyone should treat either Marx or Engels as biblical authorities.

That said, for the narrowest factional reasons the SWP machine was determined to bury the authentic Marxist tradition. The decision to close *Women's Voice* in 1981 had been bitterly disputed and internal debate spilled over into the public realm. Something confessional sects instinctively loathe and seek to avoid under normal circumstances. So when in 1991 the SWP's headquarters heard news that Knight's book was being warmly received in core branches, greeted as an exciting vindication of Engels and his *Origin*, alarm bells rang. Harman rushed to the library and quickly returned an 'expert' in anthropology.

As noted above, what he filled his head with was the standard evolutionary and technological prejudices of academia and wider bourgeois society. Though pitifully ill-equipped intellectually, politically he considered himself duty-bound to emulate Joseph Stalin and act as judge and jury over what is a scientific question.⁵³ With a chilling arrogance Knight's book was dismissed as "menstrual moonshine".⁵⁴



Chris Knight: building on the anthropological foundations provided by Marx and Engels.

It also has to be said that Harman cynically played on the blushes and unease caused on the economistic left by any frank, open, scientific discussion of menstruation, conflictive sexual relations and the formative vanguard role of females. However, he successfully achieved his objective. Discussion of Knight's book came to a shuddering halt inside the SWP. All that remained was blustering, sneering, babbling, sniggering, doctrinaire irrationality and in the end a complete inability to say anything at all about the human revolution.

Sex strike

As would be expected, since 1991 Knight's ideas have expanded somewhat because of criticism, further study and collaboration with others. Nonetheless, his basic thesis remains. The human revolution was a communist, counter-dominance revolution and, he maintains, was led by females. For the productive sex, the key Darwinian question was how to obtain the extra energy inputs they urgently needed by getting males to *engage in labour* and supplying them and their offspring. Concretely getting the physically fit, active, adult males, as a collective, to engage in long-range hunting and then handing over the kill to them. At an elemental level that involved sex for meat. An exchange which nowadays might conjure up tawdry images of prostitution. In fact, it was the exact opposite. Females had to seize control of sexual access and then redistribute and manage it through the system of group marriage. And to achieve that outcome the alpha male system had to be overthrown.

Incidentally, group marriage involves males regarding the corresponding females in another clan as *potential* sexual partners - the moiety. Once again, immoral only for those with a "brothel-tainted imagination".⁵⁵ Generations are married, with individual entry into the system coming through initiation. Hence the males of one clan call the females of another clan wives. Females too have many husbands. But who you actually have

sex with is decided by mutual attraction, courtship and negotiation with parents.

Via group marriage, the majority of males previously occupying lower positions in the hierarchy got regular sexual partners for the first time and the group got regular supplies of meat. A massive protein boost and therefore a win-win situation. Groping towards that end, females, “allied to their male kin”, had to go beyond Darwinism and invent culture.⁵⁶ Sexual pleasure, given or promised, thereby played a revolutionary role in transforming males from the leisured sex into the second productive sex.

Inspired by the great political and industrial struggles of the late 1960s and early 70s, drawing on world myths and the ritual practices of Africa’s living social fossils, constructing a convincing account of crisis-riven pre-human hominids, Knight introduces his trade union analogy. The picket line. Forming a protective, bodily fence around, or alongside, the fertile, menstruating, young female in the camp - the target of monopolising alpha male lust - other females put on a half-threatening, half-playful display.⁵⁷ The dancing, hooting, jumping, gyrating, laughing, gender-bending, ochre-painted ‘picket line’ broke through the fetter of alpha male dominance and took control of female sexual availability and therefore the production and reproduction of immediate life.

Females in the group *symbolically* synchronised their fertility and simultaneously exhibited themselves as something else. Wrong sex, wrong species, wrong time. They pretended to be male. They pretended to be another species. They pretended to be menstruating ... but forcibly insisted that they were unavailable and that their collective sex strike had to be respected by all. Displaying artificial penises, raising arms as horns and painting themselves with red, blood-like ochre. Menstrual blood, even in substitute form, was powerful, magical and sacred. The source of life.⁵⁸ A socially constructed, matrilineal, reverse-dominance burst through. And, having succeeded, the human revolution leapt from group to group.

In effect the female-led overthrow of alpha male dominance was the beginning of religion, or a human cosmology, which can still be found in the stories, practices, taboos, dances ... and cosmetics of social fossils in modern times. To this day red ochre is applied as body paint by women in hunter-gathering tribes such as the Himba and San in southern Africa.

Anthropologists call it sham menstruation. Women colour themselves before what can, for good reason, be considered a re-enactment of the human revolution. Eg, the eland bull dance involves women partying, displaying overt sexuality, pretending to be male, pretending to be animal and encircling a young menarcheal girl ... it can last for five days.⁵⁹ The message is unmistakable: the community is in charge of “sexual contact”.⁶⁰

Camilla Power, a colleague and co-thinker of Knight, astutely draws a line of continuity between red ochre - what she calls the first cosmetics - and today's beauty - ie, sex - industry.⁶¹ That aside, she predicts that, where archaeologists uncover the use of red ochre, this announces the existence of counter-dominance strategies. The earliest such red ochre is now dated at around 300,000 years ago.⁶² In other words, we are talking about pre-modern *Homo sapiens*. Around 120,000 years ago, however, the use of red ochre became ubiquitous. It was mined and appears to have been routinely passed on to others, presumably through gifting. Hence one can say with some considerable certainty that with modern *Homo sapiens* counter-dominance is an integral part of what Marx called our “species-being”. Humans are a revolutionary species.

Hence the claim that the first appearance of “religious ideologies” happened between 60,000 and 30,000 years ago no longer appears credible. Such claims linked religion to widely recognised religious objects.⁶³ Eg, carved figurines and cave paintings. Religion, however, does not necessarily rely on such things to be religion. The red-ochre-painted, dancing human body is both a religious subject and object.

As already mentioned, the background to Knight's account of the human revolution lies in the increasingly fraught situation faced by the immediate ancestors of our subspecies. We are talking about archaic *Homo sapiens* and *Homo heidelbergensis*. In Knight's model, the contradiction between exploitative males and productive females sees a growing disparity between potentiality and actuality. There was the long established making of stone hand axes, scrapers and the like. But male rivalry, selfish individualism and outbursts of terrifying competitive violence makes extended cooperation impossible. Hence no language, no egalitarianism, no religion, because all

such phenomena flow from, and rely upon, a definite level of social solidarity and trust.

As Engels recognised, the break with alpha male domination “was the first condition” for modern humans.⁶⁴ His remarkable reconstruction of ancient history, *The origin of the family, private property and the state* quickly came to be regarded as a Marxist classic.* Mistaken though he was in some of his conceptions, choice of data and conclusions – inevitable, given that he was writing in the late 19th century and therefore reliant on an undeveloped archaeology, anthropology and primatology - Engels was capable of the most penetrating insights. Eg, the human revolution produced what he called “primitive communism”. It can usefully be added that a good case can be made for “our ice-age fellow humans”, the Neanderthals, too.⁶⁵ Seemingly entirely apart from out-of-Africa humans,⁶⁶ at least for some of them, at least for some of the time, Neanderthals appear to have arrived at something closely approaching, or closely resembling, the human revolution. Eg, black, red and yellow pigments have been found at Neanderthal sites. The general opinion is that they too used it as body paint.⁶⁷ Camilla Power sees Neanderthal populations as oscillating between alpha male domination and a tentative egalitarianism, depending on shifts in climatic conditions.⁶⁸

*Engels based himself in no small part on what is now commonly called Marx’s *Ethnological notebooks*. Marx was a voracious reader. He was also in the habit of putting down extensive extracts of what he had read into notebooks. They were accompanied by pithy comments and possible lines of thought. In this case, centrally, there is a synopsis, and rearrangement, of Morgan’s *Ancient society*. There were, however, comments on other authors, observations and wider thoughts on anthropology (see L Krader [ed] *The ethnological notebooks of Karl Marx* Assen 1972). One must presume that Marx was planning to incorporate his anthropological studies into the greater *Capital* (perhaps book four on the state); that or he was thinking about an entirely separate work along the lines of Engels and his *Origin*.

Anyhow, by symbolically locking the female menstrual cycle and the phases of the moon into a monthly re-enactment of the original human revolution, primitive communism was framed, celebrated and reasserted. There being, of course, an unmistakable relationship, a close correlation, between the female monthly cycle and that of the moon. Indeed, the life of the primitive communist community moved according to a female-driven, on-off lunar rhythm.

Let us begin with the 'on' from the male point of view.

With the full moon, men were temporarily separated off from their wives and sent hunting for big-game animals. The productive phase of the primitive communist order. A bright moon provides the best hunting conditions for humans (hence the hunter's moon). In the tropics the searing heat of the midday sun drains energy and can prove exhausting. Moonlight extends the working day. Hunters can both keep cool and keep track of intended prey. And because we lack nocturnal vision a bright moon has another advantage. Dangerous predators can be spotted and avoided ... or sent packing.

Now the 'off'. Having returned to the campsite with raw meat, roughly to coincide with the full moon, there is cooking, feasting, dancing, ceremony, story-telling and love-making. For a fortnight men become husbands, women wives (hence the honeymoon). The phase of consumption. But with the last quarter of the waning moon the system switches. Women's solidarity is back 'on'. Darkness is considered particularly sacred. Collectively the women become sisters, ritualistically making themselves inviolable. They seclude themselves from their husbands. Meanwhile the men are obliged to leave their wife's household and become brothers and hunters again.⁶⁹

The language of revolution

Let us return to language: to work as a means of communication - for that is surely what it is - the collective must be prepared to go along with what is symbolic, tokenistic or purely fictional. Unlike the limited, but honest body language and sound signalling of other great apes, including, one presumes, our immediate ancestors, the unlimited universe of words has in and of itself no essentially honest meaning.

Words are arbitrary. Made from syllables effortlessly spun together in the head and let out through vocal cords as modulated air. As they tumble out, words have to be interpreted, weighed and judged: reliable or suspicious, biased or generous, muddled or clear, tedious or inspiring. But, strung together, words communicate in astounding abundance.

Before the human revolution, chronic internal conflict and individual mistrust prevented such embryonic abilities reaching critical take-off point. There are instances of symbolic or counter-reality signalling. Eg, the young engage in play. Mock fights between immature chimps normally result in not the slightest nick. There is an unwritten agreement on both sides not to hurt. A co-conspiracy. Each side holds back. They pretend. But, come adulthood, and with it sexual rivalry, play between adult males ceases. Turns into its opposite. Becomes ferociously real. Competition therefore stands in “antagonistic” contradiction to cooperation. A profound observation made by Engels.⁷⁰

Hominids began as a barely detectable evolutionary twig which diverged from what was itself a minor branch of evolution: the first, incredibly rare and fragmentary hominid fossils date from 6-7 million years ago. The entire clade occupied a marginal, often very fraught, ecological niche. Searching out fruits, grains, roots, eggs, nuts and insects; catching the occasional lizard, fish, small mammal and bird; scavenging from the kills of those higher up the food chain ... and yet also being a source of prey. Part of the “right dribble” towards complexity - the mass of life being banked up on what Stephen Jay Gould called the left wall of “minimal complexity”, which is dominated by microbes⁷¹ - in terms of biomass hominids were pretty unsuccessful. Numbers are estimated to have swung between 100,000 and 10,000 - depending on fickle conditions. Low points clearly indicated that they constituted what nowadays would be designated an endangered species.

Apart from the earliest examples, hominids walked upright. Not on all fours. Thereby they fortuitously freed hands for other uses. Stone tools begin to appear in the archaeological record some 2.5 million years ago and even the crudest flint axe puts the best efforts of chimps to shame. There must also have been other tools, such as digging sticks, carrying slings, cups and baskets of one kind or another, which do not survive in the record.

About 1.8 million years ago, various hominids managed to find their way out of Africa and into Eurasia. They rapidly spread along coastal and river routes. By around 750,000 years ago, there is clear evidence of the use of fire. That meant cooked meat, light, warmth and safety ... and the deliberate burning of bush and forest cover. Yet, despite such unprecedented

achievements, hominid species went extinct one after the other. Technical prowess should not be equated with biological success. *Homo habilis*, *Homo erectus*, *Homo ergaster*, *Homo neanderthalis*, etc, etc all winked out of existence. *Homo sapiens* is the sole survivor of the hominid family. And it has to be said that there is no reason to suppose that we would not have gone the same way too. If, that is, it had not been for the human revolution, which put our ancestors on the road to where we now dominate the planet and carry our unprecedented responsibilities for its future.

Knight well-foundedly reasons that bigger brains and extended childhood must have put a huge additional burden on females (even with the help of their sisters and mothers).⁷² *Homo heidelbergensis* brain size ranged from 1,000 to 1,400cc. Then there were the physical strains associated with the long months of pregnancy and the need to secure increased nutrition, especially when breast-feeding. Modern females require about 300 extra calories each day during the final six months of pregnancy. This raises the total to about 1,900-2,500 calories daily. That roughly amounts to a calorific input amounting to an additional 15% - a statistic which in prehistoric times could well separate life from death.

The agony, trauma and dangers of delivering babies with enlarged skulls is well known (bipedalism requires that the legs be close together, to avoid having to walk with a waddle, and therefore a *narrow* birth canal). Death of child and/or mother was a sadly frequent event until modern times. And even after the trials of pregnancy and giving birth, the infant must be breast-fed and carried on hip or back up to the time when they have properly learnt to walk. Not that juveniles are fully independent. They have to be cared and provided for till they are aged perhaps 13 or 14. And there is every chance of another pregnancy and having to simultaneously cope with two or three children with various degrees of dependence. Meanwhile there are the disruptive, exhausting and highly risky seasonal group treks to the next encampment. There must have been a particularly high death toll among young children and nursing mothers.

And, remember, in Knight's model all of this was without any substantial input from males. The philanderer supplies sperm. Little more. Indeed, rivalry meant males hobbled their own potentiality. A dominant male would

be more than reluctant to leave a fertile female in order to embark on a long-distance hunt with other males.

Unlike with chimps, bonobos and gorillas, his only clue that a female is soon to be fertile is that she menstruates. No outward swelling or coloration telling him the right time to mate. Hominid females concealed their fertility and that probably gained them extra male attention and, albeit temporarily, extra supplies. The result, however, was that the dominant male was in all likelihood less mobile than he might otherwise be. He could not possibly trust those males who remained in the camp: juveniles, the temporarily or permanently injured and elders. Instead he would seek an *extended* sexual monopoly. Alpha males therefore aggressively compete, fend off rivals and stand guard over fertile females for some considerable time. Cooperation - including over the supply of food through collective effort, crucially meat - was correspondingly impoverished.

Bigger brains and an extended childhood are massively costly in energy terms, but doubtless conferred certain evolutionary advantages. Almost certainly enhancing female cooperation. But male jealousy, aggression and selfishness constantly cut short, prevented or sabotaged cultural developments, such as language. More than that, male competition, and gross over-exploitation of females, pointed to species extinction.

Picket line

Of course, the 'wrong sex, wrong species, wrong time' ritual was transparently false at one level. But the ritual invited, demanded, that the whole group go along with the deception. Males were expected to play along with the scrambled signals, the theatrical lie, and banish all disbelief. Eg, females are male, are animals and all of them are fertile. And instead of courting, targeting, singling out the genuinely fertile female in the camp, males had to respect their picket line.

Those tempted not to go along with the rules of the game faced not only a united picket line of females. They faced the majority of males too. The other males had a real interest in supporting the picket line, not least because of the system of group marriage associated with the revolutionary order. Alpha males therefore faced impossible odds and would have agreed

in the end to embrace the pleasures, discipline and ethics of egalitarian communism. The leap into symbolic culture thereby created anti-hierarchy by subordinating and integrating the alpha male into the collective. New patterns of the family, new ways of thinking, new forms of communication and a new mode of production followed. Indeed, I think we can hazard to say that the human revolution *must* have been associated with speciation.

Male jealously met a stronger force in collective interest. Now males had to deliver meat if they were to gain access to females. They were expected to show their worth as husbands by success in hunting. Hence alpha males no longer stayed put in the camp in order to monopolise fertile females. Males could at last fully cooperate with each other in hunting, fundamentally because of the socially constructed level of trust released through the monthly female picket line and sex strike.

Husbands were obliged by custom to bring the raw meat to their wives and through them it was distributed to children, parents and other relatives. Women did the cooking. There was, it should be pointed out, a taboo against males consuming their own kills.

Always contested, doubtless sometimes losing momentum, occasionally thrown back, but out of necessity always driven on and on, the results of the human revolution were spectacular for the species. Inputs of protein shot up. Population numbers soared. Life expectancy increased. So did areas of habitation. Maybe 80,000 years ago there was the second 'out of Africa' movement into Asia, from which all modern non-Africans are descended. Above all, however, through the revolutionary order established by females, there was the beginning of language. Knowledge thereby passes down from generation to generation and steadily accumulates. Inevitably, not least to make it memorable, this is given the form of religious rituals and stories. Religion is thus both an unwritten rule book governing social relations and an invaluable ally in productive activity.

Amongst primitive communist peoples, religion is a magico-symbolic system for the *relevant*, but unavoidably distorted, understanding of, and interaction with, nature. Religion is therefore a thoroughly practical matter. It must have seemed possible to control, or influence, real things through ritual and the recurring pattern of collective religious activity. The fantastic stories - told and retold - and the constantly recurring warp and weave of

ceremony find their validation in the real world. Humanity attempts to find itself by projecting itself onto outer reality: anthropomorphism.

Religion was also the handmaiden of science. Nature is *usefully* imagined as full of spirits and open to human persuasion. Rain, the seasons, the return of migrating herds of wild animals, female fertility are assured by performing certain fixed rituals. By slotting these rituals into the dimly observed pattern of nature, the wish duly becomes part of a chain which leads to fulfilment. Eg, do your rain dance just prior to the rainy season, pray before daybreak for the sun to rise. Projecting itself as the cause, humanity feels its way into nature and comes to know its own immediate environment. Religion and religious practices thereby draw ever closer together with nature. This eventually gives rise to calendars, astronomy and mathematical calculation.

The great mother and other lesser ancestors are said to remain alive in the nether world and can choose to intervene in this one - therefore they have to be kept happy and can be appealed to for help and advice. The immortality of the dead is once again fantastic reality. The living owe what they have in terms of productive activity and knowledge of themselves and the outside world to the “transmitted culture” from past generations.⁷³ This reality of culture and its importance is clothed in stories, dreams and ceremonies, and explained as the work of constantly recalled ghosts. These spirits combine various aspects of nature with human characteristics.⁷⁴ The ancestors behave benevolently or malevolently, not just because hope and fear are closely related cognitively in the human brain, but because life itself is full of unpredictability. Welcome moments of good luck happen. So does shit.

Under primitive communism, religion embodies the unity and authority of the collective. The individual personality, in terms of potential, is still cribbed, cramped and crouched. What matters is the cohesion of the group, the clan or the tribe, not the fullest development of each individual. Nevertheless, as emphasised by Scott Atran, there is a reciprocal relationship between the collective and the vital physiological and psychological needs of the individual.⁷⁵

Things change with the decomposition of primitive communism, the defeat of the female sex and the separation of mental from manual labour. Religion becomes the consciousness of a humanity that has lost itself. The

emergence of class societies - eg, the temple city, the warrior kingdom which raids neighbours and enslaves war captives, the tributary state - goes hand in hand with internal oppression and an exploitative system of religion. Religion is no longer indistinguishable from the collective: there arises a professional caste of priests whose prime function is to sanctify (or mystify) and thereby help to sustain and reproduce social stratification and social privilege.

In so-called Asiatic social formations, the king or emperor is deemed responsible for continued prosperity and the functioning of society. At first perhaps these people play a useful role in coordinating production and ensuring the repair of irrigation systems. However, that function progressively passes to bureaucrats. As it does, religion becomes ever more elaborate, so that it can act as a counterbalance against the masses, who are expected to survive on the barest minimum of subsistence levels. Because of his unique relationship to the gods, the monarch is supposed to guarantee the daily return of the life-giving sun and the seasonal rains or river floodwaters.

Religion demands that the people worship their parasitic rulers as if they were the producers of social wealth - everything is said to belong to them, because everything comes from them. Religion thereby becomes the inverted consciousness of this world, because human society itself has been inverted.

The priests of the ancient world were responsible for the growth of some real knowledge. For example, by the 7th century BCE, Babylonian priests could trace the course of the sun through 12 constellations of the zodiac and distinguish five planets from the fixed stars.⁷⁶ They were also able to predict solar and lunar eclipses. Yet, this ran alongside the elaboration of entirely illusory ideas. Eg, the search for mystical inner knowledge and the tendency to spiral off into extreme subjectivity, which, when pursued to its logical conclusion, arrives at solipsism. Objective reality is dissolved (if only in the mind) by the pure, white light of blinding self-obsession.

As 'instinctive dualists', human beings are prone to performing such flattering tricks on themselves - but especially those classes which have lost their functions, desperate religious sects and defeated political parties. Nonetheless, as Engels emphatically states in his *Ludwig Feuerbach*, "our

consciousness and thinking, however supersensuous they may seem, are the product of a material, bodily organ, the brain".⁷⁷ Needless to say, most modern neurological scientists agree. Though involving constant interaction with objective reality, including, of course, other human beings, consciousness relies on the sense organs of *discrete* individuals. Their culturally shaped, informed and filtered picture of the outside world - no matter how far society advances technologically - can nonetheless be warped or even completely turned inside out.

Matter exists as a unity. However, there is no automatic correspondence between consciousness, a property of matter, and the objective world of matter. People can convince themselves - through arrogance, ignorance or even in an attempt to escape intolerable conditions - that they, and crucially what they think, are the centre of the universe. Even the only thing in the universe - a revolt against an intolerable status quo. "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven," writes John Milton in 'Paradise lost'.⁷⁸ Of course, through trial and error people can also learn to think appropriately and therefore accurately, so as to distinguish reality from illusion ... and being fundamentally interested in and bound up with *practice*, that is what the vast majority *try* to achieve.

CHAPTER THREE

When all the crap began

Primitive communism triggered qualitatively higher levels of cooperation: language, totemic religion, myth, forward planning, art and long-distance hunting (the monthly female sex strike also helped calm male fears of being cuckolded, not least because the involvement of all able-bodied males in the hunt was a social expectation). So successful was the new order that population numbers steadily grew - and not only in Africa. Egalitarianism demonstrably worked.

Despite that, we now inhabit a grossly unequal society. A society far more polarised than anything prior to the human revolution. “Almost half the world’s population lives on less than a dollar a day.”¹ Simultaneously the richest one percent of adults own 40% of global assets and the richest 10% of adults account for 85% of the world total.² The United States alone boasts over a thousand billionaires. They “control more wealth than 90% of the US population”.³

As I have argued, logically, if humanity began as a revolutionary species, there had to be a turning point, a transition where revolution and egalitarianism gave way to counterrevolution and inequality. So where, when and why did “all the old filthy business” begin? (a phrase of Karl Marx’s - otherwise translated as “all the old crap”).⁴ Closely related questions I shall attempt to answer in this chapter.

Over the years the left has mainly got it wrong - badly. The nearer to the present, the less the excuse. The Levellers of the 17th century fondly looked back to the ancient liberties of their Anglo-Saxon “predecessors”.⁵ In that spirit the Russian Narodniks banked on preserving the peasant *mir*. Here was their native socialism. James Connolly touchingly portrayed pre-conquest Ireland as owned by its people who were “knit together as in a family”.⁶ Latin American anti-imperialists display the exact same kind of

romanticism. Eg, glowing references to “Inca communism” (which find eager sponsors in Evo Morales, Sendero Luminoso and Túpac Amaru).⁷

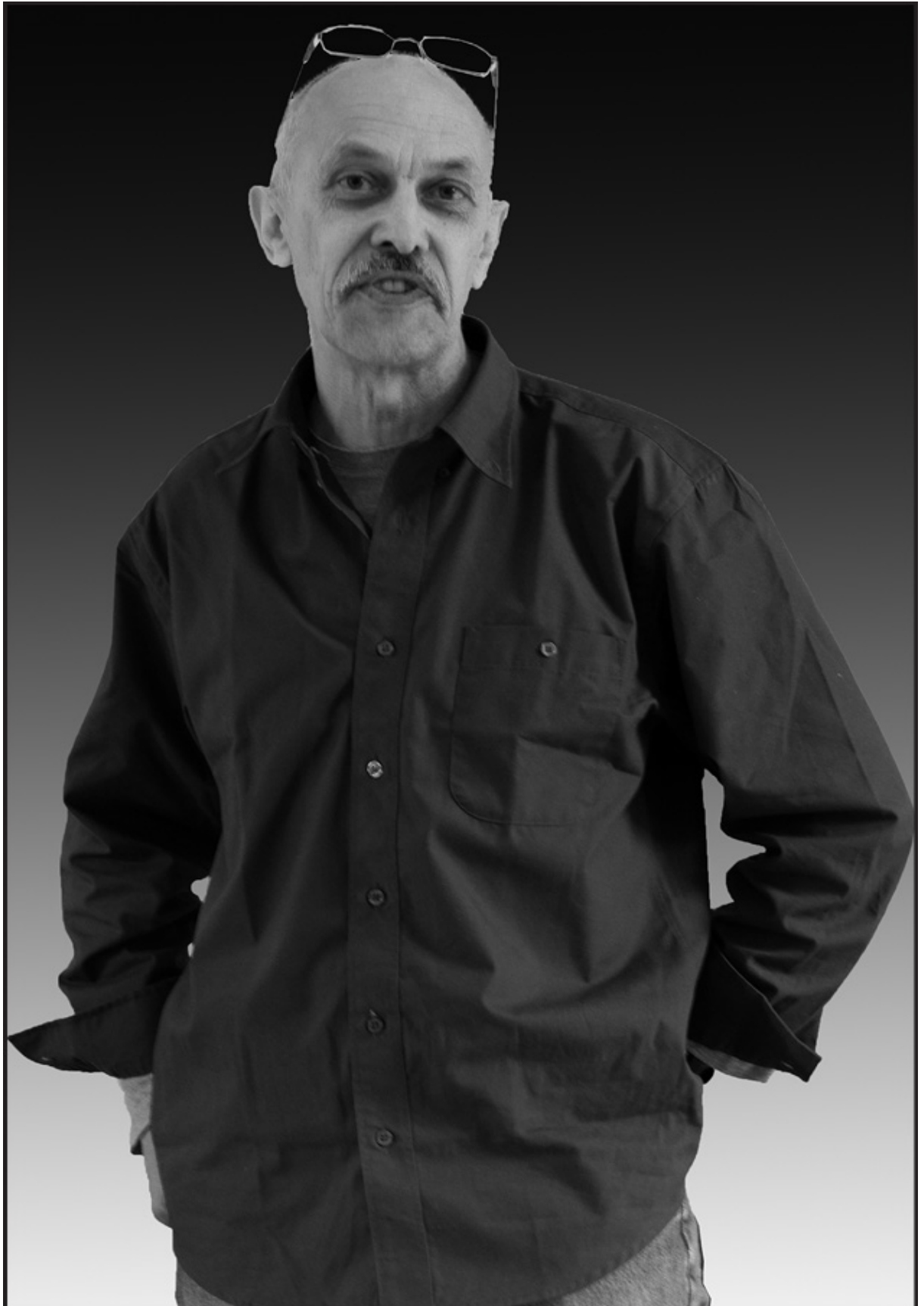
The radical anthropologist, Lionel Sims, rejects such misconceived accounts - they disregard “all of what anthropology and archaeology have to say”. There was, he contends, a counterrevolution “long before” any of that.⁸

I am entirely sympathetic to Sims and his argument. Indeed, I am convinced he is right when he says that there was a counterrevolution “long before” either European high feudalism or the rise of Spanish colonialism. That said, it must be appreciated that the prehistoric past is a highly contested subject, crucially in academia. There is no unanimity, no “all” about it. Eg, mainstream archaeology tends towards the utterly contemptuous when it comes to primitive communism.

Lord Renfrew’s paradox

Culture began, so we are told, with agriculture, fixed settlements, monumental building, social stratification and the vertical division of labour. Here was the *real* human revolution for *mainstream* archaeology ... and from then on things are reassuringly depicted as steadily ascending to ever greater heights of rationality, wealth and happiness. The Whig version of history. Neither primitive communism nor any counterrevolutionary overthrow comes into it.

In the immortal words of Colin Renfrew, aka Baron Renfrew of Kaimsthorn - former Disney professor of archaeology at Cambridge and director of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research and perhaps the most prestigious 20th century British archaeologist - “not a lot happened until the Neolithic”.⁹ A condescending attitude if there



Lionel Sims: a Marxist theory of the counterrevolution within the
revolution.

ever was ... and given his prizes, gongs, lordly title and honorariums, testimony to the poverty of contemporary bourgeois thinking.

Renfrew posits a “sapient paradox”. A supposed gap between “genotype and take-off”. Humans became visibly modern anatomically around 250,000 years ago - in Africa (Renfrew finds little to support the multi-regional hypothesis). However, according to our ermined professor, the cultural “take-off” only commences with the Neolithic a mere 12,000 years ago. Hence Renfrew brushes aside as “dogma” all theories which propose that the “great human behavioural revolution” began 100,000 years ago - and by definition any time before that.

The contention that *Homo sapiens* emerged with “full linguistic abilities, and with a different kind of behaviour” is rejected by Renfrew on the basis of what he claims is a lack of hard evidence. Reasonable, if true. But the undeniable fact is that human infants show a remarkable capacity for acquiring language. Many scientists, theorists and philosophers consider the learning of language an innate human quality. Hence the ‘language instinct’ and ‘language facility’.

More than that, throughout the world and throughout recorded history - no matter how ‘backward’ they are deemed to be - every human group exhibits a wonderfully creative mastery of language. For any doubters, it ought to be pointed out that linguists insist that *all* the 5,000-10,000 languages spoken in the world today are *equally* capable of transmitting the full content of culture. John Lyons writes in his university primer:

The truth is that every language so far studied, no matter how primitive or uncivilised the society using it might appear to us in other respects, has proven on investigation to be a complex and highly developed system of communication.¹⁰

While there might still be people living something like a Stone Age-type existence, Lyons finds that “there is no such thing as a Stone Age-type of language”.¹¹ Indeed there is every reason to believe that there never was - if by that is meant a halfway house pidgin or quasi-language. Our ancestors probably had a communication system broadly similar to chimps, bonobos

and gorillas ... and to all intents and purposes went straight from there to fully-fledged language. A dialectical leap from analogue to digital communication and simultaneously a dialectical leap from Darwinian evolution into human culture. Chris Knight considers song, laughter and play the vital behavioural portal.¹²

Unmoved by that prodigious feat, what commands Renfrew's admiration is not the hunter-gatherers of 30,000, 50,000 or 100,000 years ago. They almost certainly had fully articulated language, passed down powerfully explanatory stories from one generation to the next and had a real handle on nature (the group would have had intimate knowledge of their immediate environment, be able to predict the seasonal movement of animals, the coming of rains, etc). Despite that, such people, in Renfrew's opinion, ought to be studied by animal behaviourists. In effect, they ought to be classified as sub-human. Outwardly looking like us, they are not us inwardly. He goes further. As if from the pages of *Mein Kampf*, hunter-gatherers are ranked organisationally *below* the "social insects, including mound-building termites".¹³

Why such a derisive assessment? Apart from a high Tory affection for the British empire and its patronising attitude towards the 'childish' native peoples, there is the 'biological' argument. There is a seductive, widely held, but erroneous assumption that human intelligence undergoes linear progress and therefore, the further back one goes, the less intelligent people will be.

In my opinion, Stephen Jay Gould convincingly demolished all such claims with his brilliantly argued book *The mismeasure of man* (1981). They result, he says, from a "deeply held prejudice" - namely equating biological evolution (ie, adaptation) with intellectual progress and equating biological evolution with cultural progress. Note: evolution is not conceptually synonymous with progress.

The large brain is the biological *basis* for human intelligence and, with that, culture and cultural transmission. But, once culture and cultural transmission was in place it ran ahead with little or no reference to Darwinian processes and genetics. We know that culture can progress at extraordinary speed (it can also go into a tumbling reverse). Hence

differences between groups of people - ancient and modern - need to be explained in the realm of culture, not biology.¹⁴

The eugenical agenda of Renfrew and his ilk - conscious or unconscious - is pretty transparent. Flatteringly, today's humans might be placed on a higher plane than fellow *Homo sapiens* in the past. Yet, even if only by implication, the western upper classes are classified as innately superior. Gregory Cochran and Henry Harpending give this story a particular ethnic twist with the claim that Ashkenazi Jews have the highest IQ of any ethnic group because of their "success in white collar occupations" - a caste position with origins in medieval Europe.¹⁵ But it amounts to the same thing. Hunter-gatherers, past and present, are classified as stupid and innately inferior.

Nonetheless, we are extraordinarily similar to our Palaeolithic ancestors and to each other. Whatever else might be questionable about their overall methodological approach, the evolutionary psychologists Jerome Barkow, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides at least admit the commonality between prehistoric and modern populations.¹⁶ Contemporary human-to-human genetic variation is estimated to be no more than 0.5% (in other words, we are 99.5% "similar").¹⁷ There is every reason to believe then that intelligence is extraordinarily similar too.

Not that we should rely on self-serving IQ tests with their well known cultural biases as our criteria for judging. The human mind is transcendently complex. The "highest product of matter" (Lenin). To reduce this unique marvel of nature to Gradgrindian numbers like weight or height is Mickey Mouse, not serious, science. Intelligence is used to solve manifold problems, to exploit manifold circumstances, to achieve manifold ends. Certainly intelligence is a particularly human way of dealing with the environment.

Not surprisingly Renfrew admires those societies which built temples, palaces and pyramids: eg, the mega-constructions of "Teotihuacán in Mexico, Giza in Egypt or Ur in Iraq, or indeed Stonehenge".¹⁸ In his reckoning, fully articulated language comes about with the Neolithic (beginning in the fertile crescent of the Middle East and the Indus valley

roughly 12,000 years ago). Presumably it then trickled down to benighted hunter-gatherers from the villages and towns of class society.

Hence what *archaeologically* establishes, what *archaeologically* sustains, what *archaeologically* vindicates Renfrew's "deeply held prejudice" is a vulgar materialism: ie, the self-evident fact that hunter-gatherers leave behind the lightest of footprints. They go from here to there during the course of the year and generate precious little material detritus: baselessly interpreted as indicating cognitive inferiority.

Apart from exceedingly rare human skeletal fragments, the odd jumble of butchered animal remains, occasional barely detectable campsites and a limited range of stone tools, their Palaeolithic counterparts offer next to nothing that can triumphantly be unearthed and put on media-grabbing display. Hence, the lack of interest in prehistoric hunter-gatherers by archaeologists who presumably aspire to be celebrated alongside Heinrich Schliemann, Arthur Evans and Howard Carter.

Engels and the counterrevolution

Using the studies of Lewis Henry Morgan¹⁹ and other anthropological specialists, undertaking his own historical researches and bringing to bear the dialectical and materialist method, Engels successfully located the human revolution in its essentials. An event - albeit possibly spread over thousands of years - which resolved the contradiction between the "jealousy of the male" and the group or collective. What he called the "horde".²⁰ Engels shows a corresponding ability to locate the essential conditions which made the counterrevolution. In the last analysis, he roots both revolution and counterrevolution in two main determinates



War began with the Neolithic and private property.
: the production and reproduction of the means of subsistence (“food, clothing and shelter”) and the production and reproduction of human beings themselves (the “family”).²¹

Let us revisit Engels’s argument (and where necessary see how it stands up in light of contemporary research and theory). Engels situates the counterrevolution against egalitarianism in the Neolithic and the seemingly benign conditions brought about by the “domestication of animals and the breeding of herds”.²² He is convinced that before this epochal shift hunter-gatherers lived a noble life, but often stood on the edge of starvation. Periods of plenty alternated with periods of famine. Infanticide, premature death, malnutrition and group extinction were presumed to be common occurrences.

The Neolithic provided a permanent surplus product for the first time. From here Engels reasons that the private ownership of herds “must have developed at a very early stage”. Given the sexual division of labour, those owners would doubtless be male. They were the hunters, the providers of

meat. Obviously cattle originated in their sphere. From the growth of male-owned herds - and thus the growth of private property - Engels derives the appearance of war, slavery, the state and the patriarchal family.

What was the first form of private property must also have been the first form of theft. Opposites which, of course, constitute a single whole. Grazing lands, watering places, cattle themselves would have constantly been fought over, not least due to the social power they conferred. Private property therefore leads to war. Archaeologists find evidence of violence: eg, enlodged spear blades and arrow heads in human remains, which first appear alongside “the emergence of leaders” in the Mesolithic, but especially with the Neolithic.²³ Hastily dug pits in which massacre victims were unceremoniously dumped have been found. For instance, in 1983-84 excavators uncovered a “communal grave containing the remains of 34 individuals” dating from around 5,000 BCE. Bodies were “piled on top of one another and all having suffered a violent death”.²⁴

War captives come as a by-product of war. Instead of being summarily butchered, they were more and more enslaved: males used as routine labourers and to tend ever expanding herds; females as cooks, nurses, weavers, etc (or with the most attractive as second wives, concubines, prostitutes, etc). It was quickly realised that their work produced a surplus. What slaves delivered to their masters proved to be worth considerably more than required for their maintenance. Subsequently, war became a means of gaining slaves. War captives were no longer a by-product of war, but became one of its prime aims. People were stolen and traded because they could be exploited. Such were the beginnings of civilisation.

The greater the number of slaves, the more society cleaved into classes. The ownership of slaves fouls, perverts, corrupts all traditional relationships. A few get richer and richer. Meanwhile, the mass of people are steadily reduced to a position that approached or was barely distinguishable from servitude. And, once society is characterised by rich and poor, free and slave, oppressors and exploited, antagonisms become irreconcilable. The state is invented.

In essence the state consists of armed men, though it has other coercive adjuncts - in our day courts, judges, prosecutors, prisons, etc. The state exists to prevent social chaos and disintegration. Purporting to stand above

society, in actual fact it keeps class struggles within safe limits. Hence the state is the state of the ruling class and serves as an apparatus for dominating, subduing and if need be crushing the oppressed and exploited. It ought to be added, to the degree that class antagonisms become acute, and other neighbouring states compete, the state can assume such proportions that it swallows society itself.

What of the family? The old sexual division of labour remained unaltered and yet the new conditions turned domestic relations upside-down. Though women occupied the first place in the household, that very position ensured that their status declined compared with men.

The owners of herds (and slaves) grew ever more wealthy, influential and ambitious. Their wives benefited, of course, but they had no ownership stake. Inevitably the time came when men seized control over the household. No longer were they to occupy second place. No longer would they perform bride service. From now on men were to be in charge.

Rich men purchased wives from their fathers in exchange for cattle (bride price). And the women were treated as such. Henceforth, women became the “slave of the man’s lust, a mere instrument for breeding children”. A degraded, humiliated position only seriously challenged in the 19th century with the rise of the socialist working class.

Understandably, better-off males would have been strongly inclined to reverse matrilineal tradition. And inheritance, previously traced exclusively through the female line, was “overthrown” in one group after another. In its place “inheritance from the father was instituted”.²⁵ Herds were then passed down through the patriarch. As a direct concomitant the wife had monogamy imposed on her. Alone she was expected to be faithful.

Engels famously dubs this change the “world-historic defeat of the female sex”.²⁶ Hence the “first class antithesis” coincides with the “development of the antagonisms between man and woman in monogamian marriage”, and the “first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male”.²⁷ The antagonisms of class society therefore find cellular expression in the family.

A far-reaching revolution happened with the domestication of animals, polished stone tools, the cultivation of crops, a sedentary existence, pottery, etc - a technological package which significantly boosted labour

productivity. Nevertheless, this revolution allowed, paralleled, cemented a social counterrevolution. As one would expect, far from being simple, the transition to class society was extraordinarily complicated, with all manner of dead ends, reverses and hybrid formations.

One thing is quite clear, however. The Neolithic counterrevolutionary revolution resulted from definite social and material factors. Therefore, we can confidently say that inequality, male domination and private accumulation are not biologically determined - as claimed by Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) and his present-day pseudo-scientific equivalents.

Abundance and the good life

Nowadays, the idea that hunter-gatherers endure a life of extreme poverty is considered untenable by anthropologists. Engels was badly wrong here. Back in 1966 Marshall Sahlins paved the way for a thorough-going intellectual reassessment with his “original affluent society” thesis.²⁸

Hunter-gatherers should not be thought of as bourgeois ladies and gentlemen with inferior tools and lazy habits, who survive by no more than the skin of their teeth. A solipsistic notion derived from Adam Smith and his “economic man”.²⁹ No, far from suffering terrible deprivation, hunter-gatherers are usually more than able to satisfy all their needs. Sahlins boasted considerable experience as a field researcher ... and one can justifiably project from his contemporary insights directly back to the middle Palaeolithic. His full-scale study, *Stone Age economics*, was first published in 1974.

Hunter-gatherers have no interest in the endless accumulation of things. That would more and more hobble and immobilise them. Moreover, what they hunt, what they gather, is overwhelmingly shared with others in the community through what Sahlins calls the domestic mode of production and the system of gift-exchange. Suffice to say, hunter-gatherers enjoy a wonderful variety of foodstuffs - a variety only approached under capitalism with supermarket chains such as Tesco, Sainsbury's and Waitrose.

Indeed, so easy is their life that hunter-gatherers are able to devote plenty of time to relaxing, gossiping, telling stories, debating, playing with the children and all in all thoroughly enjoying themselves. True, they have very little in the way of possessions and no conception of landed property, but because of their Zen-like “want not, lack not” philosophy they are “free”.³⁰

It must also be borne in mind that the remaining African hunter-gatherer tribes we see today have often been pushed into dependence both by native and white farmers (who took hold of the best watering holes and combined to wipe out much of the larger local fauna, thereby making the bringing home of meat much more problematic).

We can, I think, quite reasonably infer that hunter-gatherers in the middle Palaeolithic lived the good life. In other words, under the initial conditions of primitive communism there was affluence (Marxists call it abundance).

As will be readily understood, Sahlins and his theory contradicts the one-dimensional version of history promulgated by vulgar materialism. The productive forces and their relentless development being venerated as the main, if not the sole, criterion for judging social progress. Any society which relies on stone tools is automatically ranked below one that glories in nuclear power stations, factory farms and space weapons. The centrality of human relationships, human development, human freedom pass unnoticed, are traduced, doubted or simply denied.

Two illustrative examples.

- First: *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism*, a Soviet textbook of the ‘red plenty’ era edited by Otto Kuusinen (1881-1964). Here we are meant to believe that the “primitive instruments of labour” provided “such a meagre subsistence” that there was “scarcely enough to feed each member of the commune”. The low level of technology supposedly produced people of a corresponding mental stature. They were “ruled by childishly naive religious ideas” and lived in “blind submission to tradition and custom”.³¹ Unlike *Homo Sovieticus*, of course.
- Second: ‘official Trotskyism’. It is hardly better than ‘official communism’. In his *magnus opus* Ernest Mandel (1923-95) depicts prehistoric people as entirely absorbed in “seeking and producing

food”.³² Taking for granted this premise - courtesy of highly jaundiced accounts written by European explorers, missionaries and colonial administrators - Mandel says that “primitive man” (sic) could not devote “himself” (sic) to any other activity. And, despite such all-engaging exertions, our ancestors apparently lived “on the brink of famine”, and that for “thousands of years” ... that is, until the Neolithic revolution came to their rescue. This, declares Mandel, is the “most important economic revolution man (sic) has known since his (sic) appearance on earth”.³³ Leave aside the sexist language - still the norm in most leftwing circles even in the mid-1970s, when my edition was published. The fact of the matter is that his argument was already discredited when the first edition of this version of his book came off the presses in 1968.

While Mandel celebrates the Neolithic counterrevolutionary revolution, the original human revolution simply passes him by. Sexual contradiction and sexual politics do not appear to have entered his mode of thinking about the prehistoric world. Nor seemingly could he comprehend the idea that people who possess next to nothing in terms of property can have full and rewarding lives.

Coevolution and the crisis of communism

Lionel Sims is convinced by the “original affluent society” thesis. During the middle Palaeolithic there was, he says, “abundance”. That said, the underlying condition which sustained primitive communism was the existence of teeming herds of large animals: eg, elephant, zebra, wildebeest, buffalo, giraffe, hippo and antelope. Through coordinated, long-distance hunting expeditions they provided the meat in plenty which made primitive communism hugely advantageous ... and not only for the cohesion of the group, but for the well-being of each and every constituent individual too.

In general, such animals and humans unproblematically coexisted. While hunting techniques slowly improved, there evolved a corresponding instinctive, or quickly learnt, mistrust of humans. Hence humans and

megafauna (an animal weighing over 100lbs) not only coexisted: they coevolved. The hunting of hunters and the reproduction of the hunted proceeded in rough equilibrium.

However, as modern *Homo sapiens* spread out from Africa into Palestine and the Arabian peninsula around 80,000 years ago, then headed into southern Asia, south-east Asia and China, then into Australasia some 60,000 years ago, then into Europe 45,000 years ago, into the Americas 20,000 years ago, finally reaching the Tierra del Fuego tip of South America around 10,000 years after that, problems mounted up. The relationship between hunted and hunters proves unsustainable. Consumption eats into reproduction to the point of wide-ranging animal extinctions. Primitive communism therefore increasingly malfunctions.

Numerous authors have sought explanation for mass animal extinctions in climate change. Continents drift and weather patterns shift with global wobbles, sunspots, etc. Every secondary school student knows that. As a concomitant, ice sheets advance and retreat and sea levels rise and fall. The last glacial maximum was around 20,000 years ago. There followed a global warming which 5,000 years later saw deserts once again expanding in northern Africa, central Asia and Australia. Eg, 7,000 years ago the great lakes of the Sahara were visibly drying up.³⁴ A to-and-fro pattern repeated over millions of years. The argument being that, as established habitats disappeared, so did associated megafauna.

How does that thesis stand up to criticism? Even rapid climate change, despite its appellation, surely moves far too slowly to see off most big land animals. Why should even a sudden climate transition - one taking no more than a few decades - result in their demise? Surely they, or at least some of them, would migrate or adapt? After all, they have done that over the dozen or so known ice ages that have occurred during the last two million years. And we are discussing continents with varied climate zones. Not islands such as Iceland, Britain or New Zealand. In short, climate change fails to convince when presented as the overriding explanation for the mass extinctions which happened in what were far removed times and places.

Take Australia.³⁵ The fossil record shows that its megafauna survived and evolved through numerous climatic shifts over 55 million years (following the Australia-Antarctica split and the break-up of the Gondwana

supercontinent). However, its big animals went extinct around about the same time in the late Palaeolithic - and not only in the dry interior, but in lush zones too, such as the south-east and New Guinea (joined to Australia in the Sahul continent during the last glacial maximum). Apart from middle-sized red and grey kangaroos and crocodiles, the megafauna died out in each and every climate zone (as did a whole range of smaller animals). Ergo, in explanatory terms, climate change surely fails.

Mass extinction of megafauna is increasingly explained by a combination of human entry and animal naivety. Paul Martin presented what he called the “blitzkrieg hypothesis” in 1984. From my admittedly limited reading on the subject I would call this the established consensus nowadays. In Australia and the Americas, megafauna are thought to have possessed no instinctive, or quickly learnt, mistrust of humans ... till for most of them it was too late. Hunters killed the unsuspecting, slower animals and on a huge scale. Easy meat. Incidentally, to this day in the Galápagos and Antarctic, birds and mammals which evolved in the absence of humans “are still incurably tame”.³⁶ If conservationists had not vigorously campaigned to get governments to agree protectionist measures, doubtless they would have been annihilated too.

It appears that within a few hundred years of the estimated time of human arrival, most of the megafauna were under severe pressure in Australasia and the Americas. Only those already evolved to move fast, fly or hide survived. The rest plunged into extinction. An observation, of course, not to the liking of those with a sentimental attachment to first peoples. Nevertheless, facts are facts. A whole range of animals, especially the largest - ie, those that could feed the most people with the least effort expended by hunters - died out in a remarkably short period of time.

Do not imagine that each and every individual animal was killed, butchered, cooked and eaten. Rather, hunting rates overtook reproduction rates - and perhaps only by a narrow margin at that. It might be assumed that there would be nothing more threatening than lowering population densities. Overhunting can, though, tip what is often a delicate balance and bring about a sudden, crashing, extinction. A phenomenon known in the relevant literature as “critical slowing down”.³⁷

Computer simulations produce “serious decline” and “eventual extinction” with predation rates of no more than four or five percent.³⁸ Carnivores who find their natural prey disappearing through over-hunting by another species certainly face doomsday - that is for sure. No doubt breeding patterns and other biologically determined forms of behaviour were amongst the contributing factors. Eg, in general, the bigger the animal, the more impoverished the environment, the slower the rate of reproduction.

In Australia monotremes, the diprotodon, zygomaturus, palorchestes, euowenia, eurycoma, etc, had all gone extinct by around 46,000 years ago (dates are far from certain). That is, big birds, big mammals and big reptiles. In North America a similar mass extinction was completed around 11,500-10,000 years ago. The horse, glyptotherium, musk ox, mammoth, bison antiquus, giant beaver, ground sloth, maerauchenia, mastodon, camel, etc, all disappeared. In South America the horse, ground sloth, mastodon, mammoth, camel, arctodus, etc, went the same way.

The *best* explanation which joins these widely dispersed mass extinction events is human colonisation. Hunters would stroll up to an unconcerned giant herbivore, like the eight-ton megatherium ground sloth, and spear the poor beast to death. In a similar manner, hungry European sailors exterminated the dodo when they landed to reprovision on Mauritius in the 17th century.

The influx of modern humans into continental northern Siberia likewise probably accounts for the extinction of the steppe bison and woolly mammoth around 12,000-10,000 years ago (a dwarf version of the mammoth survived on Wrangel Island in the Russian Arctic ocean and St Paul Island in the north Pacific, which were only colonised by humans a few thousand years ago).

In Australia, 93% of the larger mammals were lost with the coming of humans and this seems to have had far-reaching ecological consequences. Giant herbivores consumed vegetation on an industrial scale. The “continuous” wet and dry forests which covered thousands of miles in northern and eastern Australia were as a result variegated, full of open spaces and young growth. With the removal of the megafauna the undergrowth thickened, fallen leaves accumulated ... till lightning struck.

What had once been light and localised seasonal burnings were transformed into raging, giant, murderous bushfires.³⁹ Many medium and small animals were killed as a result ... to the point of species extinction. Moreover, with much of the flora reduced to charcoal, thin, ancient, dry, mineral-poor soils were blown or washed away. Australia's biomass underwent a severe crash. Fire-resistant eucalypts flourished and came to dominate. But they did so in an ecosystem *maintained* by Aboriginal fire stick 'farming' ... an eco-system sent further crashing down by European colonisation some 200 years ago.

If the optimal condition for primitive communism was the hunting of megafauna, their steady reduction in Eurasia and almost total elimination in Australia and the Americas was bound to trigger a profound social crisis. Exported versions of primitive communism became more and more prone to breakdown.

Our ancestors came out of Africa not only as anatomically moderns, but as a communist vanguard. They also took with them - as they moved along coasts, up river valleys and then into continental interiors - the hunting techniques inherited from Africa (deadly to all slow, flightless and naive animals outside the coevolved environment). We can surmise that groups would move primarily through division. Some stay and socially adapt: eg, turn to fishing or gardening. Others - perhaps the younger adults, those without children - head off in search of better conditions and maybe the old ideal.

Of course, that pursuit was sometimes more than well rewarded. At least to begin with. As humans entered new areas they encountered megafauna that they could kill with astonishing ease. Nevertheless, precisely because of that, the megafauna was either quickly reduced or totally destroyed. Superabundance gave way to chronic shortage. In extremis, cannibalism serves as a substitute means of obtaining protein (eg, amongst the Maoris the victims of war were a "prized source of food").⁴⁰

Such a model, despite being very broad-brush, has the advantage of both explaining the rapid spread of human populations (maybe at an average of one mile per year) and the *degenerate* forms of primitive communism still found dotted here and there throughout the planet.

Of course, there is degeneration and degeneration. Best habitat conditions plus the revolutionary conservatism of women - allied to their sons and brothers - can sustain something resembling pristine primitive communism. Eg, to varying degrees, certain tribes in the Amazon jungle still hold the land in common, give over what they kill to the collective and in other ways remain militantly egalitarian too. So, it must be emphasised, there is a dynamic relationship between objective and subjective factors which explain particular social formations.

However, in the most fragile, most rapidly deteriorating, most testing habitats, males would have reorganised themselves into much smaller hunting parties. Say from 20 to five. The extinction of the megafauna and increased difficulties experienced in killing even small animals would have provided an inescapable impetus. Obviously, the already discussed Australian land mass comes to mind (with the partial exception of west Arnhem land in the north-east).

Under such squeezed circumstances wives would have had to follow husbands - if they were to ensure meat for themselves and their offspring. Paradoxically, a *dependent* attachment which engenders separation. And not only of women from their mothers and sisters, but from matrilineal brothers too. Muscle in disputes with husbands is thereby lost. Hence distance renders ineffective a once key socio-political relationship. Roving family units come together in the tribal whole, but only infrequently - eg, the *corroborees*. Apart from such occasions, women could no longer call upon their matrilineal brothers for help. Nor could they easily return to their mothers. Female opposition to male domination is thereby undermined through loss of these vital supports.

The old social order brought out of Africa proved untenable in Australia. Atomised into small family units, women see their power shrink. Attempts to observe the monthly sex strike would have been rendered completely obsolete by the rapidly deteriorating natural conditions - that is for sure. The original social relationships being vaguely recalled in the dreamtime stories of the ancestors.

Men could no longer afford to hunt for a fortnight and then party with the women according to the rhythm of the moon. Hunting had to be done whenever the opportunity arose. And the kill would no longer be handed over to the wife's extended family. They were far, far away. Frequently,

however, the men returned to the campsite crestfallen and empty-handed. The guaranteed hunt had long gone. Though less problematic, gathering roots, fruits, nuts and bugs took considerably more time too; in the denuded environment the women and children had to range much further afield.

Men would have felt themselves compelled to act. And that is exactly what they appear to have done. To borrow a phrase, “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change” (Giuseppe Tomasi). A breaking through tradition within tradition is achieved by giving a new content to existing religious forms. To preserve the sacred rituals associated with social cohesion, men took over the symbolic role of women ... necessarily that involves oppression, albeit said to be for the common good. Nonetheless, men freely admit, at least to each other, that in the beginning women were central to the social order. That they had been usurped.

However, it was not only women who paid the price. In order to stand in for them - and display their commitment to their new role - men have to menstruate. Eg, an excruciatingly painful subincision was performed as an integral part of male initiation ceremonies over wide areas of Australia. The underside of the penis being cut “from the urethral opening in the glans to the base of the shaft where it meets the scrotum”.⁴¹ A kind of vagina in the penis results. Much blood flows ... and not only during initiation. Men bleed in unison from their penises and other wounds whenever tradition dictates.

Not that too much sympathy should be extended to the men. Any woman caught trying to discover their closely guarded secrets risks horrible punishment, ie, death by gang rape. Men are determined to retain their status as the ruling sex.

Cattle and the transition to class society

If men collectively managed to preserve social cohesion and egalitarianism - to the extent that was possible in the much reduced circumstances - the substitution of domesticated animals such as sheep and goats, but especially cattle, for increasingly rare megafauna allowed a small minority to elevate themselves above their fellows.

The domestication of cattle is dated to the early Neolithic: that is, approximately 11,000 to 12,000 years ago. From the fertile crescent and the Indus valley cattle herding then spread, through migration, exchange and emulation, over the ensuing five or six thousand years.⁴² Not throughout the world, true, but into Egypt, the Sahara, Sudan, Ethiopia, China, southern India and Europe.

Cattle served as a primitive form of money. Revealingly, the terms ‘cattle’, ‘chattel’ and ‘capital’ are closely related in Indo-European languages. Ownership of expanding herds generated a corresponding desire for numerous wives, luxury and power in the first ruling class. Suffice to say, for the great majority every advance of such wealth foreshadowed degradation: ie, fear, want, misery and overwork.

Doubtless new values, moral codes and religious belief systems helped galvanise the few into taking decisive action. Post-processual (interpretative) archaeology has in recent years usefully highlighted the role of ideas when it came to hatching the social elite and moving to agriculture and a settled existence (that despite its post-modernist associations and connotations).

Put in the words of foundational Marxism: “within the old society, the elements of a new one have been created, and ... the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions” (*Communist manifesto*).⁴³ Of course, ideas have a certain autonomy. There is never an exact correspondence between ideas and social conditions. There is a complex determination. Ideas are shaped by social conditions but they also *shape* social conditions.

Suffice to say, the consolidation of a ruling class did not neatly follow the hoofprints of cattle. The evidence we have reveals a prolonged, chequered and highly contested transition from classless to class society. There were a “variety of trajectories”, we are reliably told.⁴⁴ Archaeologists find what appear to be class societies alongside the continuation of hunter-gathering. They also find classless societies alongside newly domesticated crops and animals. So, while the rise of class and the rise of agriculture were closely related phenomena, they were not equivalents.⁴⁵

Monumental constructions doubtlessly announce the existence of an elite. Göbekli Tepe in southern Anatolia, as present knowledge stands, is widely credited with being the earliest stone temple in the world. Unmistakably grand and unmistakably the site of collective religious ritual, the whole site covers 25 acres and dates from approximately 9,500 BCE; that is probably just before full-blown farming cultures and somewhat before permanent villages, towns and cities. One can therefore infer that those who planned, constructed, ran and worshipped at Göbekli Tepe belonged to a transitional social formation which stood on the cusp of agriculture.⁴⁶ Thus far no evidence of domesticated cattle or domesticated cereals have been excavated. Despite that, slightly later sites in the region clearly show that people had started to raise sheep, pigs and cattle.

Because of its age and fame, Göbekli Tepe has been subject to much wacky theory-mongering: eg, alien builders visiting from outer space. Nonsense aside, let us begin by considering the geographical/ecological context.

The surrounding area lies north of the Zagros mountains, on the edge of the Anatolian plateau and between the upper reaches of two great rivers - the Tigris and Euphrates. At the time when Göbekli Tepe functioned, the whole region would have been green and fertile. There were fields of wild wheat and barley, numerous streams, stands of fruit and nut trees, and surviving herds of gazelle. Hence, Göbekli Tepe has, well foundedly, at least in my opinion, been associated with the original Garden of Eden story.⁴⁷ The book of Genesis specifically mentions the Tigris and Euphrates when describing the land of Eden.⁴⁸

As 'disguised history', the myth can easily be interpreted. While the lifestyle of hunter-gatherers was generally easy, fulfilling and happy, the turn to agriculture led to unremitting hard labour, inequality and a greatly impoverished diet (skeletons of early agricultural peoples show damage from being forced to adopt a constant crouching position and from mineral and other such dietary deficiencies).⁴⁹ Hence the transition from one mode of existence to another could be seen by those who experienced or could recall it, albeit via oral transmission, as a punishing expulsion from paradise.

Göbekli Tepe went through a number of design reconfigurations. However, the basic pattern consists of an inner series of T-shaped pillars arranged into an oval, the highest around nine-foot tall, which are surrounded by a series of high, circular walls with a maximum diameter of 100 feet. At least seven other walled and pillared structures have been located within the immediate site, all smaller, but clearly related.

Pillars are carved with abstract shapes and what are wonderfully realistic images of lions, deer, boars, foxes, gazelles, asses, birds and snakes. And archaeologists have unearthed numerous bones of wild animals - presumably eaten during communal feasts.

One can safely suppose a priestly elite, which not only presided over ceremonies, but the mobilisation of the population from the surrounding area. Constructing Göbekli Tepe took a lot of people a lot of time. It is estimated that “up to 500 persons were required to extract the 10-20 ton pillars (in fact, some weigh up to 50 tons) from local quarries and move them 100 to 500m to the site”.⁵⁰

As stated above, I think we must hypothesise a complex transition from primitive communism to class society ... a contested one too. There are signs, both negative and positive, of what has been interpreted as social resistance to the kind of elite that we presume oversaw Göbekli Tepe. Eg, Çatalhöyük (circa 7,500-5,500 BCE) - also in southern Anatolia, but further to the west. At its peak it is *conservatively* estimated that Çatalhöyük had a population of 3,500 to 8,000. Other archaeologists put the number at around 10,000 - though even the lowest figure is amazingly high, given the date. Çatalhöyük appears to be another example of a transitional social formation. Its people not only hunted and gathered; they tended herds and cultivated crops too.

Fascinatingly, those excavating Çatalhöyük - most recently Ian Hodder - have found no “evidence of large public buildings, ceremonial centres, specialised areas of production or cemeteries”.⁵¹ None of the 160 houses that have been investigated at the time of writing show any significant variation in size. The whole settlement consists of a “myriad” of tightly packed “small, mud-brick dwellings” - entered through rooftop skylights. And it surely follows: if you cannot prove that a society is unequal then it isn’t (here I follow the archaeologist, Norman Yoffee).

Ancestors were buried beneath the floors of houses. They appear to have been venerated religiously. Houses being regularly demolished and new ones built over the old according to the same design configuration. So houses were not only places to live in, but a means of “imagining, remembering and interacting” with past generations.⁵² Not that those buried in that domestic fashion are thought to be privileged.⁵³ Skeletons are not accompanied by jewels, weapons or other high-status grave goods. Nor do remains show discernable differences brought about through diet and lifestyle.

Given all this, there is every reason to conclude that there was no elite and therefore no classes. Nor, it is argued, are there overt signs of women’s oppression. Archaeologists have found numerous cattle motifs and clay figurines. When it comes to the human form, female figures predominate. The most famous being a fat, seated woman (a goddess?) whose arms rest on two leopards.

Çatalhöyük has been celebrated on the left as confirming the existence of a “Neolithic communism”.⁵⁴ Overenthusiasm perhaps. Despite that, given the model I am advocating, we can, albeit tentatively, postulate a popular *revolutionary* movement founding, or taking over the settlement by overthrowing an exploitative elite.

Because of the evidence - admittedly in the form of absence - I think the egalitarian claims made about Çatalhöyük ought to be accepted, however cautiously. The discovery of big temples and big houses in each of its “12 successive layers of occupation” would, of course, shatter the hypothesis.⁵⁵ Yet the fact of the matter is that nothing of the kind has been unearthed. Nevertheless, while the origins of Çatalhöyük remain murky, there are roughly contemporaneous settlements - populations were numbered in the several hundreds. They were, it would seem, dominated by a ruling class.

Çayönü is typical. The few top-range houses occupy twice the floor space of others. There was animal ... and human sacrifice. Blood has been extracted from a one-ton, cut-and-polished ‘offering block’ and Çayönü’s “gloomy” temple contains the remains of nearly 300 people. There is also evidence of what might well be class struggle. Around about 7,200 BCE elite houses were burnt and the main temple demolished. The site being

turned into a rubbish dump. A “new Çayönü” was built ... without mansions.

Bernhard Brosius has suggested that the social order established, or re-established, at the new Çayönü spread to places like Çatalhöyük and beyond that to the Balkans.⁵⁶ What this, and similar theories, point to is a prolonged period of intense class struggles.

It is highly significant then that Göbekli Tepe was not quietly abandoned and left to the elements. The whole complex was buried under 300-500 cubic metres of earth around about 8,000 BCE. An act of deliberate obliteration. The community would have had to expend a huge number of labour hours to achieve what was clearly a pre-planned goal. We might guess at one socio-religious system being replaced by another socio-religious system. The new wanting to blot out even the memory of the old.

Slightly later sites in the region have been located at Jerf el-Ahmar, Mureybet and Nevalı Çori. All destroyed or abandoned. And, of course, Neolithic megaliths occur elsewhere. In Egypt the 12 foot-wide Nebta Playa stone circle is dated to the 5th millennium BCE. At the time the area was not desert but savannah and contained a large wet-season lake. People tended herds of goats, sheep and cattle. Other, lesser known, stone circles have been discovered in south-western Egypt. Indeed, stone and wooden circles, long stone avenues and single standing stones appear in many places where Neolithic culture was adopted.

The British Isles, though more recent compared with Turkey and Egypt, are far from unique. However, not only are there an estimated 1,000 stone megaliths: there is an added scale. West Kennet, Avebury, Silbury Hill and Stonehenge in southern England are truly massive. According to estimates, Avebury henge took 1.5 million hours of human labour to complete. Dwarfed by the 18 million needed for Silbury Hill and Stonehenge’s staggering 30 million.⁵⁷

There are a wide variety of theories purporting to explain the origin and function of these Neolithic megaliths. I shall ignore the plain crazy. Instead, let me sample the plausible.

Klaus Schmidt, chief excavator of Göbekli Tepe since 1994, has suggested that it was the centre of a cult of the dead. Corpses were exposed on top of the big pillars till all flesh had been removed. Supporting evidence

is certainly there in the form of murals which depict twin sets of vultures descending onto T-shaped pillars. However, there is no body for them to devour. Schmidt's idea seems to be an obvious borrowing from the Zoroastrian towers of silence. Perhaps too obvious. Frustratingly for Schmidt and his team, the surrounding area has revealed no graveyards, as might be predicted.

Cult-of-the-dead theories have been used to explain other megaliths, Stonehenge included. However, in this particular case there are burials in and around the site (albeit few in number, they are male, and as shown by grave goods, clearly members of the elite). Despite that, the archaeologists Timothy Darvill and Geoffrey Wainwright, interpret the Stonehenge complex in an almost diametrically opposite fashion. Instead of death they see life-giving cure. Stonehenge was for them an ancient version of Lourdes. Perhaps another obvious borrowing.

People supposedly travelled from far and wide, not to ensure their place in the beyond, but to prolong a hold on this life. The smaller bluestones being credited with possessing particularly magical qualities. Supporting evidence is, however, rather thin: eg, the supposed "abnormal number" of remains found in tombs nearby which "display signs of serious disease" and teeth which show that about half the bodies there were "not native" to the local area.⁵⁸ So people died from "serious disease" - they often do. And that many of them were not native to this part of Wiltshire hardly proves they came looking for a supernatural cure.

From Göbekli Tepe to Stonehenge, others see mass gathering places for fertility rituals. Yet, the widest held theory about such sites is that they were astronomical devices for tracing the movement of the sun, moon, stars, etc. In our day, Druids, new agers, hippies, neopagans and the plain curious descend on Stonehenge on June 20-21 - the summer solstice - in their many thousands.

Astronomical theories must, however, be taken seriously. Solar, lunar and star alignments have been authoritatively claimed or authoritatively demonstrated. Eg, Fabio Silva impressively shows that Neolithic dolmen (big stoned tombs) in Iberia have an unmistakable orientation towards the equinoctial full moon.⁵⁹ Incidentally, astroarchaeology as a discipline was first given scientific rigour by Norman Lockyer (1836-1920) with his

detailed investigation of Stonehenge. His 1909 classic study has recently been republished, and despite enthusiasm occasionally carrying him away, it is clearly a work of genuine scholarship.⁶⁰

Sky-watching and Stonehenge

Claude Lévi-Strauss referred to what he called the “equinoctial concern” of peoples throughout the Americas, from Alaska to Terra del Fuego, in his four-volume *Les mythologiques* (1964-71). In point of fact, ancient peoples on every continent were fascinated by the sun, moon and stars and made careful observations about their movements. Indeed, there is a strong case for human sky-watching dating back to the dawn of culture.

Alexander Marshack (1918-2004) has found *material* evidence of what he believes are daily tallies recording the moon from the upper Palaeolithic: that is, around 30,000 years ago. Markings cut into bones, ivory and antlers prove not to be random or purely decorative. They seem to coincide with lunar phases, recorded not just over a monthly period, but around the year. Marshack attributes meaning to the markings beyond the mere passing of time. They are not ancient versions of a calendar. Rather, as with Lévi-Strauss, he sees “narrative and myth”.⁶¹

As already noted, women have an obvious link with the moon. But let us limit ourselves to the *material* evidence of human understanding. The 25,000-30,000-year-old Cro-Magnon figurine, the so-called Venus of Laussel, not only displays female fertility, but cosmological awareness. She has a noticeably swollen belly and holds a horn. Thirteen distinct lines are carved onto it. Astroarchaeologists suggest that these 13 lines represent the 13 new-moon cycles in a solar year (women having around 13 menstrual periods during the same time).

Then there are the rock paintings of Lascaux. Dating from around 16,000 years ago, they appear to include the Pleiades star cluster above one of its famous bulls (known to archaeologists as ‘bull No18’). The rotunda of bison, deer, horses and aurochs (wild cattle) in the ‘great hall’ has been interpreted by Michael Rappenglueck as an astrological depiction of the night sky.⁶² The idea that Palaeolithic peoples were feeble-minded savages,

dull-witted and lacking culture is, of course, flatly contradicted by all such accounts.

If women suffered an historic defeat with the crisis of big-game hunting and a male minority came to dominance with cattle herding and agriculture, then we would expect claims of continuity. Counterrevolutions rarely, if ever, announce themselves as counterrevolutions. Eg, Napoleon Bonaparte and Joseph Stalin kept themselves cloaked in the colours of the revolution. And yet, because the Neolithic social counterrevolution was bound up with the revolutionary transition to a new mode of living, the result in religious terms would inevitably be a multilayered combination of the old and the new.

Solar rhythms assume an ever-growing importance with agriculture. After all, people would now labour while there was daylight and sow and harvest according to the solar-governed seasons. A new solar-orientated religion was bound to arise. I think we can also say that, once an elite emerges, an *organised* religion would tend to follow. Or perhaps, more accurately, an elite would emerge in *conjunction* with organised religion. Anyhow, after shamans come priests. People who live off surplus product coaxed or squeezed from the community. Almost by definition that necessitates deception (and by increasing degrees).

Men begin the counterrevolution by attempting to fool women (backed by force). The religious elite go further and attempt to fool the entire population (they had every interest in fooling even themselves). Their new religion passes itself off as a continuation of the old - and thus maybe that way exploitation could be legitimised. The historical record is chock-a-block with exploiters presenting their exploitation as being beneficial for the exploited. This culminates in the exploited being expected to thank, bless, pray for and even worship their exploiters (priests, prophets, chiefs, lords, monarchs, emperors). Religion thereby *categorically* ceases to be a system for investigating, deciphering and engaging with nature (science). It collapses into mere ideology (mystification).

Neolithic megaliths surely need to be considered in that light. Stonehenge can be used as a test case. In the main, official archaeology considers it a device for observing the movement of the sun, predicting eclipses, etc. The standard approach is via a plan diagram: ie, as if seen from the air. A centre

point having been calculated, lines are then projected outwards, spoke-like, which locate the sun at key times of the year: eg, summer solstice.

Showing how conventional they are, at least when it comes to Stonehenge, Druids, hippies, new agers and neopagans think within that paradigm. After travelling many miles to celebrate the summer solstice, they eagerly await the sunrise. When it finally shows there is joy, reverence, camaraderie and, of course, a conviction that long before them the ancients felt the exact same.

Obvious problems exist with this model. The fact of the matter is that Stonehenge has no centre; at least shown by a marker of any kind.⁶³ True, depending where you stand, any set of stones can be aligned with astronomical events. Eg, shuffle a little this way or little that way, close an eye and you can see the sun rise over the heel stone from somewhere in the centre. But nothing matches exactly. That much is clear.

Archaeologists have tried to explain away what they consider to be imperfections. Supposedly because Stonehenge's architects and builders were barely one removed from savagery, they made elementary blunders. Yet, confounding such accounts, the lintels, the stone tops of the outer circle, prove to be "accurate to eight centimetres across a diameter of 30 metres".⁶⁴ An accuracy that many a modern builder would envy. I think we must conclude that the summer solstice sunrise theory fails to explain Stonehenge.

So what was the intention of its Neolithic architects? Lionel Sims provides a daring, but much more convincing theory. Think about Stonehenge neither from above nor by looking out from the centre. Hardly, he suggests, the way the Neolithic community would conceive, approach or emotionally engage with the complex. On the contrary, having gathered on the bank of the river Avon, they head uphill to the site. That is why the 3km-long Stonehenge Avenue was made - surely. With this orientation in mind, the configuration, purpose and significance of Stonehenge can be understood.

According to Sims, the monument served to preserve the lunar cosmology, along with an increasingly tenuous social link with hunting. Simultaneously, the old religion is "estranged" by the "emerging solar cosmology".⁶⁵

From above, Stonehenge is full of gaps between the stones. Yet to those heading up from the Avon it would have appeared almost as a solid wall. That is why there were 160 carefully arranged stones in what archaeologists call Stonehenge 3ii (to line up the summer solstice only two would be needed). There were, however, two gaps (windows). One on the upper left, the other on the lower right. Sims shows that one gap captured the *setting* sun, while the other captured the *setting* moon.

Presumably among the aims was to transpose onto the sun the religious significance previously held exclusively by the moon and locate the monthly rhythm of the moon within the annual cycle of the sun. An extraordinarily powerful message for Neolithic viewers. And, as we have shown, the Neolithic architects would have been able to draw on a long tradition of observing and giving meaning to the sky.

What its priest-architects were intent on demonstrating was not the unity of the sun and moon during the longest day, the summer solstice. Rather the unity of the sun and moon that coincided with the longest *night* of the year. Winter solstice sees stars at their brightest. And even with thick cloud cover, the outer bluestones of Stonehenge would glisten and glitter like stars. The sacredness of darkness, how it coincided with women's magic and seclusion, was, one presumes, still fully internalised by the community. Now, however, it was firmly under the control of the priesthood, not least because of their mathematical, architectural, astronomical and other such special knowledge, which was displayed, affirmed and magnified to spellbinding effect through their monumental construction.

So the elect within the community reverentially approach Stonehenge before sunset, halt at some fixed point (the heel stone?) and then await in expectation. They see the moon and sun appear in the two windows and while their light lasts, seemingly held still. Doubtless these people were awestruck at the power of priests who could halt time itself.

One does not have to agree with every detail of the theory. Despite a few nagging doubts, I am firmly convinced that Sims is on the right track. Damningly he describes Stonehenge, Avebury, Silbury Hill ... and that whole line of Neolithic monumental constructions going back to Göbekli Tepe, as "giant lying machines".⁶⁶ Neolithic religion was out to intimidate, console and manipulate.

In Britain the hunter-gathering mode of production was steadily accumulating contradictions. Deer, elk, wild pigs, brown bears and aurochs were still present with the onset of the Neolithic, but were being overhunted (the horse had been driven to extinction by around 7,500 BCE).⁶⁷ Domestic animals, above all cattle, increasingly serve as a substitute. But, as we have seen, the benefit mainly goes to the few.

One can guess that the religious elite steps in to square the circle. They can be seen as continuing the old religion and *putting off* a social order entirely based on farming. The planting of crops seems to have been practised on a limited scale, but understandably full-scale agriculture held no attraction for the mass of the population. Farming requires endless, back-breaking toil.

Not that the lunar-solar religion of the priesthood was an easy option. There are the labour hours needed to build and rebuild their huge monuments, added to which the priests would have expected and doubtless received tithes. Evidence also exists of human sacrifice, including children. However, in return the priests invented a “symbolic representation of communal cohesion”.⁶⁸ It is no accident that so many of their monuments were circular (they convey wholeness, inclusion, unity, cycles, etc). Priests were in all likelihood also responsible for composing rules which maintained a hybrid social formation. Eg, seasonal, geographic and other such restrictions on hunting.

The new and old are reconciled. Hunting and cattle herding co-exist, along with male private ownership, the continued role of women in the household, child-rearing, gathering plants, etc. The vital mediation being, of course, the priesthood and their *rival* monuments. We presume that Stonehenge and Avebury/Silbury Hill competed for allegiance and tribute - hence the constant rebuilding programmes and the striving after scale and novel special effects.

Neolithic cosmology seems to have been based on binary unity of life and death, the past and the present, the earth and the sky. Despite that, it was fractured in terms of time and space. The sun and moon had to be watched at a particular time - eg, the equinox - and in a particular place. One can also speculate that each complex wanted to give the impression that it was

the centre of the universe. That the sun and the moon descended back into the earth via the 'navel' of these monuments.

However, the breakdown of the old order proved unstoppable. Between declining numbers of game animals and the rise of cattle-owning there was only one possible outcome. The dynamic pole being occupied by the male owners. Around about 1,600 BCE, Stonehenge was abandoned (there are indications of desecration). The same is true of other such sites.

Theocracy is replaced by chiefdoms and kinship based on "territory, or co-residence". Chiefdoms were, to begin with, very small and highly "unstable".⁶⁹ One gave way to another in rapid succession ... but here we find the kernel of state and therefore state religion.

One presumes that priests - and their religion - had become thoroughly discredited in the popular mind. Perhaps they were blamed for the scarcity or disappearance of bigger animals and the suffering associated with the adoption of the full agricultural package and a sedentary existence.

Instead of monumental religious complexes there appear elaborate hill forts, aristocratic burials and signs of endemic armed conflict. The male elite clearly felt safe in overthrowing, or subordinating, the priesthood and founding a new social order. And, having done so, they proceed to make war their abiding concern, passion and means of exerting and expanding their power. The community divides into three 'orders': those who work, those who preside over worship and those whose profession is fighting. Needless to say, the warrior displayed no hesitation in rating himself above the specialist in prayer.⁷⁰

CHAPTER FOUR

Religion, class struggles and revolution in ancient Judea

During Victorian times, prompted by the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew scriptures, and their recurring stories of backsliding kings and the constant attempts by fiery prophets to uphold the ancestral faith, Christian thinkers rejected the claim that religion evolved from animism, to polytheism, to henotheism and finally to monotheism - an idea first popularised by Auguste Comte (1798-1857). It was, they said, the other way round. That in prehistory all of humanity held to a belief in the one true god, but that over the generations this was obscured and corrupted by the cults of lesser sacred beings.

Yet despite occasional lapses, such as their worship of bronze serpents and golden calves, the chosen people stayed faithful to the god of Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Joseph and Moses. Through continuing, deepening and universalising this tradition, Christianity supposedly allowed humanity to rediscover or recall the first revelation of the deity.

The most influential advocate of this theory of devolution from what has been called primitive monotheism, was Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954), an Austrian Catholic priest, who was also a respected linguist and ethnologist. In his view, the original object of worship was a creator sky god. Apparent similarities between the supreme sky deities of preliterate cultures and the single godheads of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Zoroastrianism were cited as proof.¹

Suffice to say, this religious comfort blanket has long been discarded by serious scholarship. As I will show, it was only following the return from Babylonian exile after 538 BCE that the Jewish religion assumed a form that we would recognise today. In fact, the aim of this chapter and the next two is to locate the main internal and external factors involved in bringing about the Jerusalem temple cult described in the *New Testament*, in which, of course, Jesus and his party participated and sought to purify through their

audacious actions. Necessarily, that means evaluating competing theories advanced by academics and seeing what contribution Marxism has made.

Fetishes

The *Torah*, the so-called five books of Moses in the *Old Testament*, offers tantalising glimpses, albeit through cracks in the officially constructed account, of the period prior to the general crisis of the late Bronze Age: ie, before the 13th century BCE.

Patriarchal social structures, pastoralism, recurring vendettas and routine banditry combined with an unmistakable animism. Strange spirits roamed the earth, including *nephilim*, or the “sons of god”. They “took to wife” the daughters of men who bore them children (*gibborin*).² Elsewhere, the *Bible* talks vaguely of *rephaim*, ancestor or clan gods, and in all likelihood nature deities: “Your fathers lived of old beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor; and they served other gods”³ ... “the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the river”.⁴

From such tiny literary fragments, numerous archaeological digs, anthropological studies and wide-ranging socio-economic theorisation, scholars have put together a credible socio-economic picture of the ancient Hebrews and their religion.

To bring about symbolic cohesion, the appearance of social oneness, herding peoples carried their clan gods with them in the form of sacred objects - peculiarly shaped stones or pieces of wood. Biblical references to the ‘ark of the covenant’ - a sacred box which contains the god - surely recalls these times. Worship took place in a special tent (*tabernacle*). So the specifically Hebrew gods were, we would guess, fetishes; a thesis reinforced by the story of Jacob’s wife, Rachel, who stole her father’s “household gods”, as she and her husband fled away towards the “hill country of Gilead”.⁵ Such objects, or *teraphim*, brought divine protection, much needed rain and military victory.

A further insight can surely be gained by looking at contemporary pastoralists. Such peoples not only pay minute attention to their flocks and herds: whether reindeer, horse, yak, llama, camel, sheep, goat or cattle.

There is a symbiotic relationship between them and their living factories on the hoof. According to Canadian anthropologist John Galaty, one animal is usually “culturally dominant” - crucial for subsistence and also a means of exchange and measure of status and wealth. Furthermore, the dominant animal comes to be “an object of emotional interest and symbolic elaboration”. Pastoralists internalise the image of their dominant animal. It becomes part of a herder’s sense of inner-self and a “lens through which the world is perceived and understood”.⁶

In a public display of affluence, religious devotion and community solidarity, the herder offers a correspondingly fitting gift to the gods. They sacrifice their most prized animal: a pared-down version of the system of total exchange which characterised primitive communism⁷ and its ‘don’t eat your own kill’ taboo.⁸

From the *Bible*, and what can readily be deduced from other sources, the ancient Hebrews primarily relied on sheep and goats for their livelihood. According to the *Bible*, they also sacrificed bulls. So maybe there were those amongst them who once tended substantial numbers of cattle and worshipped a god represented by a golden calf. But, whatever their main outward manifestation of wealth, for patriarchal heads of important families, status and social connections stemmed from the large size of their flocks and herds.

That also went for gaining women. Wealthy men in effect purchased brides through exchanging them for sheep, goats or cattle. Because they could afford to sustain many animals, they could afford multiple wives. With a ratio of say 50 animals to one wife, that could realistically mean four or five wives. Women became a form of private property; and, of course, brides moved away from their kin and instead joined the husband’s family (not the other way round, as in primitive communism). And if her husband died, she was expected to make herself available to marry one of his brothers or another close relative. Property was retained through such means.

A brief aside. Preliterate cultures develop elaborate religious systems which explain not only ancestral origins and gender relationships, but the workings of nature. Life demands of such peoples an intimate knowledge of plants and their edible, narcotic and medicinal properties, the movement

and behaviour of animals, the geographic features of the landscape, the alternating seasons, the signs of rain, etc. A botany, zoology, mineralogy and meteorology of the concrete achieved, remembered and transmitted through ritual, art and allegorical myth - rather than rational investigation, testing and the peer-reviewed papers associated with modern science.

Nature in each of its elemental aspects is considered the realm of a particular self-willed god or the dwelling place of this or that spirit. Clouds, rain and the winds; the sun, moon and the stars; caves, trees and springs are anthropomorphised: given distinct personalities which must be engaged with and propitiated. Religion thereby comes to provide a cosmology which serves to grade, interpret and open up a deeper understanding of the environment.

It is an elementary mistake to dismiss the religions of preliterate peoples as worthless, half-formed or childish compared with those of classic antiquity, high feudalism and rising capitalist societies. Nowadays, most specialists in the field agree with Claude Lévi-Strauss. Despite his structuralist anti-evolutionism, the prime place he assigned to the mind and his moody, introspective contemplation about humanity's place in the universe. What is the purpose of life? Is there free will? When we die what follows next? Lévi-Strauss rightly argued that in the myths and rituals of preliterate peoples we see not an inferior intelligence, but a common need by all human beings to classify the world.⁹ These men and women were not, and are not, less intelligent; rather, differences in thinking are simply the outcome of the input of different data upon which human logic operates.

Pastoralism

Back to the ancient Hebrews. The current balance of scholarly opinion is firmly against the storymyth of the wandering children of Yahweh, who after departing from Abraham's ancestral land of Haran journeyed to and fro around the Middle East; whose 12 tribes descended from Jacob's 12 sons; who entered, prospered, multiplied and then sank into servitude in Egypt; who, led by Moses, escaped, hotly pursued by the pharaoh's chariots and cavalymen; and who, after spending decades roaming the inhospitable

wastes of the Sinai and Arabian deserts, seized Canaan under Joshua. All carefully manufactured myth.

Pastoralists, it must be stressed, cannot travel hither and thither in the manner described in the *Bible*. Water and pastureland are prime but always limited resources and are vigilantly guarded. Each tribe, clan and even constituent extended family group has its recognised watering holes and territorial range, within which it regularly relocates according to routine and carefully looked for seasonal indicators. Those who stray into another's terrain, whether intentionally or not, will quickly find themselves meeting a fully armed reception committee.

Pastoralists must always be prepared for war and, if strong enough, will exact brotherhood taxes on caravan trains which pass through their customarily established space. Pastoralists also engaged in what was closely associated - "trading and raiding".¹⁰ Merchant and robber were till recently virtually synonymous.¹¹ Palestine, let us note, lay strategically located between the great civilisations of the ancient Middle East and straddled the east-west Mesopotamia and Egypt trade route and the south-north trade route joining India, the Yemen and the Red Sea with Phoenicia and Anatolia.

Because pastoralists regularly turn to "protection rackets, extortion, and violent predation" as a means of gaining an extra income, inevitably theories arose of an eternal conflict between warmongering keepers of herds and flocks and peaceable villagers.¹² Roman, Islamic and French imperialists each in turn depicted themselves as protectors of civilisation against desert barbarians. Though possessing impeccably progressive credentials, the historian Fernand Braudel (1902-85) even wrote of "the clash between two economies, civilisations, societies, and arts of living".¹³ Nowadays, however, most scholars consider such stark formulations badly misconceived.

Pastoralism is not a self-contained socio-economic mode of production. To one degree or another the pastoralists are specialists, after all. Therefore, to state the obvious, pastoralism cannot "provide even all the immediate requirements of nomads".¹⁴ They need the agricultural and handicraft products of their sedentary neighbours. Invariably there is a close, often

subordinate, relationship with settled village agriculture. In the case of Bronze Age Palestine this would, under 'normal' circumstances, situate the pastoralists within the tribute system of the Canaanite city-states.

Winter rains allow pastoralists to fan out far and wide in order to exploit the lush grasslands that suddenly appear. However, once the dry season comes round and the grass withers and dies back, they return to settled areas. Water and feed for herds and flocks must be secured. After the summer harvest had been gathered in from the peasant's fields, the remaining stubble would have been an obvious place to graze them. The animals would in turn supply much needed fertiliser.

Under most circumstances, such a metabolic exchange must entail gaining the cooperation of the sedentary population: achieved through a negotiated business transaction, which might see pastoralists working as temporary farm labourers; military domination by either side; or intermarriage and forming a farmer-herder family joint venture. So nomadic pastoralists in the Levant are, in fact, much better thought of as being semi-nomadic.

Nor, incidentally, should it be assumed that pastoralism and semi-nomadic modes of socio-economic life predate the beginnings of seed-crop agriculture in the Middle East. On the contrary, the domestication of goats and sheep either came *after* the establishment of villages, the farming of cereals and pulses, and the construction of irrigation systems, or developed side by side as part of a combined agricultural package.¹⁵

There was in all likelihood a political factor at play too. Besides searching out new economic opportunities, those turning to semi-nomadic pastoralism may well have been trying to put themselves at one remove from the grasping hand of Canaanite state control. Till this day, mobile peoples show not the slightest enthusiasm for schemes to settle them down (and thereby subject them to taxation, wage-slavery and state control). Indeed some pastoralist peoples actively resist and are viewed as "outlaws and bandits by the state authorities".¹⁶ Various accounts of conquest by barbaric nomads that come down to us from ancient sources could therefore be reinterpreted as possible violent returns by rebellious, freedom-loving exiles.

Joshua

Hence, as the reader might have expected, we arrive at the well known account of Joshua. The *Bible* relates how with the death of Moses a new Hebrew commander-in-chief arose. Joshua served as a “minister” under Moses and it was he who appointed him as his successor. So nothing much in the way of a democratic culture on display in this instance. Underlining the point, anyone amongst the Hebrews tempted to rebel against Joshua’s word is promptly threatened with “death”.¹⁷

Yahweh tells the newly installed Joshua to issue orders for the 12 Hebrew tribes, the Israelites, to immediately prepare for the much delayed crossing of the river Jordan so as to take possession of the land long ago pledged to them. Of course, Joshua does as he is told. Ominously, given present-day Israeli politics, the territory is described as stretching from “the wilderness and this Lebanon” to the “great river” Euphrates and all the lands of the Hittites to the Mediterranean, the “Great Sea”, and “toward the going down of the sun”.¹⁸

Headed by Levite priests carrying the ark of god, the invasion of Canaan begins. Yahweh miraculously stops the flow of the Jordan to allow the Israelite men-at-arms to safely cross, along with wives, children, animals and other possessions. Encamped on the left bank of the river, Joshua oversees the circumcising of all uncircumcised males (a practice that seems to have lapsed during the 40 years spent in the Sinai and Arabian deserts). The Hebrews are sworn to exterminate the entire indigenous population of Canaan, to uproot every trace of idolatry and to exclusively worship Yahweh.

Everyone surely knows the next episode in the story. Jericho is besieged and Joshua sends the ark, accompanied by seven priests, marching around the city each day. On the seventh they noisily blow their trumpets of ram’s horn and, hey presto, Jericho’s stout walls crumble. The city is torched. There is much booty and much bloodshed: “men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep and asses” are slaughtered.¹⁹

Next, the story moves to Hebrews who kept looted treasures from Jericho for themselves. Guiltily they confess and are swiftly dispatched: stoned or

burnt to death. These transgressors are blamed for a frustrating setback in battle. Yahweh had decreed that all gold and silver were his and his alone. Suitably purified, the Hebrews then target the city of Ai. Joshua carries out a clever military ruse. Once again there is total destruction and mass killing. Fearing the same fate, the people of Gibeon sue for peace. They plead that, being foreigners, they are not due to be exterminated. Joshua believes them and agrees terms. When their lie is



‘The walls of Jericho falling down’. Artist: Gustave Doré. But Joshua, if he existed, had nothing to do with the widespread destruction of Canaanite cities.

exposed, the Gibeonites are spared, but cursed to be “slaves, hewers of wood and drawers of water” in perpetuity.²⁰

The Hebrews go on to rout the combined might of the five kingdoms of the Ammonites - Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon. Yahweh rains deadly hailstones down upon them from the heavenly heights. And so as to provide sufficient light for the almost industrial butchery of the terrified Ammonites, the sun and the moon are made to stand still. Joshua proceeds to sack, burn, massacre and terrorise his way through the rest of Canaan. Finally, the city of Hazor was taken and, again obeying Yahweh, the Hebrews “did not leave any that breathed”.²¹

Looking at passages such as this, the modern reader cannot but be struck by an eerie resemblance that exists between Yahweh’s genocidal programme and Adolph Hitler’s ethnic purity laws and his crazy plans, flagged in *Mein Kampf*, to remove the entire Slavic populations to the east - that or reduce them to slavery, so as to provide his beloved German yeoman farmers with labour and *Lebensraum* (living space).

Anyway, though there were still unexterminated Canaanites within their borders and god-sanctioned conquests to the west, north, south and east remaining to be accomplished, the tribes are each allotted their carefully delineated territory - being otherwise privileged, the Levite priesthood have to make do with burnt sacrificial offerings and pastures and towns specially put aside for them in the midst of other tribes.

So comes into being the post-conquest social order described in Deuteronomy, Judges, Ruth and Samuel. From the death of Joshua to the inauguration of the monarchy, the loose confederation of Hebrew tribes were advised, guided and on countless occasions rebuked by the so-called judges. They acted as military leaders and a kind of collective conscience for the whole people.

Religiously sanctioned measures were put in place, presumably designed to prevent extremes of poverty and wealth: “there will be no poor among you”, confidently proclaims the book of Deuteronomy.²² In order to keep a due sense of proportion, it is worth adding that the same book contradictorily admits, just a few lines down, that “the poor will never cease out of the land”.²³

Nevertheless, the egalitarian ethos is clear. Every 49 years, more likely every seven, a jubilee happened. A year of release from the chains of debt and indentured labour. Enslaved Hebrews were to “go free” and be furnished “liberally” with grain, wine, sheep and goats. Elsewhere we read about land and property. Each seventh year, the land had to remain fallow and property was to be returned to its original owners (or heirs). Though slavery and debt bondage was a constant danger for the poor, given the period we are talking about, the people of Israel seemingly enjoyed a quite extraordinary social settlement: “In those days there were no kings in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.”²⁴

We actually have no hard evidence that the Israeli inter-tribal confederation ever existed (or whether it was a much later biblical invention). “It is extremely difficult any longer to assert that it did,” remarks a doubting Thomas Thompson.²⁵

Quite conceivably, the general crisis of the Bronze Age produced social chaos, along with a myriad of highly localised strong men and rival tribal chiefdoms, before the re-emergence of state formations. But the *fact* is that Deuteronomy, Judges, Ruth and Samuel contain a strong egalitarian strand. And radical scholars have understandably made much of such passages and descriptions.

Three examples. George Mendenhall presented a pioneering argument for a revolutionary anti-monarchist Israel founded on a direct treaty between each individual and Yahweh.²⁶ Another American, Norman Gottwald, maintained that Hebrew society under the judges was “revolutionary and egalitarian”.²⁷ Along the same lines, but with undoubted hyperbole, at least in my opinion, Jan Dus, a Czech theologian and anti-Stalinite dissident, even claimed that the judges oversaw the “first ideologically based socio-political revolution in the history of the world”.²⁸

Damning archaeology

More about such ideas below. At this point in the discussion we shall, however, investigate our subject from another direction. The traditional

dating for the Hebrew conquest of Canaan is between 1230 and 1220 BCE.* This neatly fits with the claimed flight of the Hebrews from Egypt and references in the book of Exodus to Ramesside pharaohs. Yet, though there is an Egyptian victory stele of the pharaoh Merneptah mentioning a group called Israel in Canaan, which is believed to refer to the year 1207 BCE, the whole narrative of Joshua's invasion and the destruction of its native population is now widely doubted - to put it mildly.

* Accurately dating the history of the Bronze Age is notoriously difficult and still subject to much academic dispute. There are those who question the standard chronology - which is based on Mycenaean dates and lists of Egyptian monarchs. But revisionist opinion is itself divided. Some want the chronology shifted upwards and some downwards. Difference between them and the standard chronology can amount to ± 200 years. Meanwhile carbon 14 dating and dendronchronology (tree-ring dating) help archaeologists to *statistically* estimate the dating of particular sites, objects and events. But the margin of error is still quite considerable. Eg, timber which is already 100 years old can be reused. So Bronze Age chronology is quite clearly as much an art as it is a science. Plenty of wriggle-matching goes on.

The eradication, or driving out, of the indigenous population, and its replacement by another, completely fresh, people, was once widely presumed to reflect the general pattern of ancient and early medieval history. Eg, Romano-Britons being physically wiped out by incoming Anglo-Saxon invaders.²⁹ Nowadays such versions of history are disputed across a whole range of disciplines. Of course, there were genocides. The Athenian assembly voted in 416 BCE to exterminate all male captives on the small Aegean island of Melos. On a much bigger scale the Mongol horde, under Genghis Khan, carried out massacres in a string of cities - eg, Ghazni, Herat and Merv - during the 13th century. In most instances, however, conquerors would much rather take over the exploitation of the native peasants than kill them off as if they were vermin: time-consuming and economically counterproductive.

Let us get down to specifics. The archaeology is damning. There are "abundant records" from Egypt in the late Bronze Age (1550-1150 BCE) which show that the Canaanite city-states - and beyond them to the north the great Phoenician trading ports and the kingdoms of south-west Syria - were vassals.³⁰ Clay accounting tablets, temple engravings and diplomatic correspondence prove that the pharaohs regularly issued orders and were in receipt of a steady flow of tribute. More than that, Egyptian administrators, Egyptian troops and Egyptian-paid mercenaries were stationed in towns and

strongpoints in Canaan. And yet the book of Joshua completely fails to mention Egyptians outside the context of Egypt itself.

Perhaps because of gouging Egyptian tribute, perhaps because of hobbling Egyptian decrees, Canaanite cities were unfortified, much diminished and presumably pretty shabby at the time. No tall towers or intimidatingly thick walls, as alluded to in the book of Joshua. Nor did they command vast armies. In fact they were “pathetically weak”.³¹

The pharaohs built an empire which included not only Canaan. Their domains reached into Libya and incorporated the whole of Nubia down to the fourth cataract. Tribute also flowed in from Cyprus, Crete and Syria. The Egyptian sphere of influence had hardly ever been so extensive. Visit the temple complex at Abu Simbel on the shores of lake Nasser and stand before the four colossal statues of Rameses II (reigned 1279-1213 BCE) and you will appreciate something of the confidence, wealth and ego of its rulers.

Though its hold over Canaan was steadily weakening, this late Bronze Age superpower would have experienced no particular trouble in dispatching necessary reinforcements, if needed, through their well managed and well fortified Sinai coastal road into Canaan - had there been any sort of serious armed incursion by Hebrews (leave aside whether or not they were refugees who had fled Egypt decades before). Not surprisingly Merneptah's stele reports that Israel was crushed. Apart from that, Israel and the Israelites go unmentioned in what Egyptian records we have available to us from the period.

Except from the Hittite empire in the north, Egyptian domination of Canaan met no strategic challenge. And Egypt came to a stand-off agreement with the Hittites despite the bruising a youthful Rameses II received at the battle of Kadesh (1274 BCE). Taking cognisance of this geo-political balance of power, the idea of a raggle taggle Hebrew population, who had been scratching out a precarious existence in the desert wilderness for 40 years, storming their way through an Egyptian-dominated Canaan is simply not credible.

Circumstances were different in the middle Bronze Age. Then there was indeed a system of affluent, tribute-gathering and militarily powerful Canaanite city-states - despite their independence one from another, they

were linked by alliances and shared a common culture. But during the late Bronze Age they fell into decline. Jericho, Ai and Megiddo were abandoned. Other urban centres were destroyed: eg, Ashdod, Aphek and Hazor. Nowadays this is not put down to Joshua. Rather, explanation is sought in ecological degradation, disease, social revolt due to over-exploitation and the raids and dislocation caused by the so-called sea peoples.** Doubtless there were a combination of factors at play. But all that was several centuries before Joshua was supposed to have marched Yahweh's chosen people across the Jordan.

** The mysterious sea peoples were an ethnically mixed group who attacked and rampaged throughout the eastern Mediterranean in the 13th and 12th centuries BCE. Various hypotheses about who exactly the sea people were have been advanced. None particularly satisfactory. Some argue that they were a confederation of rootless sailors, dispossessed peasants and adventurers. Others that they were Aegean migrants forced to move from their various homelands by social collapse and agricultural failure. Apart from being depicted on triumphant Egyptian carvings, a few fleeting mentions in diplomatic correspondence, appearances on lists of defeated enemies, etc, there is little documentary evidence about them. However, the sea peoples, given the small numbers that would probably have been involved, were unlikely to have put cities under sustained siege, let alone to have conquered whole states.

The late Bronze Age general crisis hit the whole of the eastern Mediterranean during the close of the 13th century BCE. Archaeological excavations in Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Egypt reveal a "stunning story of upheaval, war and widespread social breakdown".³² The collapse of the western Roman empire in the 5th century CE was nothing in comparison: and it saw the severing of vital trade connections; a breakdown, fast or slow, of the tax system in successor states; a general decline in material production; and widespread depopulation (not that the reduction of the tax burden on the immediate producers should be discounted here - freed from gross exploitation, peasants would no longer need to maximise their biologically generated labour force - instead they would have arguably practised *restrictive* family planning in its various available forms³³). Anyway, population laws aside, at the most extreme, Britannia fragmented into numerous petty chiefdoms, which culturally stood roughly on a par with what the remote island managed to achieve during the late Iron Age.³⁴

Though surviving the Bronze Age general crisis, Egypt was left a shadow of its former self, being stripped of all vassals. Tribute dried up, so did

international trade. The production of bronze must have become problematic - tin and copper being rare metals in Egypt and the kingdom relying heavily on “importation”.³⁵ Presumably, Egypt resorted to metallurgical cannibalism. However, the other superpower of the day, the Hittite empire, located in Turkey and northern Syria, disappeared entirely. Related tribute-gathering palace economies were likewise extinguished. Mycenae, the city of the famed Agamemnon, the overlord of all the Achaeans in the *Iliad*, was overrun and destroyed. Subsequently Greece experienced a prolonged dark age. There was a loss of writing and rapid depopulation; and not only in the few remaining cities, but in the countryside too. Sites in Crete, Cyprus and the Levant share the same characteristic blackened archaeological strata, indicating conflagration and a violent end - excavators find ash, charred wood and slag formed from melted mud bricks - and above that the replacement of a materially rich culture by one that is noticeably impoverished in terms of objects.

As an aside, Robert Drews argues that it was new military techniques which tilted the balance against the palace economies. Bowmen and infantry throwing javelins, protected by packed lines of men carrying long spears and large, round shields, ended the military dominance previously enjoyed by hugely expensive aristocratic chariot warfare.³⁶

The Bronze Age general crisis certainly left behind many enigmatic ruins scattered throughout Canaan. The German biblical scholars, Albrecht Alt (1883-1956) and Martin Noth (1902-1968), reasoned that local stories peopled with legendary heroes and villains must have sprung up which gave meaning to those gigantic wrecks. Both men thought that there was also the likelihood of genuine folk memories. Namely victories scored by hill-country militias over the declining Canaanite city-states which, had till then dominated and exploited them. The book of Joshua was, they concluded, a stitching together of these accounts into a single and much elaborated epic. It ought to be added that both Alt and Noth drew inspiration from the “documentary hypothesis” approach to the *Bible* developed by Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918); who was himself unmistakably influenced by the explicitly atheistic writings of Ludwig Feuerbach.

Apiru

Now let us ask an obvious question: who were the Israelites? Intriguingly, apart from the lone Merneptah stele directly mentioning Israel, there are records of two other named groups who are of obvious interest here. People who lived on the margins of Canaanite society “between the desert and the sown”.³⁷

The first is the Shosu. They kept flocks and herds and appear to have been something of an all-round nuisance. An Egyptian report tells of a punishment raid on the tented encampments of the Shosu from which the pharaoh’s troops took away cattle “without number”.³⁸

The other group was the Apiru (or Habiru). A term that crops up throughout the Middle East in the Bronze Age, but, and this is obviously significant, it does so especially with reference to Canaan. They seem to have been an amorphous collection of escapees from, or rebels against war, taxation, famine and state power. Disparagingly, the Apiru are portrayed in official sources as criminals, brigands or mercenary soldiers ready for hire. Contending state formations loathed, dreaded and yet might choose to cynically use them. Surely, however, the Apiru would have had their own programme and ideology. An ancient combination of the Luddites, the Sicilian mafia, Nestor Makhno’s Black Army and the People’s Temple of Jim Jones perhaps. Anyone familiar with Eric Hobsbawm’s *Primitive rebels* (1959) will get the point. Such honourable outlaws, self-defence associations, religious dissenters and bands of social avengers can arrive at the point where “class conflicts are dominant”.³⁹

Various writers have speculated about a linguistic connection between the words ‘Apiru’ (‘Habiru’) and ‘Hebrew’ (the Israelites). Opinion is still divided. Nevertheless, even if there is no direct join, both Shosu and Apiru might provide a clue about who the Israelites might have been.

Whereas archaeological superstars such as William Albright and Yegael Yadin believed they were proving, illustrating, filling in the fine details of the biblical account contained in Joshua, long before them an iconoclastic Albrecht Alt argued, beginning in the 1920s, that the Israelites did not originate in northern Mesopotamia. Nor did they wander round the Middle

East before their spectacular invasion of Canaan. Hence Alt not only rejected the biblical account. He rejected the standard academic model of grand people movements - a nationalist assumption which dominated history writing from the late 19th century onwards when dealing with the ancient world.***

***The French Egyptologist, Gaston Maspero (1846-1916), is largely responsible for initiating this highly dubious but very influential conjecture. In his book *The struggle of nations* (1896) Maspero depicted whole peoples - men, women and children of all classes - migrating hundreds or thousands of miles before settling down. Thus the Libu were not simply Egypt's neighbouring Libyan people. They originated in the Balkans, where they were displaced by incoming Illyrians (along with Dorians and Phrygians). Leaving the Balkans behind them, the Libu apparently trekked through the length of Europe, arriving at Gibraltar, then crossing into Africa and turning sharply eastwards. Having been sent packing from Egypt by pharaoh Merneptah's forces, the Libu retraced their footsteps westwards, where they finally halted and gave their name to Libya. Each people were conceived by Maspero as a solid national unit and moved from one location to another, for example, when pressed by another people. Of course, there were long-range movements by warrior chiefs and their followers in ancient times: eg, the Visigoths. Originating in eastern Europe, they were recruited into the Roman army and subsequently went on to sack Rome in 410 and found kingdoms in southern Gaul and Hispania before going down to defeat by the Umayyad Muslim forces in 711. However, though Maspero's claims for generalised mass people migrations still has its advocates, nowadays it is widely doubted (see R Drews *The end of the Bronze Age* Princeton 1993, chapter 4).

Alt put forward the idea that the Israelites were modest pastoralists, a loosely organised independent group of Shosu-like people, who regularly shifted between the Transjordan plateau and the Jordan valley. At the end of the Bronze Age they began to relocate, clearing areas in the next-door, heavily wooded, sparsely inhabited central highlands of Palestine. Given the lack of direct state control by the Canaanite cities, this sedentarisation - the voluntary settling down to a farming way of life - proceeded, in Alt's model, without large-scale battles, prolonged sieges or mass slaughter. Instead he proposed a gradual process of peaceful infiltration.

As the population of the highlands steadily increased, the corresponding scarcity of land and water led the Hebrews down into the coastal plain. Only then came serious military conflicts with the Canaanite city-states. Here, or so concluded Alt's theory, was the *real* background to the recurring struggles between the Israelites and neighbouring peoples vividly described in the book of Judges.

In the 1960s and 70s Alt's peaceful-infiltration theory was increasingly disputed. I am not talking about Christian or Zionist fundamentalists; that almost goes without saying.**** No, I refer to serious critics. Tellingly, a range of biblical scholars, anthropologists, historians and sociologists

pointed to field studies which showed an intimate connection between semi-nomads and village farmers in the Middle East. Not unreasonably, Alt's critics, friendly and hostile, argued that in ancient times the pastoralist population which regularly headed east from the fertile northern section of the Jordan valley with the coming of the winter rains, and those practising peasant agriculture, were quite possibly one and the same ethnic entity. More than that, while pastoralists might opt for a settled life - for example, because of climate change - once conditions allowed, they returned to their old ways. Semi-nomads certainly do not exhibit Alt's land-hunger. They are reluctant peasants.

**** Those who insist on the literal truth of the *Old Testament* hubristically celebrated each discovery by prove-the-Bible archaeologists as a vindication of their doctrines, agendas and convictions. Yet, once the balance of archaeological opinion decisively tilted against biblical literalism, they behaved like ostriches. Heads were buried further and further into irrationality, leaving exposed that part of the body which fundamentalists normally talk through.

An alternative set of theories inevitably arose. George Mendenhall, like Alt, discounted the historicity of the biblical account of Joshua's conquests. Yet, despite his background as an ordained Lutheran minister, Mendenhall developed an innovative class-conflict thesis. For Mendenhall there was neither violent invasion nor peaceful infiltration. Rather, he contended, internal conflict pitted the rural lower classes - those who called themselves, or were called, Hebrews, or Israelites - against the exploiting "network of interlocking Canaanite city-states".⁴⁰ Mendenhall thought in terms of a religiously motivated peasant movement and gaining control over an established political economy.

While he hardly discounts social relations, Mendenhall's hypothesis ultimately rests on theological explanation. In the beginning came the idea. Yahwehism made Israel and in that spirit its operational precepts are conceived of as being nearer to Mahatma Gandhi than Thomas Müntzer. Mendenhall argues that the Israelites withdrew from the Canaanite system "not physically and geographically but politically and subjectively". Through that inner refusal, an increasing swathe of the population no longer felt "any obligation to the existing political regime".⁴¹ Legitimacy drains away (perhaps along with tax-gathering powers). And, though their final religious war swept away the latifundist-trading Canaanite ruling classes, this did not involve mass extermination by the Israelites. In percentage

terms the aristocracy was, of course, insignificant anyway. Furthermore, Mendenhall insisted, the old society was not taken over without modification. A radically novel anti-monarchist social order was constructed, centred on a covenant between Yahweh and those who were prepared to believe in him.

Symbolically, land ownership passed from the Canaanite aristocracy and was nominally given over to Yahweh. I would hazard a guess that there would have been something akin to what in Russia was called a 'black redistribution'. A shattering division of the great agricultural estates into numerous smallholdings. The socio-economic foundation of Israelite society was therefore constituted by a mass of independent peasant farmers. Politically there was a matching rejection of centralised power. In religious terms this 'regulated anarchism' correspondingly enacted rules forbidding graven images. That is, images of kings and gods, and of gods giving authority to kings.

Others took over the baton from the "pioneering work" of Mendenhall.⁴² The most notable being Norman Gottwald. Like Mendenhall he is convinced that there was an Israelite revolution which finished off the Canaanite ruling classes (but not the Philistines). Hence Joshua is treated not as history, but myth. Gottwald successfully synthesises Mendenhall and Alt by assiduously constructing a theory which has at its core ideologically motivated escapees colonising the frontier lands of Canaan. Gottwald argues that these people played a role analogous not to America's westward-moving settlers,⁴³ but Mao Zedong's People's Liberation Army.⁴⁴ The frontier constituting a base area from where a revolutionary return was carefully prepared, not a safety valve which attenuated class antagonisms.

Gottwald's monumental study, *The tribes of Yahweh* (1979), historically-theoretically reconstructs Israel as a "major sub-system". Crucial is understanding religion as a "social phenomenon", related to other social phenomena "within the system".⁴⁵ The influence of Marxism is unmistakable and acknowledged from the outset. The riches, complexities and contradictions of the Yahwehite religion are therefore derived from social circumstances. Not the other way round.

Gottwald fully accepts Mendenhall's idea that pre-monarchical Israel embraced a primitive anarchism. Though he prefers to call it a peasant communitarianism or an "inarticulate tribal socialism".⁴⁶ Despite Gottwald stressing extensive common ground with Mendenhall, he refuses to subscribe to what he calls his philosophical idealism. Pointedly, he chides Mendenhall for not pursuing class and social relations far enough. Unfortunately this produced an infuriated, but sadly conventional, reply by Mendenhall (not further development of his original insight). Gottwald was accused of forcing "the ancient historical data into the Procrustes' bed of 19th century Marxist ideology". A banal charge endlessly thrown against Gottwald by the academic establishment, which insists for its own reasons on gutting the history of ancient Israel - and virtually everywhere else for that matter - of class content. Technological determinism, piecemeal evolutionary change and state teleologies are always preferred over real historical movement (which is always complex and involves dialectical contradictions, social conflict *and* revolutionary breaks). However, as Gottwald painstakingly shows, the facts tend to support the peasant revolution thesis.⁴⁷

Gottwald argues, crucially in his *magnum opus*, that the Israelites originated in the Canaanite lowlands. He depicts them as a revolutionary political movement which retreated from the stifling oppression and exploitation of the Canaanite ruling classes (and the Egyptian tribute system). These *social* revolutionaries organised a short march eastwards into the lawless uplands. Gottwald's *physical* withdrawal could only have included relatively small numbers, especially to begin with. And probably the attempt to establish a secure base area had to be repeated by one expeditionary group after another before decisive implantation was finally achieved.

Gottwald's ideologically inspired settlers were aided, he contends, in gaining a tolerable living for themselves in this otherwise uninviting area, through two crucial developments: iron tools***** for hewing cisterns out of the rock to hold winter rainwater; and new plasters which sealed cisterns and terrace hillsides. Not, it should be stressed, that Gottwald's theory primarily relies on technological determination.

***** Gottwald, like Mendenhall, believes that iron working was introduced into Palestine and played a decisive economic role in raising agricultural productivity. Steel weapons weigh slightly more than their equivalents fashioned from bronze. However, they are considerably stronger. And, whereas bronze is made from constituent elements, tin, which is not commonly found in the Mediterranean, iron and charcoal (carbon) were readily available. Once the high-temperature smelting techniques had been invented and widely mastered, Gottwald believes, the result would have been a dramatic *class* shift in warfare. Bronze weapons favour the aristocracy. Iron weapons were in comparative terms democratic - a thesis advanced in the 1940s by V Gordon Childe. However, archaeological finds of iron weapons in the 12th century BCE have proved to be exceedingly rare. It is now thought that the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age in the eastern Mediterranean spanned the entire period from the 12th to the 9th centuries BCE (see R Drews *The end of the Bronze Age* Princeton 1993, chapter 5).

No, quite rightly, his main determination is class: eg, the “broad-based grievances and restiveness in the direction of an alternative political economy and society had deep roots in the Canaanite heartlands”.⁴⁸ The peasant mass would have looked to those who established the initial rebel foci against the Canaanite system for leadership. What must have been a permanent, smouldering, class struggle between peasants and elite would, however, only have triggered a full-scale social revolt because of deep fissures opening up in the existing Canaanite ruling system. Civil wars and foreign invasions are the classic causes.

Anyway, perhaps after a number of failures, the Israelite community finally establishes itself in the highlands rising from both banks of the Jordan river. Free at last, they align themselves with the semi-pastoralist population and constitute a beacon of liberty. Welcoming a steady trickle of those “yearning to breathe free” heading out from Canaan, the Israelite revolution steadily expanded its political, military and economic base area. The ruling classes would surely have included this dissident body under the pejorative term ‘Apiru’.

Supporting his lowland origins thesis, Gottwald cites what he considers the best archaeology. Eg, William Dever was one of his “informants” in the mid-1970s. He had shown that pottery and buildings discovered in the Palestinian highlands exhibited a similar style to lowland finds of the same 13th and 12th century BCE date.⁴⁹ For Gottwald, observations such as this provided archaeological validation for his liberation theory (interestingly the philosophically “pragmatic” Dever agreed).

Not that Gottwald ignores the active role of ideas. His “liberated Israel” adopts, fashions or perfects Yahwehism. An ideology providing the

cohesion, fervour and popular appeal which raises the Israelites from peasant discontent to the tipping point which delivers state power; despite seemingly impossible military odds. Theological inspiration for the Israelite revolutionary movement came, according to Gottwald, from an exotic intellectual elite which inherited/carried with them doctrines of the kind that lay behind the monotheism of Akhenaten in the 14th century BCE.

Akhenaten

Let me close this chapter with a brief detour. Akhenaten was the young pharaoh, beginning his reign as Amenhoter IV, who inaugurated a strict monotheism in Egypt by demanding, during year five of his rule, the *exclusive* worship of the god Aten. Egyptologists, it can usefully be mentioned, trace the roots of this monotheism back to the notions of a chief god put together by the high priests of Thebes and Luxor in the 16th century BCE.

Later Egyptian pharaohs, those whose rule went far beyond the narrow confines of the Nile - whose tribute-giving subordinates included Nubia, Libya, Canaan, Crete, Cyprus and Syria - could not content themselves with the medley of national gods. Along with their foreign realms, soldiers, subjects, concubines and wives came the need for a religious universalism. The giddy polytheism of the early and middle kingdoms therefore gives way to the henotheism of Amun-Ra.

As a new-kingdom monarch, Akhenaten is therefore to be distinguished from his contemporaries not because of adherence to a supreme god. Rather, Akhenaten is to be distinguished because he imposed an uncontaminated, systematic, harsh and intolerant monotheism.

Linking Akhenaten and early Israel is a constantly recurring theme. Take Sigmund Freud. Admitting a reluctant intellectual debt to Otto Rank (1884-1939) and his writings on world myths and legends,⁵⁰ quoting a select range of biblical critics and inevitably applying “psycho-analysis”, he proposed that Moses was an Egyptian with an Egyptian name.⁵¹

In his slim study *Moses and monotheism* (1939), Freud saw the story of Moses paralleling, in whole or part, those of Karna, Gilgamesh, Semiramis,

Telephos, Heracles, Amphion, Paris, Cyrus and Romulus. All of whose birth, childhood and surrounding “family romance” are purportedly derived from Sargon of Akkad, the famous conqueror of the Sumerian city-states and widely credited with being the founder of the world’s first empire (circa 23rd century BCE).

Freud contended that Moses was a high-born aristocrat and a committed Atenite priest who had fully immersed himself in its doctrines and methods. After the death of his master, the pharaoh Akhenaten, and the suppression of the Aten cult, Moses led a small group of servants, scribes and close followers out of Egypt - the original Levites. He intended to found a glorious new Atenite empire to the east. Energetic and driven, Moses wins influence over the desert-dwelling Midian tribe and then attempts to foist the Atenite religion upon them. But Moses is murdered by his “stubborn and refractory people”.⁵² Possessing a higher culture, however, the Levites assert their authority, albeit through agreeing a religious compromise. After their prolonged, frequently interrupted, but never fully completed takeover of Canaan, the god they promoted was a composite of Aten and the Midian volcano deity called Yahweh. Or so says Freud. He derives the later Jewish yearning for a messiah from latent psychological feelings of collective guilt over the killing of Moses. Jesus being a substitute Moses.

Freud deserves a prize for creativity. But historically his thesis finds little or no justification. Moses is likely a much later mythic invention. Hence in the 14th or 13th centuries BCE it would have been rather difficult to have killed or regret killing him. I think it can reasonably be said that Freud’s thesis falls at the first hurdle.

The archaeologists, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, provide a much more convincing explanation. Moses has real foundations as a constructed story. Instead of being a flesh-and-blood historical individual, he personifies the fabricated backstory of two related, but entirely separate, states. Moses was a politically moulded founding father who *symbolically* joined together Judea *and* Israel.

Not that the Moses story was spun out of thin air. There is evidence of Canaanites drifting into Egypt and establishing themselves in the Nile delta around 1800 BCE. Later, for a hundred years, their elite ruled Egypt as the 15th dynasty during the period 1670-1570 BCE. A resurgent Egyptian

ruling class finally drove them out. These Canaanites were the Hyksos (foreign rulers). Their domination of Egypt and violent expulsion doubtless created an enduring folk memory in Canaan that echoed down the generations. Raw material for later myth makers of the kind that produced the wonderful fables of Arthur, Lancelot, Merlin, Guinevere and the triumphant Romano-British resistance to the Saxon invasion. Except that the Hebrews converted defeat not into victory, but heroic escape.

One thing seems certain though. There was no exodus of 600,000 Hebrews under the leadership of a man called Moses during the 14th or 13th centuries BCE.⁵³ The numbers are simply impossible. On top of that, biblical descriptions reflect not those centuries, but Egyptian monarchs, place names and geo-political realities of the 7th century BCE. A sure sign of politically expedient invention rather than real history.

What of Akhenaten's elevation of Aten into the one and only god head? Consciously or unconsciously, this innovation was, in my opinion at least, just as much about secular calculation as high-minded spirituality. The pharaoh almost certainly wanted to further enhance his autocratic status by subordinating Egypt's phenomenally rich, politically strong and numerically bloated priest caste to his will.

Thomas Mann touchingly depicts Akhenaten as a dreamy, if flawed, otherworldly saint in his novel *Joseph in Egypt* (1936). A constantly repeated artistic motif. Yet, as the noted American Assyriologist, William Moran (1921-2000), conclusively showed through his translation of the 'Amarna letters', the pharaoh took a keen interest in politics, including international relations.⁵⁴ Not surprisingly then, Akhenaten expects his instructions to be promptly carried out by vassals. They in turn expect him to meet requests for military help.

Gottwald's identification with late 20th century Christian liberation theology clearly influences his assessment of Akhenaten, whom he admiringly considers to be a spiritual revolutionary.⁵⁵ But the appearance of monotheism in heaven surely reflects the concentration of earthly political power into a single pair of hands. Not people's power or the highest revelation of divine truth. "Nobody knows thee but I, thy son Akhenaten": that was Akhenaten's self-description contained in his 'Sun hymn'; and ministers, scribes, priests and other flunkies dutifully

promulgated the bombastic message originating from the new capital city, Akhetaten (modern Amarna).⁵⁶ A recipe for an unbrookable monarchy that finds an echo in the status, claims and powers of Byzantine emperors, Islam's caliphs, Japan's mikados, Russia's tsars and Roman popes.

CHAPTER FIVE

Peasant socialism and the persistence of polytheism in ancient Israel

In Norman Gottwald's account, the revolutionary highland vanguard of Israel successfully mobilised the lowland rural masses to overthrow the ruling classes in Canaan using Yahwehism (which, as we have seen in the last chapter, he believes found initial impulse in Egypt's monotheistic Atenist religion).

Like good multiculturalists, Israel then positively encouraged collective recruitment. For Gottwald there is nothing exclusive about the worshippers of Yahweh in the late Bronze Age. Indeed, whole peoples seek entry into the newly established social order. After a prolonged period of fluidity this arrangement eventually hardened into the 12 tribes which Gottwald argues were finally institutionalised by king David (or maybe before him by Saul) and then given bureaucratic "rationality" by Solomon with his monthly rotation of officials.¹ Gottwald, let it be noted, draws inspiration from Lewis Henry Morgan and his classic study of the Iroquois confederacy of tribes.²

Albeit vastly more ambitious, wide-ranging and sophisticated, the central thesis advanced by Gottwald essentially corresponds with that of George Mendenhall. Israeli peasant socialism was a deliberately segmented social formation. Mutual aid, confederal relations, tribal intermarriage, tribal military levies, small-scale patriarchal landholdings and universal male cultic assemblies were, taken together, an anti-aristocratic, anti-imperialist defence mechanism. Constructed for the twofold purpose of keeping free from Egypt and preventing an internal revival of Canaanite aristocratic landlordism.

Following Mendenhall, Gottwald describes the new order as uniquely "progressive", compared with "contiguous" and "antecedent" social

systems in the region.³ I have already mentioned in the previous chapter the possibility of a general land redistribution, the jubilees and textual indications of egalitarianism. Gottwald holds that Israel's "inarticulate traditional socialism" overthrew the Canaanite tribute system *without* afterwards reproducing its steep social contours. That would indeed make Israel exceptional.

Peasant revolutions have happened throughout history.⁴ Two *successful* Chinese examples: one ancient, the other modern. Liu Bang (256/47-195 BCE) - born into a humble Chinese peasant family, he led a rural insurrection and in 202 BCE founded the Han dynasty, which began by freeing slaves and reducing taxes. Then there is Mao Zedong's peasant-based People's Liberation Army. It broke the power of landlords in the villages it took. And having gained the surrender of Beijing in March 1949, Mao's regime set about liquidating the landlords as a class. Between 1951 and 1952 they were expropriated. Peasants, in their turn, were encouraged to organise themselves into cooperatives.

The subsequent pattern is, suffice to say, sadly familiar, however. Despite lavish egalitarian promises, social stratification quickly re-emerges, as revolutionary cadre are *forced* to oversee, learn or mimic *socially necessary* functions. During the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age those functions would have included: supervising irrigation work; maintaining grain and other vital common reserves; drafting legal decrees; negotiating with foreign diplomats; serving as military commanders in order to protect against invading armies; etc.

Gottwald is convinced that there were tribal chiefs, priests and generals. Despite that, Israel was a "self-governing community of free peasants", which provided "dignity and livelihood for all members".⁵ That is why he feels able to call the mode of production "communitarian". The 'big men', he says, did not exercise coercive powers. Hence, apart from the surplus production customarily given over for religious purposes and social aid for the needy, peasant labour did not support any kind of elaborate state machine. Tribal chiefs, priests and generals were probably better off than others in their immediate locality, but not by much. And, it should be added, even if their power positions were heritable, there would have been an obligation to give away any surplus product they had at their disposal to

those around them because of the gift obligation rules outlined by Marcel Mauss.⁶ Without doing that, power would have drained away from the power-holders. Other leaders would have been found. Hence, we can safely conclude, there existed no socially embedded drive to constantly raise production. That is characteristic of peasantries facing high, or increasing, tax demands. Marginal land thereby coming under the plough. Nor would there be the necessity to accumulate forced onto the better-off. Surpluses have to be given away and are always limited. Understandably, peasants, in general, prefer to do as little work as possible. An absence of forts, palaces and grand public buildings and the presence of small farmsteads throughout the highlands is cited by Gottwald as an archaeological pointer.

Nor, says Gottwald, did Israel pay tribute to Egypt, or any other imperial empire. Prefiguring 'socialism in one country', he believes Israel cut itself off from what survived of the tribute-gathering system of the day. It should be remembered that, though it survived the late Bronze Age general crisis, Egypt had been profoundly weakened. As always, periods of independence for small countries such as Israel were brief and resulted not so much from heroic internal class struggles, but more the decay, weakness and retreat of big powers.

That said, an egalitarian religious ideology almost certainly played a key role in mobilising Israel's late Bronze Age peasant revolution - if it happened (and I believe it did, with literary clues and fragments surviving in the *Bible*). However, claims of an *extended* non-hierarchical peasant socialism have to be treated cautiously. Peasant rebel armies may be mobilised with all manner of fantastic millenarian predictions, egalitarian legal decrees and even substantial measures that seem to embody those ends. Popular passions are thereby ignited, directed and sustained.

Nevertheless, if established, there is the constant danger that outside powers will invade the peasant utopia in order to plunder, exact tribute and enslave. Hence the necessity of maintaining well drilled military forces, which, needless to say, are costly and inherently hierarchical. There is an unavoidable chain of command in all armies with those who issue orders and those expected to obey them. And those who habitually issue orders can easily be tempted to establish themselves as privileged rulers. Military coups are as old as armies.

Not that peasants are best placed to resist. They are subject to the tyranny of isolation. Their general way of life is disaggregated. Peasant families are separated one from another as they work the land.⁷ Each peasant family also strives to be self-sufficient; consumption being obtained more through an exchange with nature than complex relations with wider society. That is not just the case with food. Spinning and weaving would be done by the women of the household and, once the harvest had been gathered in, the men would take up brewing, leatherworking, carpentry, smithing and building work. Then there is the tyranny of time. If starvation is to be avoided there is no choice. Soil must be ploughed, seeds sown and crops harvested, according to the endless circular rhythm dictated by the seasons. And to the degree peasant families are uninvolved with the urban centres and are fixed on the daily routine, they are incapable of enforcing common interests.

Independent action by peasants is therefore notoriously transient when it comes to high politics. That helps explain the cutting remark contained in the *Communist manifesto* about the “idiocy of rural life”.⁸ The Athenian meaning of ‘idiocy’ being a citizen who fails to attend the popular assembly, who is separated off, and who views political life from a detached, individualised and parochial viewpoint. By youthful training, Marx was a classical scholar, of course.

Nor do peasants really constitute a single class. Peasants are divided into different strata, each with mutually antithetical interests. At one extreme are those granted, holding, owning or renting considerable lands and who regularly employ auxiliary labour. At the other extreme are those languishing deep in debt and who possess less than nothing. These paupers must hire out their ability to labour (even sell themselves or their wife and children into slavery). So the peasantry includes exploited and exploiters. Even within the peasant family - the basic unit of production - that is the case. Male patriarchs ruthlessly take advantage of dependent relatives and relations.⁹

Unless limited to a pocket-sized territory, peasant democracy proves impossible to maintain for long. Work, seasons and divergent interests tear solidarity apart. The peasant’s instinctive hatred of taxation and centralised authority - peasant anarchism - resolves itself into the acceptance of, or

search for, a saviour, prophet, king or god who will deliver them from disorganisation, internal conflicts, foreign threats and send them “rain and sunshine from above”.¹⁰ Anti-statism thereby becomes statism.

I am more than prepared to accept that a late Bronze Age peasant revolution massively reduced and then institutionally maintained flattened social contours in Palestine. The most convincing way, in my opinion, to explain the surviving traces of an egalitarian ethos in the *Bible*. The social elite was confined to religious leaders and military commanders, who were in all likelihood related to their congregations and fellow fighters through ties of friendship, marriage or blood. In other words, social relations were ethnical, or personal, not those of political society (a distinction taken from Lewis Henry Morgan).¹¹ Israel could therefore be legitimately described as a non-state, or even post-state, peasant society.

Here I can usefully cite the historian Chris Wickham. In his acclaimed study of the early Middle Ages, he shows that there were many local and possibly larger regional examples of what he calls the “peasant mode of production” following the end of the Roman empire in the west.¹² Social gradations were flattened, taxation abolished and there was no state properly speaking.

However, peasant socialism does not - it needs emphasising - equate with a higher level of *material* civilisation. While the Israeli social revolution removed the main burden of exploitation from the individual peasant household, there was also an undoubted loss. Social flattening went hand in hand with cultural shrinkage.

Merchants, musicians, shopkeepers, poets, doctors, painters, perfumers, dancers, architects, dressmakers, jewellers, sculptors, etc - those whom we would now call the middle classes - found that the social surplus needed to support them in those occupations *full time* evaporated.

Because they were primarily reliant on aristocratic-driven demand, there was bound to be a downward spiral. Falling numbers of peasants from one generation to the next and a reduction of the overall social surplus surely sealed their fate. And seeing the past through the prism of material objects as they do, it comes as no surprise that mainstream archaeologists write of a darkness separating bronze and iron civilisations.

Yet though remarkably successful and lasting a couple of centuries, according to Gottwald, the Israeli system of peasant socialism eventually proved militarily inadequate when it came to meeting the growing menace posed by Philistine imperialism. To save egalitarianism, egalitarianism had to be sacrificed. Hence, mourns Gottwald, the retreat into monarchy and centralism with Saul (and then David). Yahwehism, he says, had to be continued, so popular was it, but was effectively turned on its head. Whereas kingship had been rejected because of Yahweh, now the king became Yahweh's anointed representative on earth.

The criticism of pottery

The archaeologists, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, are eager to distance themselves from Mendenhall and Gottwald. Philosophically they are liberal evolutionists. But their disagreements actually turn on what are secondary matters. Peasant revolution is disproved, Finkelstein and Silberman maintain, because: (a) new pottery and archaeological styles "could easily be imitated or borrowed"; (b) the highlands had long been populated; (c) there is a clear continuity in the lowlands between the late Bronze Age and the early Iron Age; (d) rural Canaanite society lacked the social impulse to colonise the highlands. All of which might well be true, but it hardly "shatters" the idea of a peasant revolution.¹³

It is worth elaborating upon the arguments of Finkelstein and Silberman. As we noted in the last chapter, Gottwald had approvingly cited William Dever and his discoveries of lowland pottery and building styles suddenly appearing in the Palestinian highlands. The assumption being that this proved or at least indicated a movement by *masses of people* from the lowlands into the highlands. This approach is quite rightly disputed. The appearance of an unaccustomed new style - whether that be clothing, jewellery, weapons, architecture or pottery - does not necessarily announce the arrival of an incoming ethnically or culturally distinct people. An archaeological cliché. Most often a new style represents nothing more momentous than humdrum imitation or importation via normal trade connections. Eg, Toyota, Mitsubishi and Honda cars being driven on the

roads of London, Los Angeles and Berlin does not equate with a mass influx of Japanese migrants. Nor does it signify that Japanese has become the dominant culture.

Finkelstein and Silberman confidently maintain that the Palestinian highlands have known periods of settlement dating back to the early Bronze Age (3500-2200 BCE). As for the introduction of waterproof plaster technology cited by Gottwald, it first began hundreds of years prior to the rise of Israel. Crucially, lowland society was, they believe, in unmistakable decay long before the claimed late Bronze Age entry into the highlands. Hence their conclusion that there was not the social energy for a settlement movement from the lowlands.

Finkelstein and Silberman argue that those who came to call themselves Israelites were, in fact, themselves Canaanites. But semi-nomadic Canaanites, who lived on the margins of that society. When political conditions allowed, or demanded, these people shifted their main socio-economic focus. Highlanders seem to have slowly taken over a depopulated coastal plain. They would easily have merged with the traditional inhabitants with whom they had long associations. Clearly a process that happened in the wake of the late Bronze Age general crisis and the sacking and abandonment of Canaanite cities. Instead of a swift conquest under the command of a god-inspired hero, Finkelstein and Silberman are of the view that ancient Israel emerged *gradually* from the debris of collapse. Israel is depicted as taking over what remained and slowly rebuilding various state formations in the region. In other words, a variation on the peaceful infiltration theory, first advanced by Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth in the 1920s.

Yet the fact of the matter is that Finkelstein and Silberman do not really focus on the central question of how the Bronze Age general crisis weakened the Canaanite city-states and what agency (or agencies) brought about their final demise. They are more concerned with what replaced the Canaanite tribute-gathering social formation. There is, of course, no *logical* reason to opt for either this or that solution. The biblical scholar Mark Smith, tellingly comments that detailed studies of regional variations within Palestine “call into question the viability of a single master thesis”.¹⁴ Peasant revolution, violent urban unrest, pirate raids, Apiru rebels, plague,

taxation flight and a highland movement into the lowlands are conceivably, and probably were, *all* elements that contributed to Canaanite collapse and replacement.

Suffice to say, the main polemical thrust of Finkelstein and Silberman is against the old archaeological orthodoxy (and by inference the various political projects that have hidden behind it). Eg, marshalling the archaeological evidence, they comprehensively demolish the historicity of the biblical Abraham, Moses and Joshua. Hence, while Finkelstein and Silberman develop a theory of Israeli origins which is pleasingly iconoclastic, they unmistakably continue within the critical-historical tradition of Wellhausen, Alt, Noth, Mendenhall and Gottwald.

Counterrevolution

Let us move on. How did the monarchical counterrevolution happen? Biblical accounts blame the common people because, sinfully, they slid back into worshipping other gods. Yahweh, therefore, withheld his divine protection. That put foreigners, especially the Philistines, at a distinct military advantage. As described in the first book of Samuel, the Philistine armies twice routed the combined tribal levies of the Hebrews and on the second occasion they “captured the ark of god” (in which Yahweh himself dwelt).¹⁵

Thanks to heavenly intervention, the tribes recover their sacred box after seven months. Nevertheless, because of this military humiliation, plus corruption and self-seeking, the days of the judges were finally coming to a close. The Hebrew elders insisted that they needed a king and a centralised state “like all the other nations”.¹⁶

The aged prophet, Samuel, issues what must surely be one the most powerful anti-monarchist warnings: a king who rules over you “will take the best of your fields, olive orchards and vineyards”; he “will take a tenth of your grain and of your vineyards”; he will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers; he will take your sons “to run before his chariots” and serve as soldiers, armourers or forced agricultural labourers; he will turn you into “his slaves”.¹⁷ Despite Samuel’s eloquence, and

foresight, the “people refuse to listen”.¹⁸ More than that, Yahweh too insisted upon a king. Samuel, naturally, felt obliged to fall in line

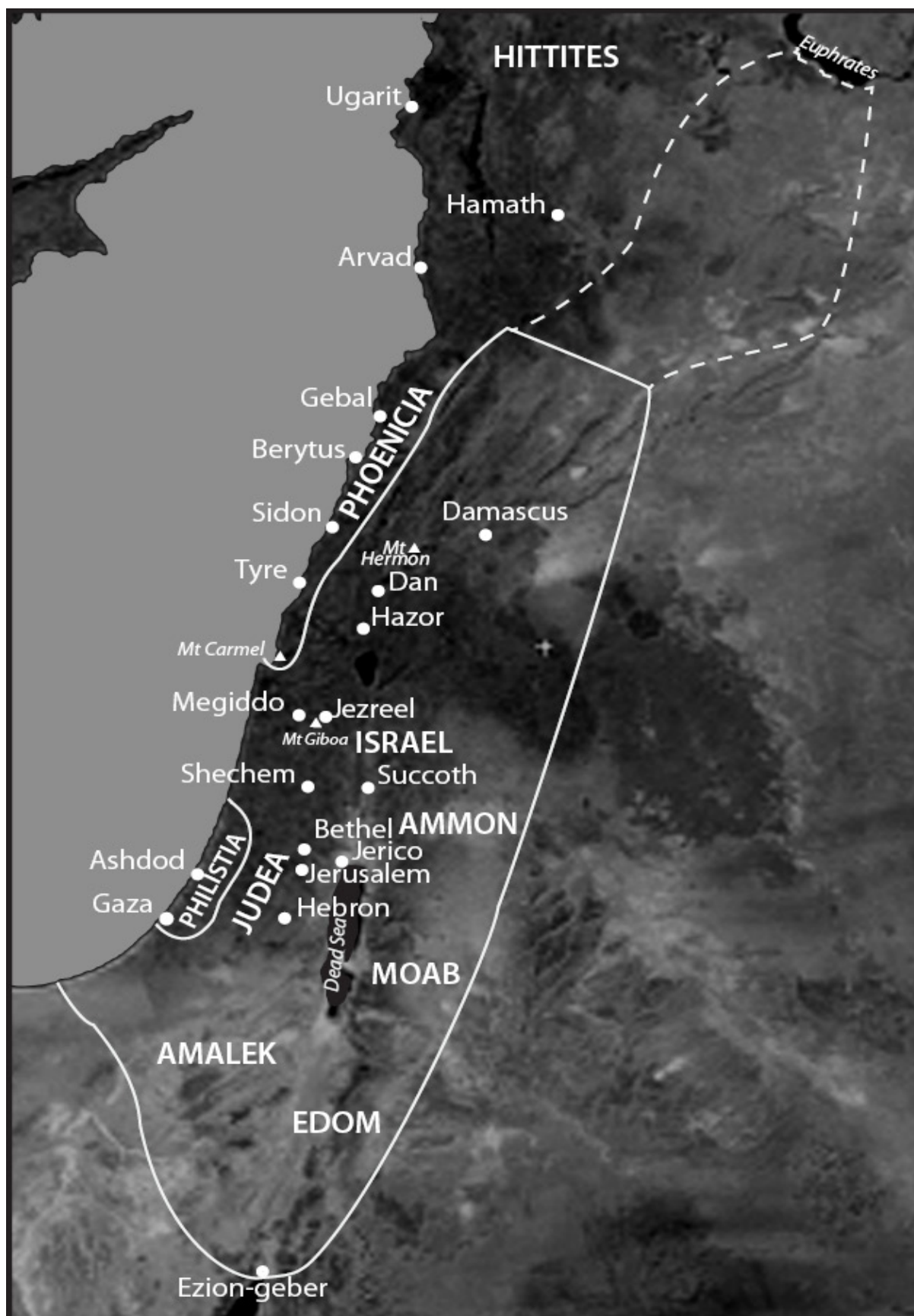


Figure 1. David and Solomon's 'empire': a late invention.

. Saul, from the northern tribe of Benjamin, was duly elected by lot and is anointed by Samuel.

Tall, handsome and charismatic, Saul proves militarily successful. He defeats the Ammonites, Amelekites and Philistines. But Saul is religiously suspect. When Samuel tells Saul that Yahweh has bidden that the Amelekites must be exterminated, he does as he is told ... up to a point. The exact instruction was to "utterly destroy" them and *all* they have. Yahweh not only wants every man, women and child killed, but every "ox, sheep, camel and ass".¹⁹ Following orders, Saul puts the Amelekites to the sword. However, he spares their king, Agag ... and the best of the lambs and oxen and "all that is good".²⁰ Yahweh is furious. And, though Saul hacks his royal captive to pieces, Yahweh rejects him and promptly informs Samuel that another king must be found.

Now, of course, we arrive at the story of David. Few readers will not know the basic outline. David, the youngest son of Jesse, comes from the Judean town of Bethlehem. Samuel anoints him and the spirit of Yahweh "came mightily upon him".²¹

Yahweh torments Saul, who suffers bouts of severe depression. For consolation Saul gets David to play his lyre. This brings respite and a temporary return of mental stability. David enters into Saul's service and wins the love of his son, Jonathan. The Philistines once again launch themselves against Israel. Their champion, the giant Goliath, challenges anyone in the ranks of Saul's quaking army to single combat. Even though still a callow youth and working for his father as a humble shepherd, David volunteers. He kills Goliath with a single sling shot. David cuts off his head and the terrified Philistines flee.

David is acclaimed a national hero by the people. This provokes the murderous jealousy of Saul. To save his skin, David seeks refuge amongst the Philistines. Then the Moabites. But the prophet Gad advises him to go back to his native Judea.

Heading a band of 400-600 outlaws, David harries the Philistines, engages in a bit of extortion, saves various village folk and distributes booty. Hidden away in his mountainous stronghold, he manages to avoid capture by Saul's forces. Once again, however, David exiles himself

amongst the Philistines. As one of their vassals he is granted a ‘city’ and serves in their army. David and his followers raid neighbouring lands. In short he behaves like a classic Apiru chief.

After “a badly wounded” Saul commits suicide on the field of battle, and three of his sons, including Jonathan, are slain by the Philistines, David is proclaimed king of Israel. As with the deaths of Saul and his sons, David is shown in the *Bible* to be blameless in the killing of Jonathan’s crippled child, Mephibosheth, and Saul’s close lieutenants. There is a son who succeeds Saul. But we are told Ishbaal is assassinated by the Gibeonites. It hardly takes a Hercule Poirot to work out that in all likelihood David would have spared no effort to “root out” Saul’s male line.²²

As with all such system-creators, the accounts of their successors are shot through with contradictions.* Anyhow, the *Bible* then tells how David cleverly seizes Jerusalem and establishes an extensive realm, “for the lord, the god of hosts, was with him”.²³ During his dotage David behaves ever more appallingly, driving his son, Absalom, to revolt and descends into sexual depravity. Yet, despite such transgressions, he is succeeded by another of his many sons, Solomon, who extends the kingdom to the banks of the Euphrates and the borders of Egypt (see figure 1).

*Stefan Heym’s novel, *The king David report* (1972), is a readable, knowing, eviscerating account of David’s brave, lying, talented, debauched, cheating, nation-making, serial-murdering life. Heym sees the second book of Samuel as a highly contradictory account designed to “legitimise” the rule of David’s successor Solomon. As with most such artistic creations, it does not make good history. But such works do say a great deal about the author and their world. Heym was simultaneously a committed ‘official communist’ and a *critical* citizen of the German Democratic Republic. I would suggest that the subtext of his *David* could be read as both a defence and damnation of Joseph Stalin. The latter possibility was not lost on his censors.

Unheard of riches flow into the royal treasury. The magnificent Jerusalem temple is built, along with numerous other impressive public works throughout the realm. Internationally Solomon is proclaimed the wisest and most admirable of rulers. Prestige brings exotic visitors to the king’s palace from far and wide. A golden age for Israel. And yet, like his father, in his later years Solomon succumbs to temptation. Breaking divine commandments, he “loved many foreign women”: we are told he had 700 wives and 300 concubines. As Yahweh had warned, they “turned away his heart”.²⁴ Solomon introduces the worship of foreign gods and goddesses: Ashtoreth, Milicom, Chemosh, Molech, etc.

For the sake of David, his father, Yahweh's retribution is delayed till after Solomon's death and the succession of his son, Rehoboam. Subject peoples rise up. Rehoboam had foolishly wanted to introduce harsh



Figure 2. Ancient Israel and Judea.

levels of extra taxation. Disastrously, the core kingdom then cleaves into two (see figure 2). The 10 northern tribes break away and call themselves Israel. In the south, the Judean kingdom is left to struggle on alone (by tradition it is made up of the tribes of Judah and Simeon). And yet Yahweh promises that David's throne - ie, his royal line - will last "for ever".²⁵

Few historians, biblical scholars and archaeologists nowadays hold that this and other such stories represent a broadly accurate description of early Israel. Those who do are somewhat generously called *maximalists*. Yet, going back to the 15th century, the most advanced literature has cast doubt on *Bible*-derived Christian historical assumptions. The Dutch scholar, Desiderius Erasmus (1466/49-1536), is usually credited with being the first to study the *Bible* in a critical way.

Very little in the *Bible* can, in fact, be taken as incontrovertible. Indeed, today there is a school of thought which totally discounts David and Solomon, considering them pure invention. Exactly when the scribes are meant to have been given starting orders to begin their work of highly colourful fiction varies greatly - from the 6th century BCE to the 2nd century CE. Niels Peter Lemche representing the most recent dating.²⁶ However, it is agreed, proceeding from nothing more substantive than a vague folklore, the political elite wanted a glorious past created as a popular focus for nationalist aspirations. This is the *minimalist* approach.²⁷

Others take what I consider to be a more realistic approach. Because of the sheer abundance of stories, place names and personalities contained in the Deuteronomic books, the argument is that this reflects a *real* underlying history (or, in other words, the *Bible* has some real documentary value). Though it does not decide the matter conclusively, a much valued basalt block was discovered in 1993 by the archaeologist Avraham Biran. Fragmented, written in Aramaic and consisting only of 13 remaining lines, the Tell Dan stone, carved in roughly 850 BCE, explicitly refers to the "House of David". Hence its significance. Dan, it should be mentioned, was located in the far north of the ancient kingdom of Israel - presumably the place therefore frequently changed hands. The chiselled script boasts of "[Hazal], king of Syria, Damascus having [killed] the son of [Ahab], the king of Israel, and [Ahaz]iahu, son of [Jehoram] of the the house of David".

Interestingly, the second book of Kings reports that Ahaziah, king of Israel, and Jehoram, king of Judea, were simultaneously killed - though this is put down to a coup by the Israelite general and later king, Jehu.²⁸ Anyway, the triumphant Syrian monarch, the one whom the Tell Dan stone celebrates, goes on to turn “[Ahaz]iahu’s, towns and land, into [desolation].

This, and accumulated indirect evidence, has helped to undermine the ultra-minimalists. There was, it seems, a monarchy which traced its lineage back to David (a real or imagined person) - some one hundred years after his death in the generally agreed biblical chronology. That is, the kings of Judea, as opposed to those of Israel, of course.

The best book I have read on this subject is *David and Solomon* (2007), jointly written by the aforementioned Finkelstein and Silberman. According to the two authors, there is no material evidence of a *strong* centralised state formation in Judea - not least based on Jerusalem - till towards the end of the 8th century BCE. That is more than 250 years *after* David in the standard biblical chronology. Archaeological digs - including those designed to illustrate the historical fact of the biblical accounts of David’s imperial capital and his son’s huge temple - reveal nothing more impressive than a modest hilltop settlement in Jerusalem.** A minor chief’s political-religious centre, doubtless, but certainly not a city boasting a world-renowned temple.

** Many desperately want to believe otherwise. And they are willing to pay handsomely for it. Religion can be the nationalism of the easily bamboozled. In 2005 the Israel Antiquities Authority uncovered a well organised archaeology forgery ring, which for decades manufactured splendid ancient objects, including from Solomon’s temple. The forgers targeted “key spots of interest to Israel at the moment” - there is, of course, a politically driven Zionist need to prove an ancient claim to the land (*The Guardian* January 20 2005).

Other critical-minded archaeological authorities, those whom we might call the centrist school, agree. Eg, Dever writes of a real temple in the “age of Solomon”; built along Phoenician lines by Phoenician architects, “craftsmen and artisans”.²⁹ But he too considers Jerusalem to be a modest affair. Hence Solomon’s temple is described as a “royal chapel”.³⁰

Finkelstein and Silberman are more than willing to countenance David as a real historical figure and founder of a royal line. An Apiru chief who managed to carve out, or gain control of, a kingdom which had Jerusalem as its capital. However, not only was Jerusalem no more than a glorified

township at the time (and for many years thereafter). The surrounding realm was diminutive and confined to the dry, rugged Judean hill country. Framed by the Dead Sea, the kingdom stopped short of Bethel, located slightly to the north, but included Beersheba on the borders of the Negev desert in the south. However, to the west it ended with the hills of Shephelah, where it met the prosperous and militarily powerful Philistine coastal strip. In other words, Judea amounted to little more than the highland area rising to the west of the Dead Sea.

So Finkelstein and Silberman feel confident in discounting biblical claims that David ruled over a territory that roughly equates with modern Palestine. Solomon's empire - stretching from the Mediterranean coast to the Euphrates and to the borders of Egypt - is put down to much later overinflated (fustian) invention.

Finkelstein and Silberman go on to convincingly show that David's kingdom was economically poor and militarily weak. His subject population is estimated to have amounted to 5,000 people.³¹ Small even by the Lilliputian standards of the day. Judea's only advantage when it came to the imperial ambitions of outsiders was its uninviting terrain and economic unimportance.

The real Israel (Samaria) was in these times located to the north. Once again centred on the rugged highlands, this kingdom did though contain the fertile upper Jordan valley. Its population is thought to have been some eight times bigger than Judea's and included the genuine cities of Samaria, Shechem and Megiddo. Israel really did enjoy a substantial influx of tax and tribute which allowed the construction of imposing fortifications and marbled temples - wrongly attributed to Solomon by maximalist theology, history and archaeology.

Not one, but many gods

Before proceeding further, and presenting the likely circumstances in which the Deuteronomic history (the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) was composed, we must once again backtrack. Let us ask a few closely related questions. What was the religion of Israeli peasant socialism and,

following that, the kingdoms of Israel and Judea? Was Yahwehite monotheism universally accepted and woven into the social fabric? Were there only temporary and to all intents and purposes minor deviations from strict orthodoxy?

In the King James *Bible* - the 'authorised' English version - the 'divine name', or 'Tetragrammation', is more or less consistently rendered as 'Lord' or 'God' (often printed in upper case). The same goes for earlier Greek and Latin translations. It should be added that biblical scholars freely admit that these titles substitute for the Hebrew letters IHVH, in English translated as YHWH, which, of course, stands for 'Yahweh' (the vowels being omitted).



The ancient Hebrews worshipped many gods ... and goddesses.

The practice of replacing 'Yahweh' for an altogether vaguer term such as 'Lord' began "before the Christian era": ie, with the Jews. As the preface to my revised standard version of the *Bible* (1973) further explains, this avoided using the proper name of "the one and only God, as though there

were other gods from whom He had to be distinguished”. That would be “entirely inappropriate for the universal faith of the Christian Church”.

Yet the *Tanakh* has numerous passages which simply take for granted the existence of other gods. The first commandment instructs the Israelites: “You shall have no other gods before me”.³² In other words, the various authors of what Christians call the *Old Testament* did think that Yahweh had to be distinguished from other gods. Indeed, evidence of an *older*, polytheistic, tradition still remains within the book of Genesis, albeit in negative form: eg, the attack on Baal and “idolatrous priests” in Zephaniah i,4; the mocking of stone and wooden idols in Habakkuk ii; the spirits mentioned in 1 Kings xxii,19; denunciations of Baal and Asherah in 2 Kings xxi and xxiii.

Such references to Baal, Yahweh’s arch-enemy, seem “to reflect Israelite worship of this god”.³³ In the *Bible*, an emotionally oversensitive Yahweh rages against those making offerings to Baal. He specially selects prophets to extinguish this despicable cult. And yet the *Bible* contains many revealing stories telling how the chosen people repeatedly turned to Baal. Eg, 1 Kings xvi, 31-33. The Israeli monarch, Ahab, “went and served Baal and worshipped him. He, Ahab, erected an altar for Baal, in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria.”

Not that the southern kingdom was immune. 1 Kings xiv,22-24, reports that the Judeans “also built for themselves high places, pillars, and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree. They did according to all the abominations of the nations which the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.”

Despite the various theories that Israel originated in the desert margins, worship of Baal indicates a clear orientation towards arable agriculture. Baal symbolises fertility and has been anthropologically categorised as a “dying and rising god”. In *The golden bough* (1914) James Frazer coined that particular designation, abstracting from his forensic studies of Osiris, Tammuz and Adonis: all male gods representing nature’s cycle, who “annually died and rose again from the dead”.³⁴

Whether Baal died and miraculously sprung to life again, or simply disappeared and then returned to view, is still a matter of debate amongst

scholars.³⁵ However, in the Ugaritic Baal cycle we read the following lines:

Baal is dead! What will return him to life; whereupon all nature blossomed again and El proclaimed: 'Baal the conqueror lives; the prince, the lord of the earth, has revived.'³⁶

The Bronze age emporium city of Ugarit is located near Ras Shamra (on the coast of Syria about 100 miles north of Beirut). At the height of its prosperity the city is variously estimated to have had a population ranging from 3,115 to 13,555.³⁷ At either margin impressive. It was excavated in 1929 under the direction of Claude FA Schaeffer and several libraries of clay tablets were brought to light. They include the Baal cycle and other sacred texts. Ugarit and Israel were closely related culturally. Ugaritic and Hebrew constitute branches on the same linguistic tree. There is a distinct religious similarity too. Tell-tale parallel sayings, poems and stories crop up in the *Bible* and the Ugaritic texts. Eg, in the Ugaritic texts one finds mention of "herem warfare": that is, the type of warfare supposedly practiced by Joshua in which "all things connected to the enemy in a battle are consecrated to the god by killing them, either in the battle itself or afterwards".³⁸ Mark Smith makes the salient point: "the Ugaritic texts ... offer significant gains for understanding the Israelite religion".³⁹

Baal is a storm god and is shown locked in an epic life-and-death struggle with Yam (god of stormy seas and chaos) and Mot (god of death). Yam kills Baal, but the tables are then reversed. Mot reluctantly submits to the risen/returned Baal. The god Baal has a long list of other adventures and enemies. Despite that, despite his list of successful struggles against them, in the Ugarit texts at least, he never becomes the chief god. He is always doomed to be the heir apparent (in that sense time remains frozen).

Seemingly the *circular* Baal cult involved orgiastic ceremonies and human sacrifice carried out at special sites called *tophets*. We are informed by the writers of antiquity, including Plutarch, about Carthage (a Phoenician colony) and the religiously prescribed, and redeeming, practice of roasting babies alive. If that happened - and most historians and archaeologists are convinced that it was not Roman black propaganda - such state-sanctioned

infanticide would surely indicate a social crisis of some kind; but that way Baal was gratified or mollified.

The *Bible* itself contains stories both condemning *and* condoning child sacrifice. Jeremiah vii,31 has Yahweh rejecting the “abomination” of those who “burn their sons and daughters in the fire”. But that must be set against a theological background where Exodus xxii,29 commands that “the first born of your sons shall be given to me”. Also in Exodus, this time xxxiv, we read: “All the first-born of your sons you shall redeem.” Nor does Yahweh show the slightest compunction in cynically testing Abraham with the instruction to sacrifice his son, Isaac.⁴⁰ In Judges the Israeli war leader, Jephthah, does kill his unnamed daughter and only child. Hubristically, Jephthah had vowed to Yahweh that, if granted military victory over the Ammonites, he would give as a “burnt offering” whomsoever first greeted him when he returned home.⁴¹

Working out the broad outlines of the original Hebrew religion does not rely on exegesis alone. Over many decades excavators have unearthed an impressive range of objects - amulets, carvings, seals, statutes - which show that ancient Israel/Judea was “thoroughly polytheistic”. Many of the figures depicted are thought to be gods and goddesses - though we cannot be sure - not mere mortals. Artistic interpretation thereby coming to the fore amongst contending academics.⁴²

Then there was a wall painting and inscription found at Kuntillet Ajrud, in the Sinai, dated 850-750 BCE. It referred to the gods El, Baal and Yahweh ... and “his Asherah”.⁴³ An archaeological bombshell.

We are, however, as suggested above, provided with another, much wider, *background* picture of ancient Israel through the Ugaritic texts. The Ugaritic pantheon has four distinct levels. At the summit sits the supreme god and his wife (El and Asherah). Below them their 70 divine children (including Yam, Mot, Baal, Astarte, Dagon, Tirosh, Horon, Nahar, Resheph, Kotar Hosis and Anat, as well as the sun-goddess, Shapshu and the moon-god, Yerak). The stars of El. Then comes Kothar wa-Hasis, the chief minister. Finally lesser servants, those whom the *Bible* calls angels (in other words, messenger-gods). Outside the divine household the Ugaritic religion was inhabited by numerous evil spirits, devils and a Satan figure (Shachar). This

arrangement would seem to be “intimately related” to the structure of the royal household in ancient Ugarit.⁴⁴

Frank Cross (following Albrecht Alt) lists the various names of the *main* god of Genesis and Exodus as it originally appeared: El-Shadday, El-Elyon, El-Olam, El-Bethel, El-Elohay-Israel, El-Roi.⁴⁵ Yahweh comes to dominance in other books. But many of El’s attributes, titles and relationships are assumed by, or transfer to, him. In 1 Kings xxii,19-22 we read of Yahweh meeting with his “host of heaven”. Then there is Asherah. In the *Old Testament* she is the wife of Baal. But, as we have already mentioned, archaeological evidence shows that, at least amongst some Judeans, the goddess Asherah was considered Yahweh’s co-ruler and spouse. A marital join continued in the ditheistic belief system of the Hebrew mercenary community based in Egypt down to the 3rd century BCE. Papyrus found on Elephantine - a little strip of an island located just above the first cataract in the Nile river - shows that they were worshipped as a couple.⁴⁶

In terms of this discussion, the Hebrew word for death, ‘metu’, is instructive. Linguists say it is derived from Mot, the Ugaritic god of death.⁴⁷ The word for sea, ‘yam’, is even more revealing, being an exact match for the Ugaritic sea god. Scholars have also noted that names such as Daniel, Ishmael, Michael and Israel are “theophoric in form” - that is to say, the suffix reproduces the divine name, in this case the god El.⁴⁸ Israel meaning something like “God rules” or “May god show himself as ruler”.⁴⁹

In all likelihood, as tradition dictated, Israelite clans continued to venerate their own particular family gods or goddesses (statues, etc, were often clearly female and big breasted). Numerous intimate shrines are thought to have existed, located within houses, villages, caves and groves of trees. The cults associated with these sites would seem to have involved an annual calendar of events: eg, “feasting, dancing and betrothals”.⁵⁰

While the topmost pantheon has been considerably reduced in biblical references, the evidence shows beyond any *reasonable* doubt that the religion of ancient Israel closely matched those of neighbouring peoples in

the Levant - including the opulent and sophisticated civilisation of Phoenicia. We know that hilltops and mountains were considered especially holy - the *Bible* contains many hints: Bethel, Gezer, Jerusalem, Arnon, Bamah and Gibeon were, we can gather, all important religious centres.

Saul, David and even Solomon are shown as patrons. Presumably, during visits to high places, they would have paid generously to have had sex with cult prostitutes, sacrificed animals, or children, and sought favours from one or another of the “host of heaven”: El, Yahweh, Asherah, Baal, Yam, Mot, Astarte, Dagon, Shapshu, Yerak, etc.

There was also an unmistakable religious-cultural borrowing from Egypt. Looking at the various objects photographed, or drawn, by archaeologists reproduced in books and journals, or placed on the internet, one is instantly struck by an extraordinary similarity between pharonic depictions of humans, animals and gods and those of ancient Israel/Canaan. Hardly surprising, though, given the prolonged periods of Canaanite vassalship to Egypt.

That aside, I think we can conclude, with some considerable degree of assurance, that notions of an exclusive Yahwehism providing the ideological inspiration for the Israelite peasant movement, and then constituting the *monotheistic* religion of a liberated Israel, are simply not credible. Ditto, notions of the early monarchs as defenders of an *exclusive* Yahwehite faith (albeit ideologically reversed).

Mark Smith has charted how Yahwehite henotheism slowly begins to emerge from polytheism (both modern concepts, of course, that would not have been understood by anybody living in the late Bronze Age or early Iron Age). The four heavenly levels went through a successive series of narrowing modifications. To begin with, Yahweh was merely one of El’s and Athirat’s children. El dividing the world “according to the number of the divine sons”. Supposedly there being 70 nations and Israel going to Yahweh, of course. Later redactors, it is suggested, “evidently uncomfortable” with the polytheism expressed in the phrase, “according to the number of the divine sons”, alter it to read: “according to the number of the children of Israel” (neatly, its patriarchal family heads are also said to number 70).***

*** I have tried to discover the origins of the significance of the number 70 for the Hebrews. But I still cannot say I have got very far. There were not only 70 nations and languages. All the “persons of

the house of Jacob, that came into Egypt, were 70” (Genesis xxxv,27). Later 70 elders were assembled by Moses at the command of god (Numbers xi,16-30) and, in line with that, the supreme court of Israel consisted of 70 men. Jesus too had a council of 70 disciples (Luke x,1-24). Bob Potter brought to my attention the fact that the Mormons, the Church of Jesus Christ and the Latter Day Saints, likewise consider the number 70 of great significance. It has a priesthood quorum of 70. The number 70 also seems to have some significance for the Babylonians and ancient Egyptians. The astroarchaeologist, Fabio Silva, tells me that Egyptian sky-watchers observed that the bright star, Sirius, disappears from view for 70 days of the year - darkness being ritualistically charged since the earliest times culturally. Sirius was certainly hugely important for the Egyptians. The goddess, Sophis, was directly linked to the star and the Egyptian calendar was based on its movement. The helical rising of Sirius marked the beginning of their new year and the onset of the vital Nile floodwaters. Canaan was, of course, heavily influenced by Egypt.

Psalm lxxxii shows the first surviving biblical narrowing of the divine family. It relates how the god, El, presides over a divine council/assembly, in which Yahweh stands up and makes his accusation against the other gods. Here the text shows “the older theology”, which the passage is “rejecting”.⁵¹

By the 8th century BCE, during which the Israeli state and monarchy comes to a shuddering end, it is “evident that the god El was identified with Yahweh”. As a result Yahweh-El becomes the husband of the goddess, Asherah-Athirat. As I have shown above, this is supported by archaeological evidence of a joint cult. Not surprisingly then, there are also biblical condemnations of the presence of her statue in Jerusalem. Ezekiel xiii,10 reports that the Jerusalem temple was full of “the idols of the house of Israel”.

In henotheistic form, the religious devotion to Yahweh puts him in the role of a divine king ruling over the other deities. This arrangement appears in psalm xxxix,6-8, where the “sons of god”, or “heavenly beings”, are called upon to heap praise upon Yahweh alone. Between the 8th and 6th centuries BCE other gods are increasingly depicted as codicils to Yahweh’s imperium: they shrink into angels or turn into devils.

Narrowing the hierarchy of heaven follows, or represents, albeit in idealised form, the emergence of kings from amongst the Hebrew tribes. Smith argues that there were associated “traumatic” changes occurring in the legal framework; the individual becomes a legal personality, next to and alongside the extended family.⁵² He cites Deuteronomy xxvi,16; Jeremiah xxxi,29-30; and Ezekiel xviii. Presumably, old structures and egalitarian relationships were collapsing, or undergoing rapid decay, and being

subsumed by class interests and property rights. Smith highlights an increase in social stratification. The poor got poorer, the rich richer.

Others write along similar lines. Rainer Albertz says that with the “formation of a state” there came deep, structural changes, including the creation of “large landed estates, from the crown downwards” and the subordination of the peasantry to market-orientated surplus production. The old “egalitarian ideal” was corrupted or simply forced “aside”.⁵³ In fact, the poor steadily lost their land, fell into debt and into a permanent state of dependence. Wage-labour, debt-bondage and slavery grew correspondingly.

Numerous passages in Micah, Amos, Hosea and Isaiah can be cited as evidence. Eg, Micah: “Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil upon their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in the power of their hand. They covet fields, and seize them; and houses they take away; they oppress a man in his house, a man of his inheritance.”⁵⁴

International power shifts

What is undeniable, though, is the role of external factors. The rise of the Israeli kingdom into a regional power and the existence of an independent Judea to the south was due almost entirely to a strategic power vacuum in the Middle East. Egypt had been thrown into crisis and temporarily weakened by the general crisis of the late Bronze Age. Likewise Mesopotamia. However, the 8th century BCE saw a revived Assyria rebuild a huge empire. At its furthestmost extent neo-Assyria reached down to the Arabian gulf, and to the west the Mediterranean coast and the Nile.

Records of the Assyrian monarchs testify to the terrorist methods employed. One describes the gory punishment meted out to those who dared rebel:

With battle and slaughter I assaulted and took the city. Three thousand warriors I slew in battle. Their possessions I carried away. Many of their soldiers I took alive; some of them I cut off hands and limbs; of others the noses, ears, and arms; of many soldiers I put out the eyes. I devastated the city, dug it up, in fire I burned it; I annihilated it.⁵⁵

Israel fell under Assyrian domination. In 738 BCE Tilath-Pileser III made the kingdom his vassal and he demanded substantial tribute. A thousand talents of silver was paid over, reports 1 Kings xv,19. Pro- and anti-Assyrian factions formed and fought for influence in the northern court. Doubtless, however, there was political overlap and considerable fluidity, given changing internal and external factors.

When the anti-Assyrian faction momentarily gained the upper hand, Israel's monarch, Pekah (reigned 735-32), attempted to force the southern kingdom of Judah to join his rebellion - that would have involved recognition of northern leadership, something which the southern king, Ahaz, was less than willing to do. The anti-Assyrian coalition united Israel and Syria, but both had to sue for peace when the king of kings once again entered the Levant with his army. There was a heavy price to pay for the so-called Syro-Ephraimite⁵⁶ war of 734 BCE in loss of territory and payment of extra tribute.

Pekah is then murdered by the pro-Assyrian faction and replaced by Hoshea. He is favoured by the Assyrians. However, with the death of Tilath-Pileser, the anti-Assyrian faction once again gains the upper hand and Hoshea, this time allied to Egypt, makes another independence attempt. He was soundly beaten by the new Assyrian king, Shalmanesser V; who besieged and took the city of Samaria during his campaign of 727-25 BCE. A few years later, perhaps in 720 BCE, Israel made a last independence bid. It revolted against either Shalmanesser, or his successor, Sargon II (the records are unclear). But once again there was failure. The Assyrians dismembered the kingdom. And to ensure that nothing of the like happened again, there was a social decapitation. The Assyrians deported the local elite - the great landowners, priests and the most wealthy. Their records boast of 27,290 people being marched off into exile. Thereafter the northern kingdom becomes an object of Judean expansionism and effectively disappears from history. Later its common people became Christian and - later again - Muslim. Many of the Palestinian Arabs of today are surely the descendants of these ancient Hebrews.

CHAPTER SIX

Royalist nationalism, opposition prophets and the impact of Babylonian exile and return

Compared with the northern kingdom of Israel - abolished by Assyrian decree in or around 720 BCE - history moved according to a similar but delayed rhythm in the southern kingdom of Judea. Archaeological evidence shows that between the late 8th and early 7th centuries BCE the population of Jerusalem multiplies many times over. From a thousand to perhaps 15,000. A rough estimate, of course; and with equal vagueness historians reckon a one-in-20 to a one-in-10 ratio between urban and rural populations in the ancient world. So that would give a total population in Judea of around 200,000 at the time.

A new, 20-foot thick wall is built to surround the western hill and incorporate the huddled dwellings that had sprung up in the shadow of the city of David. Meanwhile, the bureaucratic, mercantile and religious elite amassed considerable fortunes and indulged their whims on conspicuous consumption. They provided themselves with numerous hangers-on, married handsome wives, lived in large town houses and were buried in elaborate tombs. As for the Judean kings, they crown the city heights with impressive buildings for the first time.

Enhanced wealth for the elite derives in the main from the spread of market relations, intensified tax demands and a surge in international trade. Under Assyrian sponsorship, Judea becomes a branch line on the highly lucrative Arabian trade route. Both imports and exports mushroom. Caravan trains from the south brought in incense, spices and other exotic luxury goods. Within Judea commercial-scale olive oil production takes off. Extensive vineyards are planted and wine shifts from being a private and local, to a highly profitable, state-controlled, industry. Sleepy villages are

transformed into bustling towns with reassuringly expensive public buildings, thriving bazaars and all manner of artisanal workshops.

Although hugely benefiting from integration into the Assyrian economic space and still Assyrian vassals, politically the kings of the newly prosperous Judea begin to entertain imperial ambitions of their own. Royal eyes fix on the north. Israeli ‘reunification’ soon becomes the official slogan: one Davidic dynasty, one supreme god, one capital city. Twenty years after miscalculated rebellion ended the northern kingdom of Israel, the southern king, Hezekiah (reigned c727-698 BCE), made his own declaration of independence.

The elderly Assyrian king, Sargon, had died unexpectedly while fighting the Cimmerians in the southern Caucasus. Hezekiah seized his moment. A royalist movement for national liberation is launched, which is combined, reinforced or wrapped up with religious reformation. The second book of Kings reports that Hezekiah rebelled “against the king of Assyria” and goes on to praise him because he “removed the high places, and broke down the pillars, and cut down the Asherah”. Hezekiah is given additional plaudits because he “broke in pieces the bronze serpent”, called Nehushtan, “that Moses had made”.¹

Baruch Halpern argues that it would be mistaken to interpret this account as equating to full-blown, Jerusalem-centred monotheism. That came later. Hezekiah is therefore viewed as taking Judea in the *direction* of exclusive Yahwehism.² Halpern believes that Hezekiah did not close state temples in provincial towns, though he suppressed rural shrines and locked his kingship into Yahweh worship. The archaeological record is inconclusive.³ Yet there can be no doubt that Hezekiah did preside over far reaching changes.

Hence the related suggestion that refugee priests played a key role in shaping his Yahwehite nationalism. Those who fled from the destruction of the northern kingdom would have loathed the Assyrians with a passion. And, coming from a richer, better connected, more sophisticated culture, they could well have been regarded as an invaluable intellectual asset by Hezekiah, as he set about formulating his version of Israeli reunification.

Others say that the Yahwehite priesthood in Jerusalem wanted to assert its domination over the increasingly prosperous, but still fiercely polytheistic

countryside ... and therefore stake a holy claim to be the sole beneficiary of religiously required tithes and offerings.

Not that the two arguments are mutually exclusive. Northern and southern priests could have fused into a single Yahwehite party. A ‘Yahweh alone’ movement⁴ is thought to have emerged prior to Hezekiah’s reign, perhaps beginning in the north. Hezekiah made a big impression on the writers of the second book of Kings. Of that we can be sure. “[T]here was none like him among the kings of Judea after him, nor amongst those who went before him.”⁵

It is worth noting that it was under the combined circumstances of irredentist royalist nationalism, burgeoning commercial relations and expanded state control that for the first time written texts, rather than recited epics or ballads, became the *main form* of ideological authority. Though literacy had doubtless spread from the narrow confines of the elite to the much wider middle classes, it is clear that politics was in the driving seat.

Selecting from the jungle of lists, annals, mysteries, hymns, regulations, popular legends and recent memories, and fashioning a coherent literature, required learning, a clear aim and artistry. But committing the result to parchment and papyrus helped fix the message. That empowered the sponsor. Priests were expected to recite *scripture* to their congregations. Hence, whereas the term ‘scribe’, or ‘writer’, previously designated administrative and clerical functions, now “didactic connotations became predominant”.⁶ Scribes were valued because of their creativity, and there is every reason to believe that Hezekiah himself provided guidelines, close supervision and generous patronage.

Anyway, we can safely reckon that the king drew confidence about his coming military success not only through faith in Yahweh. Hezekiah agreed to include his little kingdom in an Egyptian-backed, anti-Assyrian alliance. So as a personality he would appear to have been a sober-minded realist who recognised the advantages of exploiting big-power rivalries. Hezekiah was therefore no crazed religious fanatic embarking on a suicide mission. I think we can say that.

Nevertheless, four years after Hezekiah’s rebellion began, the newly installed Assyrian king, Sennacherib, son of Sargon, soundly defeated the Egyptians. He then proceeded to burn, slash and exterminate his way

through the Judean countryside and sack town after town. Archaeology provides ample confirmation. Naturally, Jerusalem itself was put under siege. Though its defences proved far too strong to allow easy capture, Hezekiah, sensibly, sued for peace. The terms imposed by Sennacherib amounted to amputation: massed deportations to Assyria; agriculturally rich and heavily populated western territories, the Shephelah hills, ceded to the Philistines; and significant additional tribute transfers. We can dismiss biblical claims that an angel miraculously slaughtered the Assyrian forces surrounding Jerusalem and thereby lifted the siege. Clearly later invention, designed to enhance the image of Hezekiah.

The attempt by the Judean monarch, the Yahweh alone movement and the anti-Assyrian court faction to assert monopoly rights over the peasant tax base proved almost as disastrous for the south as it had for the north. In the countryside one might guess that the common people blamed Hezekiah for the havoc, trauma and death wrought by the Assyrians. He presumably met with unrelenting hostility from sections of the elite too, not least the rural priesthood. Those committed to the traditional heavenly host would in all likelihood have accused him of blasphemy. We can imagine them demanding an end to Hezekiah's reformation and a return to the trusted gods and goddesses.

Writing the book

The king must have mobilised all available resources to prepare Judea for the oncoming struggle against Assyria: new fortifications, building up enormous food reserves, deep tunnelling to secure Jerusalem's water supplies and, one presumes, a substantially expanded army too. Such a programme could only have been carried out by emptying the treasury, imposing compulsory labour and squeezing extra surplus product from the immediate producers. Adding to their woes, those who survived amongst the peasantry would have been bled white in order to pay for the heavy tribute Sennacherib demanded in exchange for his victor's peace.

Though the *Bible* relates, in a convoluted account, how an aged Hezekiah eventually died of natural causes, replacing him with his 12-year-old son, Manasseh, amounted to a palace coup. Hezekiah's anti-Assyrian

nationalism is thrown into reverse. Renewed cooperation with Assyria and counter-reformation marches in step. As detailed by a scandalised second book of Kings, that meant reintroducing the image of Asherah into the Jerusalem temple, re-establishing the high places, erecting once again the altars of Baal and worshipping the “host of heaven”.

Manasseh is condemned for practising soothsaying and augury, and dealing with wizards and mediums. In that exact same spirit the king is said to have “burnt his son as an offering” some time during his 55-year reign.⁷ A sacrificial act which, of course, he might actually have performed. All in all, Manasseh is depicted as one of the most dreadfully wicked monarchs and is even blamed for the future destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (obviously another later interpellation).

Yet Manasseh would appear to have pursued a successful diplomatic policy by reinventing Judea as an ultra-loyal Assyrian vassal. For its part, Nineveh (capital city of the Assyrian king) had a real interest in a prosperous Judea so that it could serve as a strong buffer state against their Egyptian arch-enemy (undergoing a great power renaissance at the time). Manasseh’s pro-Assyrian course brought about an unmistakable economic revival. Judea once again integrated itself into the Arabian trade route, and commercial agricultural production was intensified and pushed east and south into the arid zones of what remained of the kingdom.

Manasseh was succeeded by his son, Amon. But he lasted less than two years. Amon was assassinated. Perhaps another palace coup, but this time carried out by the anti-Assyrian faction. The second book of Kings blames Amon’s servants and they are duly put to death by the “people of the land” - one presumes, populist code for members of the elite in this particular context. Manasseh’s eight-year-old son is elevated to the throne. Josiah (reigned 639-609 BCE) goes on, however, to be a king in the mould of his grandfather Hezekiah. Not his father or great grandfather.

Amazingly, the high priest of the Jerusalem temple and Josiah’s secretary discover a previously unknown “book of the law”. It provides the new king with the pretext he needs for another bid at imposing root and branch religious change. Having stumbled upon Yahweh’s legal code, Josiah immediately proceeds to decisive action. As told by the second book of Kings, the statues of Baal and Asherah are once again removed from the

Jerusalem temple ... and burnt. Their, and all other, “idolatrous” priests, are “deposed”. Josiah issues further orders. The temple brothels which housed the “male cult prostitutes” are closed. His reformation tsunamis out from Jerusalem. High places are laid waste, the topheth, the sacrificial site where children are killed in honour of Molech, is demolished, and sacred pillars are toppled. Taking advantage of a well ordered Assyrian withdrawal from the Levant and the absence of an Egyptian presence in the highlands, Josiah extends his Taliban-like campaign into Samaria (the old kingdom of Israel). The great cult site of Bethel is trashed. Its altar is broken into tiny pieces. Josiah carries out the same programme of purification throughout the north, killing priests as he goes, before returning triumphantly to Jerusalem.⁸

Understandably, most biblical scholars consider that Josiah himself sponsored the writing of the ancient law codes found by his secretary and the Jerusalem high priest. Obviously the ten commandments - and similar legal instructions - purportedly given to Moses on mount Sinai by Yahweh ... and, of course, now found in Deuteronomy. While doubtless there were later redactions, its “main outlines” begin “for the first time” during Josiah’s reign.⁹ In other words, Deuteronomy was a 7th century BCE invention.¹⁰

Likewise, doing Josiah’s bidding, it was in all probability the scribes of the Yahweh alone movement who completed the *first* versions of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Existing religious literature inherited from the reign of Hezekiah, as well as suitable poems, hymns, prophecies and popular legends, was collected, woven together, elaborated and theologically interpreted. Hence the theory that each of these books should be treated as a series of original blocks, which are then overlaid by subsequent authors and redactors.

Once again, the whole exercise of literary creation was carried out in order to further political aims. Exodus, Joshua, Samuel, Deuteronomy, Kings, etc, being prequels to Josiah’s reformation and Anschluss with the north. His bold plan for making David’s empire real would have been considerably aided by manufacturing a unified religion and a unified history. Minds were that way armed and readied for apocalyptic conflict.

So, thanks to Josiah’s scribes, the peoples of the south and north are cleverly united through 12 ancient tribes, which are in their turn given a

common ancestor in the form of the patriarch, Jacob (renamed Israel by an angel), along with a superbly crafted story going back to the first man and woman (indeed to creation and the beginning of time itself). Deuteronomistic history provides them with a never to be forgotten common enemy too. Significantly, Egypt, not Assyria. The half-remembered folk tales of the Hyskos and their expulsion from Egypt are continued, but reversed in the collective memory through the annual Passover festival. Defeat becomes deliverance. Humiliation victory. There is a similarity here to the way official Britain celebrates the ‘miracle of Dunkirk’.

Revealingly, when it comes to the so-called exodus from Egypt and the so-called conquest of Canaan, the *Bible* unfailingly reflects the political, strategic and geographic realities of the 7th century BCE. Not the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age: ie, the 15th to 10th centuries BCE. The exodus, of course, provides the narrational springboard for Joshua’s Assyrian-like conquest. In an obvious attempt to forge a common, nationalist pride, the Judean-Israelites are portrayed as mighty warriors. Their forefathers stormed cities, humiliated mighty kings and ruthlessly exterminated enemies. It was they, not the late Bronze Age general crisis - ie, urban abandonment, the sea people and peasant revolution - who were responsible for the still highly visible ruins that littered the Palestinian countryside.

In status terms the southern, Judean, kingdom is presented as the *elder* brother to the wayward northern, Israeli, kingdom. After the glory days of David and Solomon, the Deuteronomistic history has the north irresponsibly splitting away. The two kingdoms being ruled by a string of good and bad rulers, who in terms of a “cultic interpretation of history” explain why the north fell to the Assyrians and the south survived.¹¹ Bad kings being defined, of course, by their participation in unacceptable religious practices.

As it turned out, Josiah’s national liberation gamble went the same way as that of his grandfather. He was defeated and killed - not, however, by the now visibly declining Assyrians, but the reassertive Egyptians under pharaoh Necho II. A miscalculating Josiah had aligned Judea with faraway Babylon and thereby inadvertently made his kingdom the front line in the

Egyptian-Babylonian war of 609 BCE. In the desperately fought battle of Megiddo, the Egyptian army overcame the Judeans en route to taking on the Babylonians (there was an Assyrian-Egyptian anti-Babylonian alliance).

There follows a brief, three-month, interregnum under Josiah's son, Jehoahaz - who reversed his father's reformation. But, returning from his unsuccessful Babylonian campaign, the Egyptian pharaoh deposed Jehoahaz and replaced him with his elder brother, Jehoiachin. He became Egypt's stooge in Jerusalem. Another terrible reversal for Judean royalist nationalism ... but, exceptionally, on this occasion, the losers got to tell their side of the story to countless future generations. Read the Hebrew canon.

Voices of opposition

Not that the *Old Testament* consists of uncontested or seamless Judean royalist propaganda. I have already mentioned Isaiah, Amos, Hosea and Micah. They are generally thought to have got their calling during the late monarchical period. Amos and Hosea being active in the north. Isaiah and Micah in the south. Apart from the notable exception of Amos - he was a sheep-herder - they came from the better-off classes, and were therefore educated and free from crushing relations of dependence. These *oppositional* prophets detached themselves from their specific origins. Albeit mediated through the prism of religious fervour, they clearly championed the interests of the peasantry as against the landowning elite. By including the complaints, protests and demands of the rural poor within their "says the lord god" indictments, the prophets provide eloquent testimony to their plight.

Violation of traditional inheritance codes, alienable property, onerous rates of interest and confiscatory loan guarantees are deemed akin to outright robbery. By such sinful means the rich join field after field to their already extensive estates till they were the sole owners of the land. Meanwhile, those who have incurred minor debts are sold off into slavery for silver or even a pair of sandals if they fail to pay on time. The prophets seethe with righteous indignation against a legal system which enforces the separation of the peasant mass from the means of production. Courts are

dominated by the upper classes and if need be easily persuaded through intimidation and bribery. A crime against god's laws, the prophets defiantly reminded people. Because of their arrogant rejection of traditional egalitarianism, callous treatment of the poor, idleness, licentiousness and luxurious way of life, the elite are soon to suffer terrible retribution from Yahweh. And, though they will flee to mountain tops and hide in the depths of the sea, there can be no escape.

Because of ideological blinkers, mainstream biblical scholars think of oppositional prophets within a reformist frame. True, in the texts we have available to us, there is no explicit demand for another peasant revolution. Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, etc, are therefore said to have directed their message to those above. The elite is admittedly called upon to repent and re-establish social justice. But this ignores likely context. Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, etc, were preachers and I think it is safe to say that they delivered their wonderfully vitriolic homilies not in temples, palaces and mansions, but market squares, village assemblies and crossroad meeting places. Here, in a popular environment, their damning condemnations and terrible warnings cannot seriously be interpreted as designed to produce a contrite elite. No, their simple, fluent, lacerating words would surely have focused anger *amongst those below*. At village level, resistance would have been internalised and, when the opportunity arose, released in mass protest actions.

Conceivably, when it came to the national stage, the message conveyed by the opposition prophets would have been taken as inspired advice to wait upon Yahweh's divine vengeance. Clearly the opposition prophets did not ignore or neglect high politics. Well versed and well connected, they formulated penetrating critiques of the foreign policy pursued by Judean monarchs.

Put trust in Yahweh: ie, common interests. Not fickle foreign powers and catastrophic military adventures. Condemnations of the disastrous war policy pursued by the ruling classes, warnings of pending national disaster - sanctioned by Yahweh - are combined with appeals for a rediscovery of the old egalitarian ideals. Hosea ii,18 urges a new covenant between Yahweh and those who would abolish war and introduce righteousness/egalitarianism. Hosea iii,4 even predicts the abolition of

corrupt kings and princes before a return to the imagined ideal of David. Surely a rallying call for the revolutionary refoundation of the state.

Not surprisingly then, the “provocative message” of the oppositional prophets is rejected *outright* by official society.¹² Blaming national woes on the religious transgressions of the monarch, the landowning classes and the state priesthood bled their Yahwehism of theological legitimacy. Yet, though the prophets were clearly despised by the elite, doubtless suffered state-sponsored persecution and never achieved their stated goals, self-selecting groups of disciples took up, passed on, supplemented, refined and finally systemised their teachings in written form. Hence an oppositional religious literature arose alongside the newly created official religious literature.

The sayings of the oppositional prophets must have proved widely popular and obviously resonated with tremendous interpretive possibilities. Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, etc, therefore, *had* to be incorporated into the official canon as the second part of the *Nevim* (the 12 ‘minor’ prophets). The result is the much commented upon fractures which characterise the *Tanakh*: official versus unofficial, egalitarian versus monarchical, peasant versus landlord, international manoeuvring versus national solidarity.

Tragically, in terms of Judean elite pretensions, not only did Josiah miserably fail, but in 586 BC the Babylonians - having rid themselves of the hated Assyrians - once again established themselves as the masters of Mesopotamia ... and from there the whole of the Middle East. They defeat the Egyptian army based on the west bank of the Euphrates and advance into northern Syria and demand immediate Judean surrender. Emboldened by Egyptian promises of aid, the Judeans prove defiant. In purely military terms a big mistake.

Nebuchadnezzar II launches a standard punishment expedition. He easily asserts his will through overwhelming martial force. Mimicking the Assyrians, the Babylonians maintain the Davidic dynasty, but cart off into exile the “mighty of the land”.¹³ Something like 7,000 individuals were reportedly involved. Including king Jehoiachin and his family. Despite this defeat, there followed yet another Judean independence declaration. Oded Lipschitz paints the situation in Jerusalem as bitterly divided between “religious-nationalist” fanatics around the new king, Zedekiah (reigned

596-586 BCE), and “realists” who calculated that rebellion against Babylon and relying on the Egyptians was inviting another disaster.¹⁴ Interestingly, amongst those who wanted to accept Babylonian rule - albeit as a form of divine punishment - was the prophet, Jeremiah (as recorded in the biblical book named after him).

Another Babylonian punishment expedition inevitably followed. However, this time round, Nebuchadnezzar opted for an entirely different solution to the ‘Judean problem’. This was part of a wider strategic reorientation. He decided to depose the Davidic dynasty, blot out Jerusalem and its royal temple, and transform Judea into a mere Babylonian province. Jerusalem was put under siege and eventually its defences were breached. A fleeing Zedekiah was captured and his sons are killed before his eyes, after which the king is blinded. A month or two after the city was seized the laborious work of razing its walls, gates, palaces, big houses, the royal temple – everything - began. Meanwhile, in or around 587 BCE, there was another deportation of the elite (including the blind king and his royal household). Maybe 8,000 were involved (plus perhaps a couple of thousand smiths and other craftsmen). The book of Jeremiah tells how the Babylonians only “left in the land of Judah some of the poor people who owned nothing”.¹⁵ These people have vineyards and fields allocated to them (one presumes to simultaneously buy gratitude and expand the imperial tax base). Needless to say, they, the rural and urban poor, constituted a clear, overwhelming, majority.

The Babylonians proceed to appoint Gedaliah, from a renowned family of priests and royal courtiers, as their “governor” in Judea. So they did not deport the entire Judean elite. Gedaliah would have been counted as one of the ‘realists’ before the Babylonian conquest. His administrative-religious centre is obviously not going to be Jerusalem. Mizpah, some four miles north-east of the ruined Jerusalem, is chosen as the new capital by the Babylonians. From here their tribute demands are allocated, collected and dispatched. As an aside, Gedaliah is assassinated. Part of a failed uprising, this triggered another, third, though little mentioned, Judean exile: rebels sought sanctuary in Egypt.

Judea in Judea and Judea in exile proceed to go their own separate ways. In Judea notions of an exclusive Yahwehism based on Jerusalem, its royal

temple and its royal line are clearly no longer tenable. Other cultic centres substitute. Amongst the remaining elite there were those who probably fashioned their own version of Yahwehism. And, from what we can gather, the common people happily returned to, or simply continued, with their ancient ways. Reliant on the soil, the seasons and the vagaries of the weather, these Hebrews sacrificed to the heavenly host and maintained their family shrines. Lacking state power, the elite could do little or nothing to stop them.

By the rivers of Babylon

Nowadays, the clear balance of scholarly opinion is that the destruction of Jerusalem, social decapitation and the subsequent diaspora in Babylonia had a “critically important” impact on Yahwehism.¹⁶ Jill Anne Middlemas emphatically confirms that the “importance ascribed to this period cannot be overestimated”.¹⁷ Throughout most of the 20th century that was not the case. Exile was de-emphasised. Academics tended to downplay the changes wrought by the deportation to Babylonia. However, in his *Studies in the book of Lamentations* (1954) Gottwald anticipated “a changed attitude to the exile that would emerge more fully at a later time.”¹⁸ Whether it was exposure to Babylon, and its ancient, wealthy and sophisticated culture, or the subsequent role played by the successor Persian state, that exerted the biggest influence on Yahwehism, remains a bone of contention. The great biblical scholars, Julius Wellhausen and Eduard Meyer, engaged in a long and acrimonious polemic over the issue. Wellhausen favouring the Babylonians,¹⁹ Meyer the Persians (and therefore Zoroastrianism).²⁰ And that debate continues today ... not least because we have so little material evidence available to us about the Judeans during this relatively brief period of time.

What we can say, and with some assuredness, is that removing a whole swathe of the elite from Judea and relocating them in the heartlands of the Babylonian empire (mostly in the lush, southern region of Mesopotamia) did not bring about either a jolting henotheism or a jolting monotheism.²¹

Nor did the Persian takeover. The elevation of one god above others was as much in evidence in pre-exile Judea as in Babylonia.

Nonetheless, the whole deracinating experience obviously produces far-reaching change. The exiled elite were doubtless traumatised. They had seen Jerusalem overrun by a vengeful army; days of killing, rape and pillage would have followed. After surviving those horrors, they, including what remained of the royal household, were picked out, because of their elevated social standing, and marched off to live in a faraway foreign land. Trauma must have mixed with grudging admiration. They would have been awed by the magnificent buildings, canals, elevated gardens and other architectural wonders. Babylonian literature and learning was no less impressive. There was bound to be a degree of cultural assimilation. Though they never entirely dropped Hebrew, the exiles adopted the Aramaic language, along with its square-scripted alphabet. There were obvious religious borrowings too. The garden of Eden, the flood, Noah's ark and the Tower of Babel all have their origins in Mesopotamia. As for Babylonian names of the month, they entirely replaced those used back in Palestine.

If it were to survive, Yahwehism had to change. I think that much is obvious. The "identity movement", interestingly summarised by Victor Matthews and James Moyer, was clearly in the vanguard of those who "refashioned" ideas, customs and institutions.²² That, we can safely conjecture, involved a split, a party conflict, within the elite. One that would have been based on rival responses to the novel "social realities" created by Babylonian exile and oppression.²³ The more flexible priests of the "identity movement" strove to "creatively" adapt to the new conditions, as opposed to those traditional leaders who wanted to doggedly resist in the name of outdated concepts such as the Davidic kingdom. Not surprisingly, the priests of the "identity movement" win out and come to serve as the leaders of the community; they demand ritual purity, a ban on outside marriage, male circumcision and strict religious observance from all members. The Sabbath becomes of central importance. All such practices mark out the Judeans and bind them together (some exiles would doubtless have broken ranks and become Mesopotamian).

With the Jerusalem temple in ruins and impossibly distant, the Judeo-Babylonians invented the synagogue (Greek for ‘place’). These prayer houses substituted for the temple cult in many respects. There were hymns, religious readings and sermons; however, the Sabbath and feast days were observed without the previously proscribed blood sacrifices. It should be pointed out, not least to highlight the uncertainty, that some academic authorities dispute the claim that Babylonia was the birthplace of the synagogue. Ptolemaic Egypt has been suggested; but frankly, given that we are dealing with a kind of Judean dark age, it is still impossible to come to anything like a hard and fast conclusion till more evidence, one way or another, is brought forward.

That aside, in Babylonia, being what Bob Becking calls a “religion under stress”, Yahwehism underwent a “multidimensional” process of “transition”.²⁴ Despite humiliation at the hands of Egyptians and Assyrians, the Judean elite could still content themselves with the self-view of being, at least potentially, on a par with other nations. Their underlying assumption was that the power of each state formation reflected the power of its patron god. With Babylonian conquest - and deterritorialisation, demilitarisation and demonarchisation - that way of thinking about the world became untenable. As the Babylonians were so evidently powerful, so too must be their god; by the same logic, if Judea could so easily be overthrown, it followed that their god was not as powerful as had traditionally been taught.

New religious concepts filled the vacuum. A new generation of prophets break the theological link joining “heavenly power and earthly kingdoms”. Though Babylon was powerful, this did not mean that the god of the Judeans was weak. Yahweh became the universal god. Correspondingly, the gods of Mesopotamia were dismissed as mere idols made from stone or wood. As a result, Assyria, Egypt and then Babylon had not succeeded in war because of the might of their gods. Instead, in the mind at least, Yahweh now decides the fortunes of all nations. In short, the rise and fall of empires reflected a divine plan: “One god stood behind all these world-shaking events.”²⁵ Hence, the rise of the Assyrians, Egyptians and finally the Babylonians testified not to innate virtue or innate blessedness, nor the power of divine patrons. It was Yahweh who presided over all events.

Defeat and exile were due not to the weakness of Yahweh. It was his anger over the backslidings and abominable practices of the chosen people. Yahweh wanted to teach a lesson and purify them. Accordingly, the notion arose that a new king would help redeem Israel. A god-chosen messiah. To begin with, he was doubtless Davidic or at least Judean. But, over time, hope and meaning shifted. As can be seen in the book of Isaiah, he could even be a foreigner. Hence Cyrus, the Persian king, is said to have served as Yahweh's anointed.²⁶

Suffering servants

Life for the exiles in Babylonia is widely credited as being relatively cushy. Hence, in a popular history we read of an “absence of racism”, along with the claim that exile could not have been “universally abhorred” because so many stayed on, even though Cyrus offered to “repatriate” them in 539 BCE.²⁷ Such liberal ideological biases pepper mainstream scholarship too. Eg, Babylonian policy was not “overly oppressive” and there was no “overt pressure” on exiles to assimilate and lose their identities.²⁸ The same scholars are at pains to stress that the Jews were not slaves and were not forced to endure “inhuman conditions”. In terms of strict Babylonian jurisprudence undoubtedly true. The Jewish exiles were not slaves (I shall from here on start to refer to the Judean exiles as Jews).

The standard point of comparison when it comes to life for the exiles in Babylonia is, of course, classical Greece and Rome; or perhaps the antebellum United States south when it comes to American academics. A misleading compass. In these social formations the institution of slavery was joined with commodity production in agriculture (and mining) and thus assumed particularly extreme, unremitting, vicious and murderous forms. Slaves were robbed of all humanity and treated as mere objects of exploitation. Hence they were commonly worked to death in accordance with nothing more than a cold, profit-and-loss calculation.

We know that a portion of Babylonian prisoners of war were directly incorporated into the branded, tattooed and tagged class of slave labourers. However, a majority of war captives were apparently “able to return home”

after the completion of a period of labour duties.²⁹ That said, those condemned to slavery could be lashed or mutilated merely on a whim. But relationships between slaveowner and slave were in general still personal. Necessarily, that involved acts of generosity, flattery, loyalty, mutual respect and even friendship. Though it needs to be stressed that the underlying relationship was always grossly unequal. Exploitation, and this is the point I am getting at, was therefore limited, compared with classical Greece and Rome (and the US south). Slaves in Babylonia could marry non-slaves, own property and buy their freedom. Babylonian legal codes afforded them definite rights and by implication recognised their innate humanity (not that that stopped slaves making escape bids).

Besides the lowest of the low, there were domestic and royal slaves. As in classical Greece and Rome (but not the US south - which practised a racialised slavery), a few amongst them rose to positions of high influence and became in our terms billionaires. Privileged slaves themselves owned slaves. However, slavery was not ubiquitous. According to the relevant volume in the Cambridge ancient history series, the majority of the *dependent* population in Babylonia were semi-free labourers, named *ikkaru* in legal texts.³⁰ True, these poor wretches could not leave the land without the owners' permission, but they lived with their families and could neither be bought nor sold. Most agricultural production on big estates, it would seem, was carried out by them. And here, we can reasonably say, lay the *main* source of surplus product, and therefore the *main* social relationship which reproduced the royal, religious and land-owning ruling classes.

While temples owned "increasing contingents" of slaves - who were regularly augmented by kings handing over new batches of war captives - Babylonia cannot be categorised as a slave mode of production.³¹ The role of slaves in artisanal and agricultural production was marginal when compared with free or semi-free labour.³² Eg, though temples had slaves who were "trained as craftsmen", we have abundant records available to us showing that they had to regularly pay for the services of jewellers, brewers, bakers, tanners, smiths, carpenters, weavers, launderers and potters. Temples also had to employ free labour during harvest times. And in cases of a failure to supply food and drink, and low or unpunctual

payment of wages, these workers would strike or simply pack their bags and head off. It was “impossible to replace them by temple slaves”.³³

Not merchants

Another misconception. Projecting back from the Radhanites and the caste position of Jews in early medieval Europe, North Africa and Asia, the Jewish exiles in Babylonia are widely credited as being proto-capitalists. Hence the constantly reproduced account of the non-priestly Jewish exiles turning to mercantile trade for a livelihood and thereby becoming seriously rich. Here, on this subject at least, Marxist writers such as Karl Kautsky and Abram Leon simply gave a leftwing spin to the standard scholarly opinion of their time.³⁴

Not that their thinking lacked archaeological foundation. In 1893 a long-buried room stacked full of hundreds of cuneiform clay tablets was discovered in Nippur (about 100 miles south of Baghdad). The business archives of a firm called Marasu. By 1898 they had already been partially translated and analysed. These documents appear to show that Jews in the area were involved in commerce - they worked as tenant farmers, rent collectors and minor officials - and therefore, so ran the conclusion, they were relatively well off. From here, given prior assumptions, it was only a small step for European scholars to categorise some, at least, as merchant adventurers. However, apart from such slippery logic, there is a chronological problem too. The Marasu archives date from the time of the Persian king, Artaxerxes I (reigned 464-424 BCE). Whether they reflect life of the Jewish exiles in the Babylonian period is highly problematic, to say the least.

Anyway, as noted above, the Babylonian mode of production did not rest on slavery. But, its kings did command corvée labour ... and on a very extensive scale. Families, villages, districts, whole communities, including exiled communities, were expected to supply labour quotas for temple construction, canal digging, road building, irrigation and other such state projects. A particular form of tribute. Then, as now, all such labour - especially when it comes to the grunt work of pulling, carrying, lifting and

digging - is physically draining and dangerous. Exhaustion, injury and death would have been commonplace. Hence there is no reason to dismiss agonised cries emanating from exilic prophets about 'suffering servants'.

Naturally, we need to take into account the social snobbery of the elite. They would have been unused to manual labour of any kind. Nor would they have respected such work. In fact they would have regarded anything resembling the daily drudge of the lower classes as being utterly degrading. But, along with other exile communities forcibly transported into Babylonia - Persians, Carians, Phrygians, Tyrians, Arabs, Indians, etc - the Jews were subject to repeated labour demands by their imperial masters.³⁵ And they were given no choice, of course. Community leaders had to deliver their set human quota as commanded.

So prior to the Persian period, in Babylonian exile, Jews constituted a distinct, oppressed, population. Yet, despite that, they were largely self-governing and self-taxing. Typical of all such quickly gained sprawling empires of the epoch. Religion, community and tribute thereby combine to form a single metabolism. Though it was always structured around the threat of violence, such multiculturalism perfectly dovetailed with official Babylonian ideology and the policy of minimising state expenditure on administration.

Nonetheless, whereas the northern elite disappeared into Mesopotamian society, their southern counterparts retained a definite separateness and cohesion. Perhaps it was just a matter of time. Maybe if they had stayed in Babylonia longer the Judeans would have become fully assimilated. But most likely not. Before the triumph of *intolerant*, universal monotheistic religions, pre-capitalist societies were characterised by a generally *unproblematic*, combined, but separate development. Toleration was the *norm*. Depending on its size, each religious/ethnic minority has its own land allocation or city quarter, district or street. Such peoples maintain a traditional language, sometimes over many hundreds of years, when it comes to religious and other such internal affairs; meanwhile in day-to-day matters the dominant language is adopted. Bilingualism and trilingualism were common.

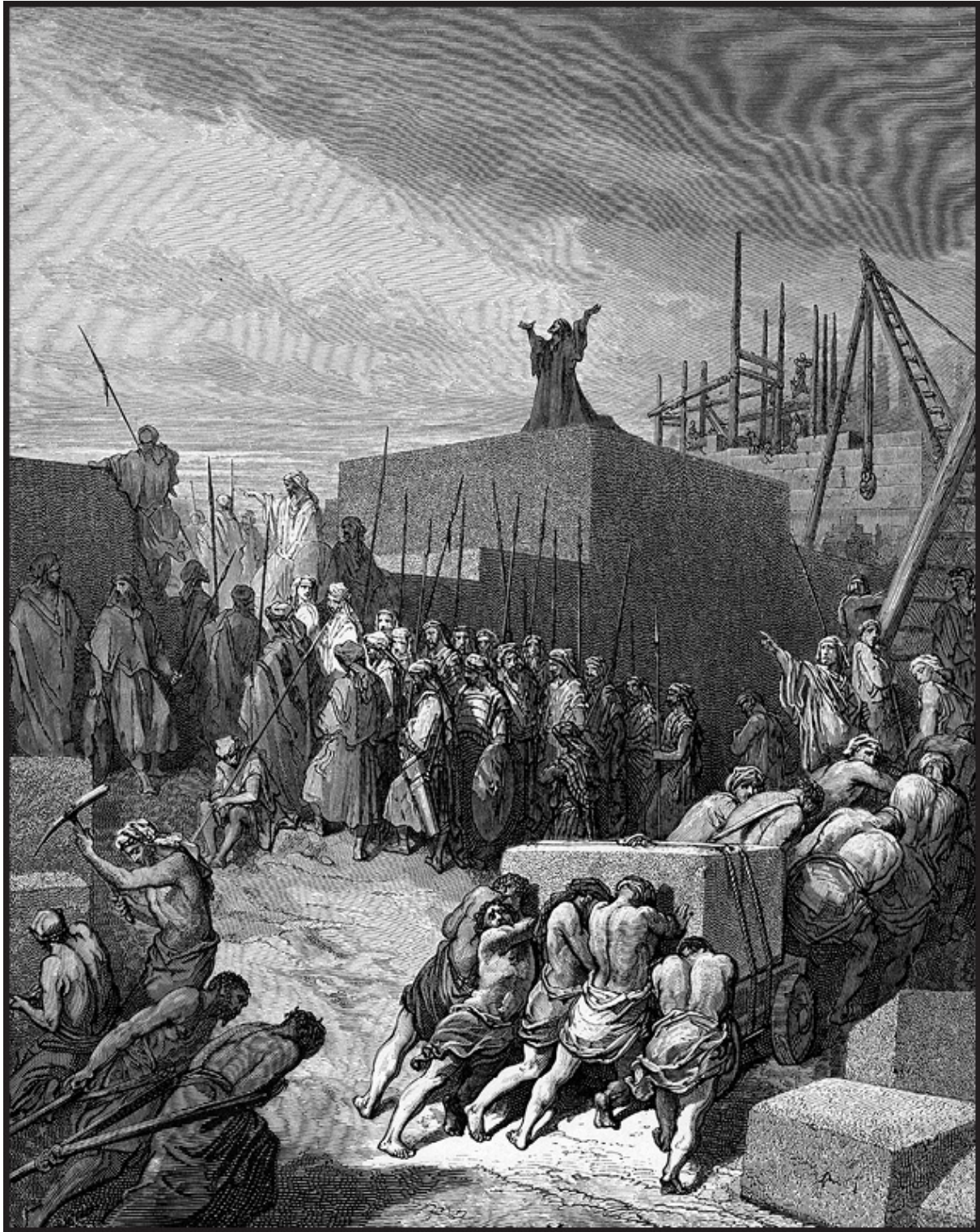
Persian agents

Showing its extraordinary fragility, the neo-Babylonian empire collapsed, like the proverbial house of cards, before an unexpected Achaemenid Persian invasion. And, having taken Babylon in 539 BCE, virtually without a fight, their king, Cyrus, allowed, or much more likely organised, a return by a section of the Jewish population in Mesopotamia. They went back to Judea not as a free people - a cosy story - but as *colonial* agents with a prime mission to extract tribute.

The Persians had no interest in restoring the old kingdom of Judea and its Davidic monarchy. Undoubtedly this was the hope of those who belonged to the royalist-nationalist party (and it is possible that for a short initial period the Davidic heir to the throne might have served as the Persian governor in Judea³⁶). That said, after a considerable gap, maybe 18 years, the Persian king Darius, did give his *active* backing for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple - of course, not over the ruins of Solomon's supposed marvel. High priests were to substitute for kings. Many scholars see in this decision an integral part of an overarching plan by Darius to manage his newly acquired empire (he usurped power in 522 BCE, overthrowing the populist monarch, Bardiya/Gaumata).

Joel Weinberg, a Latvian (Israeli) biblical scholar, developed an influential 'citizen-temple-community' thesis. Political power, he suggested, was concentrated in major temples under the Persians, and through priests and temple officials the religious community was controlled, exploited and reconciled to foreign rule. Weinburg provided a two-fold taxonomy when it comes to distinguishing temple political-economies. The first owns, or controls, large tracts of land and thereby extracts surplus through rent. The second lacks significant landholdings. Instead, these temples rely on obligatory tithes and other such offerings coming from the religious community. Clearly, the post-exile Jerusalem temple falls squarely into the second category.³⁷

The elite returnees would oversee the extraction of surplus product from the local population in Judea and perhaps draw on religious donations required from the Jewish diaspora (inhabiting towns and cities in Mesopotamia and perhaps the Nile too); that before handing a maximised portion of it over to Darius as tribute. Put another way, the rebuilt city of Jerusalem and its temple would function as a conduit for tribute.



‘The rebuilding of the temple’. Artist: Gustave Doré. But not on the ruins of Solomon’s marvel.

To help securely root what was a *subordinate* social order in Judea (the Persian sub-province of Yehud) the returnees once again refashioned the religious tradition. Davidic kingship was downgraded in favour of asserting the kingship of Yahweh. Scholars are generally agreed that that included adding to the *Torah*, hence the Jewish versions of the flood and the Tower of Babel, and introducing the books of Ezra, Ruth, Nahum, Ecclesiastes, Jonah, Lamentations, proverbs 1-9 and various psalms.³⁸ Transparently, however, the main innovation in this new material was the purity laws developed in Mesopotamia. In tandem, accepted traditions were reversed ... and, of course, claimed as ancient.

The evolution of Yahwehism was clearly bound up with military weakness, religious xenophobia and extracting tribute. Being Persian vassals, the returnees had no proper army: only a religious police force. Therefore they had to rely to an extraordinary degree on the authority of Yahweh and the religio-ethnic exclusiveness of the kind laid down in Deuteronomy. A weapon of class warfare. Theologically their self-defined community had been saved, chastised and purified by the humiliating experience of exile and had thereby regained the blessing of Yahweh. The common people, those who had stayed behind in Palestine, remained defiled and had to be treated as foreigners.* Suffice to say, the concerns of the returnees were as much socio-economic as theological. The peasants not only worshipped their own family gods, along with Yahweh and the host of heaven. They still held the land given over to them by the Babylonians. And gaining possession of the lion's share of the surplus they produced had to be justified by Yahweh's chosen ones; both to those they were robbing and to themselves. Not surprisingly, the local people of all classes confronted the returnees as a resentful, resisting mass.

* Those who remained in Judea would have made an exact opposite charge: one that perhaps finds expression in Ezra xxxiii,23-29 and other texts responding to the 597 BCE deportation. The exiles had been banished by Yahweh because of their dreadful sins and those who were allowed to stay were always true followers of Yahweh. I think that we can soundly reason along those lines even though we only have the filtered account of the returnees available to us.

Breaking from the royalist nationalism of the past, excusing collaboration with conquerors and dismissing most of the native population in Judea as foreigners had to involve a high degree of falsification. Here the returnee scribes and priests had a great advantage. As noted above, they had dropped

the ancient Hebrew alphabet - a variant of which is still being used by the Samaritans in their liturgy - in favour of a version of the Aramaic square alphabet, in which Hebrew is written today. Opportunities for disassembling opened up by the transliteration from one alphabet to another must have been considerable.

Not that the returnees constituted a monolithic bloc. Morton Smith describes two main parties that coalesced amongst them.³⁹ Using historical shorthand, we can describe the majority party as Levites and the minority as Zadokites. Whereas the Levites were dedicated adherents of the Yahweh alone movement and therefore emphasised the *practice* of religious purity, the Zadokites emphasised their rights as the *hereditary* priests of the Jerusalem cult. That was, as will already have been gathered, no mere theological quibble. The Zadokites wanted to establish themselves over Judea as an exclusive *theocracy* - a term first used by Flavius Josephus in his *Contra Apionem*.

No serious evidence exists showing that the Zadokites had an uninterrupted lineage going back to Zadok - that is, the man appointed by Solomon to be high priest of his new Jerusalem temple (let alone to Aaron, the brother of Moses). That is why impossibly ancient and impossibly uncontaminated genealogies were invented by both parties. Despite that, the Zadokite bid to establish themselves as theocrats relied first and foremost not on genes. Rather, in carrying out the wishes of Darius and showing themselves at every opportunity to be loyal servants of the Persian empire.

Understandably, the spokespersons of the Levite party raised strong objections to the plans for the Jerusalem temple. Hugely costly and, once built, it would, they rightly feared, give its priests enormous authority and wealth. The arrival of the prophet, Ezra, from Babylonia, along with the second wave of returnees, settled matters, however. He seems to have been accompanied by Persian military detachments. Ezra and his ally, the new governor, Nehemiah, are depicted in the *Bible* as proceeding to impose the programme of the Zadokite priesthood in its most extreme, most inhuman form. Returnees who had married “foreign women”, or “people of the land”, were told to immediately divorce them and “put away their children”. Those who refused to obey Ezra’s horrid instructions were to be barred from the community and faced severe punishment: “for death or for

banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment”.⁴⁰ I would interpret such demands as a kind of apartheid terror. Designed to stigmatise, divide and cower not the mass of the population, but the Levite party.

Protected, and we might suppose, encouraged by the Persians, Ezra lifted the Zadokite priesthood into power and forcibly concentrated religious authority into an easily controlled singularity. Other, existing, cults were suppressed. Apart from the Jerusalem temple (completed in



‘Slaughter of the prophets of Baal’. Artist: Gustave Doré. The returnee Jewish elite did suppress the old, pre-exile, religion.

515 BCE) all rival places of sacrifice, along with their fetishes and festivals, were branded abominations and destroyed. That would have included alternative versions of Yahwehism. By tradition, Levite priests had a role in the Jerusalem temple, but in the main presided over local cultic shrines. So, once again, another attack on the Levite party.

Nevertheless, while Zadokite ideology had a lasting impact on the biblical canon, their exclusive power proved short-lived. The Levites seem to have aligned themselves with the common people. Perhaps achieved by cynically championing the egalitarianism and fiery denunciations of the rich contained in the teachings of Amos, Hosea and other oppositional prophets. This unstable coalition would appear to have forced upon the Zadokites a conciliatory policy, including when it came, in the words of Morton Smith, to “the great document of this compromise”: ie, the *Torah*. Through what would have conceivably been a carefully negotiated historic compromise, the Levites regained a role, albeit a subsidiary one, in the Jerusalem cult, and no less importantly, the citizen-temple-community was considerably expanded. Weinburg reckons that this - what equates to a great reform act - was agreed in the second half of the Persian period (around BCE 400).

The masses were thereby reconciled with and quickly internalised the refashioned religion. Though this is a subject which I need to study further, there is overwhelming evidence that the popular classes became *militant* Jews. Strictures demanding religious purity, developed by the elite exiled in Mesopotamia, were turned *against* the rich and powerful.

For the Zadokite priesthood there was what might well have been seen as a generous compensation package. Those *willingly* paying tithes, making pilgrimages and sacrificing at the Jerusalem temple greatly increased. That promised riches for the Zadokites who monopolised the altar and decided on matters of law. However, the temple cult also employed thousands of Levites as lesser officials: accountants, guides, musicians, doormen, librarians, guards, porters, maintenance workers, cleaners, etc. The Jerusalem temple can be imagined as a combination of church, bank, library, high court, abattoir and storehouse.⁴¹ As such it provided a tolerable living for a still wider circle of others: suppliers of sacrificial animals, incense sellers, hostel owners, peddlers, pickpockets, pimps,

prostitutes, etc. Hence the Jewish religion familiar to us from both testaments of the *Bible* comes into view at last.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Uses and abuses of Jesus

Christianity, the Jesus religion, is an established historic fact. It is just as real in its own way as the internal combustion engine, the writings of Virginia Woolf and Disneyland. There are well over two billion Christians worldwide. Alone, the Roman Catholic church, the largest Christian denomination, boasts 1.1 billion adherents. Like a language, Jesus has been passed down from generation to generation, affecting them, being changed by them. As a result of this process of ‘Chinese whispers’ the Jesus of one historical period would be almost unrecognisable in another historical period. The 1st century Jew was in the 15th century pictured as fair-skinned, blonde-haired and blue-eyed by artists in north-western Europe. Likewise that Jesus has been remade to look Japanese, native American and black African. In 1969 the Cuban artist Alfredo Rostgaard (1943-2004) even produced a ‘Guerrilla Christ’. The painting deliberately mimics religious iconography. Jesus has a golden halo ... but he carries a rifle slung over his shoulder (as can be seen from the front cover of this book).

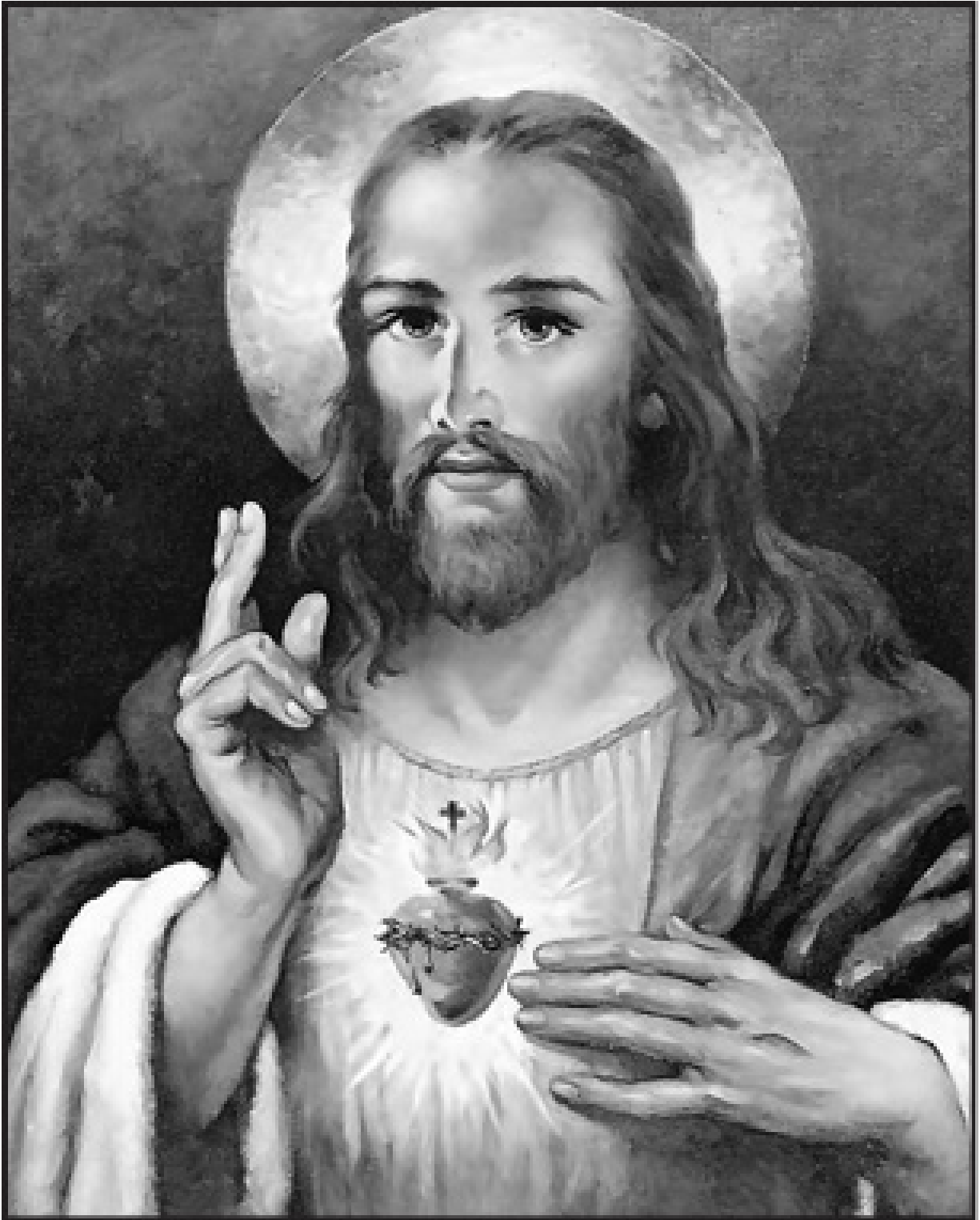
Almost uninterruptedly, for over one and a half thousand years - in various institutional forms and guises - Christianity has been a dominating cultural influence over the minds of Europe’s peoples. “Christendom” was only “replaced” by the altogether vaguer notion of “Europe” in the 18th century.¹ However, as William Faulkner put it; “The past is not dead. In fact, it’s not even past” (*Requiem for a nun*). Christian democratic parties have been particularly influential, forming governments in Germany, Italy, Norway, etc. The European People’s Party has long been either the biggest or second biggest bloc in the European Union’s parliament. Its origins lying squarely in the conservative response to the expansion of the suffrage and the rise of the socialist working class in the late 19th century; Catholic and protestant voters being mobilised to defend the status quo in the name of religion, the patriarchal family and individual rights. So Marxists would be

foolish not to respect, albeit grudgingly, the longevity of Christianity and its continued contemporary authority.

Whatever the more fatuous proponents of multiculturalism maintain, Britain is not post-Christian. It is just less Christian. The fact of the matter is that Britain has never had a prime minister, at least at the time of writing, who did not claim to be a practising Christian (Benjamin Disraeli might be thought to be the exception; born a Jew in 1804, he was, though, baptised in 1817).

Once, Christianity exercised a sort of moral terrorism against anyone who might be tempted to openly declare themselves an atheist or a materialist. Britain gave the world Charles Darwin (1809-82), the Marx of biology. However, in 1881 Darwin candidly admitted to a group of visiting freethinkers, including Edward Aveling, Marx's son-in-law, that "he had finally given up completely on Christianity at 40 years of age".² Though an "agnostic" on god, he remained afraid to criticise religion from the standpoint of science. Public opinion would crucify him. Thankfully, no longer the case.

The *Financial Times* published a survey which showed that, while atheism in the US stood at only 4%, in Europe it was much more widespread: Italy (7%), Spain (11%), Great Britain (17%), Germany (20%), and France (32%).³ Evidence that religion is on the defensive. Another survey, this time of churchgoing in Europe, put Britain fourth from the bottom, just ahead of Hungary, France and Denmark. Poland coming top with around 75% regularly going to church.⁴ Whereas some 58% of the British population describe themselves as believing in, or identifying with, Christianity, only 15% attend services once a month or more.⁵ So churches have become remote, unattractive and strange places as far as most people in Britain are concerned. Not only are services sparsely attended, but rituals are seen as largely pointless and only relevant when it comes to weddings and funerals - and less and less so even then.



Blonde Jesus: he comes in every colour and hue.

The Church of England “really can be described” as the Tory Party at prayer, hurrahs the rightwing blogger, Archbishop Cranmer. Among the

35% of the population who say they are Anglican, almost a third are “Conservative identifiers”. Fewer than a quarter are natural Labour supporters.⁶ By tradition the Labour Party is more based on Methodist votes in England and Wales, and Catholic votes in Scotland. But, of course, over the last 50 years or so, church attendance has plummeted, so we are talking about a *residual* tradition. And the much diminished Church of England congregations are more and more female, middle class and elderly. There have been reports of increased numbers of under-16s attending Sunday services. However, this is reliably put down to parents smoothing the entry of children into Church of England schools. Not a religious revival.

For warmth, Church of England professionals huddle together around ecumenicalism. There are also chummy get-togethers with Muslim, Sikh and Jewish clerics. But fundamentalist splits, often charged by the sticky heat of sex, keep occurring and, in relative terms, they prosper. Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics seem to embody certainty in an uncertain world.

There are vicars who consider themselves leftwing. Most I have come across appear perfectly sincere. Sermons fulminate against third-world poverty, ecological destruction, the greed of transnational corporations. A world of equality, justice and freedom is earnestly prayed for. Suffice to say, these red priests manifestly lack a popular base. Their congregations are as diminutive as the conservative mainstream. Usually, however, they attract more than the usual portion of the mentally damaged, recovering addicts and the desperately poor. Hence, while trying to find a fulfilling role for themselves through involvement in wider society, the political practice of leftwing vicars amounts to a mundane combination of social work and social pacifism.

Because it claims to be all-embracing, because it can contain both right and left, because it constantly fudges doctrinal differences, Leon Trotsky once humorously dubbed the Church of England the “Menshevik” church.⁷ Needless to say, the Church of England is not the religious wing of the workers’ movement. It still constitutes what Walter Bagehot called one of the “dignified parts”, as opposed to the “efficient parts”, of the constitution.⁸

Twenty-six of its bishops sit in the House of Lords. Though not formally attached to any political party, it is surely significant that they *always* sit on the government side of the chamber. At the pinnacle of the Church of England stands the monarch, amongst whose many titles is ‘supreme governor’. In reality, however, it is the prime minister who is supreme. After a formal ‘consultation’ with the Crown Nominations Commission, he or she chooses the archbishops to the provinces of Canterbury and York and the 43 diocesan bishops. So the Church of England is no democratic ‘church of congregations’.

Moreover, it can usefully be pointed out, many parish priests have time-fixed terms of tenure. They rely on bishops for reappointment. Those who fail to conform, toady and please can be evicted from office and thereby find themselves jobless and homeless. Hence, in fact, a stifling and oppressive hierarchical relationship prevails. From bitter first-hand experience Michael Hampson (a former C of E minister) confirms that the “parish clergy are the lowest rung ... of that hierarchy, sworn to allegiance and obedience”.⁹ Vicars are not elected by those below. Nor are they accountable to them. They are minions of their bishop ... and through them the bourgeois state. They swear an oath of allegiance to the monarch and an oath of canonical obedience “in all things lawful and honest” to the bishop.¹⁰

Atheism of fools

There are those supposedly standing in the Marxist tradition who claim that because of the remorseless advance of science and the seemingly full-fronted introduction of new technology - an illusion - religious ideas are bound to undergo a constant shrinkage to the point of soon vanishing altogether - another illusion. Such an outlook might provide atheist solace, but it is the atheism of fools (ie, an idealist worship of the means of production).

The United States proves the point. Here is the richest and most capitalistically advanced country on the face of the planet. It is also perhaps the most religious. George W Bush, the 43rd president, won his second

term in November 2004 and a four-million popular majority in no small part because of his pledge to follow a Christian agenda when it came to issues such as abortion, stem cell research and homosexual marriage. Though a scion of the establishment, Bush is typically American, at least in terms of religiosity.

“There is only one reason that I am in the Oval office and not in a bar. I found faith. I found god. I am here because of the power of prayer,” Bush said, speaking to his biographer, David Frum.¹¹ The US Christian right, Bush included, subscribes to the doctrine that the *Bible* is without error and literally true; that salvation comes from faith in Jesus alone; that every adult must personally and specifically accept Jesus into their lives; and that it is the duty of all Christians to evangelise and convert the world to Christianity. When it comes to getting the Jewish vote, if you say that only Christians can be ‘saved’ (and only those Christians who are ‘born again’), you have a real political problem, so this line had to be blurred in public utterances, but belief in god and following his commandments constitutes the bottom line.

Long before Bush was elected president he called in the televangelist and high-profile Texan religious rightist, James Robison, whose programme *Life* attracts millions of viewers, and confided to him that “I can’t explain but I feel that my country is going to need me” and that “god wants me to run for president.”¹² Bush claimed to be reluctant but had no choice. He had to answer god’s call. With the Republican Party increasingly influenced by the religious right, this could be viewed as an astute move. But it really does seem to be the case that Bush underwent a genuine religious conversion back in 1985: the evangelist, Billy Graham, was a weekend guest at the Bush family mansion in Maine and he appears to have provoked a profound change in Bush. Before that, he says, “I really wasn’t a believer”.¹³ From a seven-days-a-week habitual boozier, Bush became instead a *Bible*-reading teetotaler who goes to bed at 9pm and prays on his knees, pleading for divine guidance.

Prior to George W Bush there was, of course, a long line of presidents going back to George Washington who regularly sprinkled speeches with choice religious claims, quotes and allusions. The sociologist, Robert N Bellah, employed the term “civil religion” to describe the United States in a

seminal article first published in 1967 (he took the expression from Jean-Jacques Rousseau).¹⁴ This civil religion exists parallel to churches, denominations and sects and can be considered a kind of religious nationalism or religious national identity. But a decisive turning point clearly happened with the emergence of the New Christian Right. In the late 1970s Jerry Falwell founded the moral majority which successfully marshalled evangelical Christians into a substantial political bloc. The Southern Baptist Convention, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, etc, carried out what can legitimately be called a counter-reformation. Religious doctrine, religious identity began to "replace logic and realpolitik" in official Washington, "especially in the Republican Party."¹⁵

A nation of immigrants, constant flux and obsessive money-making, a nation that has never given birth to a mass workers' party, a nation still marked by racial slavery, US culture puts tremendous emphasis on consumption, self-reliance and social conformism. Families in the US are highly privatised and often sadly rootless. Atomised, insecure, reduced to mere economic objects, people live in constant fear of ill-health, joblessness, debt, migrants, losing their homes ... and they seek warmth and shelter in church congregations and the illusory community of religious nationalism. Allegiance to god, Jesus and the flag substitute for the real community that is so obviously lacking.

In the age of computers, bioengineering and Mars explorers, religion draws on a deep well. What we have seen since the late 1970s is the third "great Christian awakening" in America (the first began in the 1720s; the second occurred in the early 19th century).¹⁶ A Gallop poll shows that religious observance actually rose even further after the 2008 financial crash: "43.1% attending services at least weekly or almost weekly".¹⁷ Around a third of the US population say they take *Bible* stories as literally true.¹⁸ Many of the same unfortunate people think that the regime change imposed on Iraq by US-UK forces confirmed prophetic texts in the *Old Testament* which refer to the fall of Babylon; that the borders of Israel were decreed by god thousands of years ago; that the UN is a forerunner of a final satanic world order that will produce the antichrist. It is not only the masses. According to another survey, this time sponsored by *Nature*, even

amongst American physicists, biologists and mathematicians, 40% of them believe in god as a deity who “takes an active interest in our affairs and heeds our prayers”.¹⁹

This Christian mumbo jumbo is fuelled and reinforced by hundreds of national and local TV stations. Every night you can see scores of people miraculously ‘cured’. And if the odd televangelist turns out to have been spending his congregation’s donations on drink, drugs and women of easy virtue, he comes on air, almost like a Tory MP, forgiving wife standing by his side, and he cries his eyes out and pleads for forgiveness. The money soon starts to flow in again. After all, god loves a repentant sinner.

In short, there is no automatic correlation between capitalist progress - with its profit- *limited* (ie, skewed, lopsided, interrupted) development of the productive forces - and the diminution of religion. Therefore, despite dramatically falling Church of England attendances and a shrinking belief in prescribed ecclesiastical doctrine, there is surely no room for smug atheist complacency. A clear majority is still convinced of the existence of some vague divinity or spiritual power. And sadly, astrology, healing crystals, palmistry, tarot-reading and other such witchery fills the vacuum, not socialism. Indeed, amongst so-called ‘Marxists’ there has been a fair crop who have discovered the paranormal, the transcendental, the otherworldly. Eg, in 2000 the ‘critical realist’ Roy Bhaskar revealed to stunned devotees his 15 former lives - beginning with crossing the Red Sea as a child with “the teacher”, Moses.²⁰ His ‘god is love, man is god’ philosophy of ‘self-realisation’ was not being inconsistent. Shorn of nature, history and the class struggle, all that remains of the dialectic is idealism - methodologically more than prone to arrive at religious destinations.

It would therefore be foolish in the extreme to insist that Britain is immune from some new religious revival. Saying this does not rely on some kind of reinvention, or reworking, of David Hume’s pendulum theory.²¹ Simply that, be they conservative, liberal or radical, many people still find religion motivating, consoling and explanatory. If the bonds of social solidarity continue to deteriorate, there could quite conceivably be a sudden upsurge of those fleeing to the safety of religion - not just because of declining material circumstances, but because life under capitalism lacks meaning, has become miserably dehumanised. The perceived failure of

working class politics and absence of a viable socialist project can only but intensify the attraction of an established and well honed fantasy.

To say the least, all this makes it timely to challenge Christianity in the name of human liberation and, through historical-materialist theory, reveal its revolutionary origins in Palestine, transformation into the main ideological prop of the Roman empire and its subsequent evolution as a tool of the feudal and capitalist ruling classes. Marxist politics, let me emphasise once again, is about more than trade union disputes, fighting cuts, student grants and other such bread and butter issues.

Actually our side has an inherent advantage. The cause of the working class, if it is to succeed, needs the unvarnished truth about the past in all its concreteness, all its complexity, with all its different social formations, class antagonisms and contradictory world-historic personalities. In contrast, our rulers, in Britain at least, prefer Karl Popper's intellectually hollow anti-Marxism. Indeed, to maintain and reproduce ideological domination the bourgeoisie and its state, flatter and promote a galaxy of buyable minds - writers, theologians, journalists, broadcasters, lawyers, academics. In exchange for fat salaries, commissions and entry into the establishment, they manufacture, or propagate, a history that downplays, or obliterates, the role of those below. Piecemeal change is their totem. Revolutions might begin with blissful exaltation, but they bring only a harvest of sorrows. Capitalism is presented as the natural order, or the last word in civilisation.

When it comes to the arts, there is an unmistakable ideological underlay too. Typically, in biographies, films, plays and novels, the past and its class lines and conflicts are blurred through a drip-drip process of dilution, reversal and adoption. Aristocratic cavaliers are portrayed as headstrong but dashing heroes. Roundheads as dour proto-Stalinists and worryingly sincere in their theological beliefs - eg, Frederick Marryat's *Children of the New Forest* (1847). There are good and bad monarchs. But whether it be bad king John or good queen Bess, within the institution of royalty lies the source of hope and overcoming old enmities and class divisions (eg, *Shakespeare in love* 1998). There are bad capitalists, of course: those like Elliot Carver in the James Bond film *Tomorrow never dies* (1997), those who want to rule the world, or those who merely shy away from necessary change. The Boulting brothers' film *I'm alright Jack* (1959) lambastes, seemingly with an even hand, backward bosses and the backward

communist shop steward, Fred Kite (Peter Sellers). However, those in the middle - the wives, the sensible shareholders and the ordinary workers - have a mutual interest in ending class conflict and increasing productivity.

Hollywood too pushes reconciliation. The US civil war is gutted of social content and is often seen from the viewpoint of the confederate south: eg, *The outlaw Josey Wales* (1976). Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of heaven* (2005) provides another example of this approach applied to the international arena. The Islamic leader, Saladin, is the good guy. He drives out the dangerously fanatical crusaders from their kingdom of Jerusalem. There are decent Christians, and yet the Frankish leper-king, Baldwin IV, is undoubtedly the villain of the piece. This whole approach of softening, turning around or personalising old class and national antagonisms was first launched by Walter Scott (1771-1832), who sought, or so Georg Lukács has it, to find a "middle way" between the warring extremes of his particular early 19th century social location.²²

What of our dead leaders? Marx and Engels have both been transformed from dedicated revolutionary politicians into mere harbingers of globalisation and capitalist downturns by left economists, liberal academics and mainstream newspaper columnists alike. Eg, Meghnad Desai,²³ Nouriel Roubini,²⁴ John Gray²⁵ and Charles Moore.²⁶ The Marx-Engels team have also been deemed responsible for the gulags and the system of terror instituted by Stalin in the 1930s by rightwingers and their bog-standard anarchist outriders. Such claims are sustainable because not only was Stalin's 'second revolution' - ie, the 1928 counterrevolution within the revolution - carried out under the guise of Marxism, but so too were the Chinese, Korean, Albanian, Kampuchean and other bloody and disastrous experiments in national socialism. 'Official communism' in power created and lived an anti-Marxist Marxism. Instead of lighting the way to universal human liberation, what was called Marxism functioned as a creaking, idealist doctrine, which obscured (non-capitalist) statist oppression and exploitation. In the absurd propaganda claims, ideological trappings and *actions* of Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Kim Il Sung, Enver Hoxha and their heirs and would-be emulators, the paid persuaders of capitalism found their truth.

Suffice to say, turning the likes of Marx and Engels into their opposites - ie, advocates or heralds of national socialism - requires dishonesty on a grand scale. Capitalism ensures conformity of the intelligentsia in general through assimilation - generous salaries, research grants and all manner of honours and privileges (there is, of course, the parallel threat of the sack, ostracism and middle class poverty). Bureaucratic socialism by contrast relied on blanket censorship, the destruction of genuine political debate and the cult of an all-knowing leader. Supposedly Marx and Engels blessed the grey on grey drabness. Lying about such personalities is endlessly difficult, however. Deceased they may be. But their thoughts and aspirations live on in published and widely disseminated writings (crude doctoring is easily exposed and was therefore in the main never attempted or quickly abandoned).

Marxists must, and will, defend their own. Being partisans of a cause uniquely interested in the truth, it is also necessary to put the personalities of official history back on their feet - not least those who in some way struggled to achieve human freedom. That must include Jesus.

Jesus remains a popular *and* therefore highly contested figure. In March 1966 John Lennon only half-jokingly boasted that the Beatles had become "more popular than Jesus". Not any more. A Google search gave me 31 million references for the fab four. However, Jesus does somewhat better. He scored 676 million.²⁷ Even in Britain, it is therefore no surprise that top politicians find it advantageous to parade their religious affiliations or, failing that, at least their moral affinity to religion.

There is doubtless some considerable degree of pretence involved. Nonetheless, religion, especially the Jesus religion, is actively courted, promoted and appeased. Three examples.

- Labour right: The return to religion in education undoubtedly began with Tony Blair - he also sought to bring Muslim private schools into the fold of the state sector.²⁸ A well publicised Church of England attendee, after leaving office in 2007, Blair converted to Catholicism. A year after that, in an unmistakable act of egomania, he launched the Tony Blair Faith Foundation. Other prominent New Labour figures can be cited too. Take Ruth Kelly. A successful cabinet minister, she was

also a committed member of Opus Dei, the secretive, rightwing Catholic cult which supported general Franco's regime in Spain. Then there was Gordon Brown. He gained media plaudits by championing the demands of the Make Poverty History campaign, and to further burnish his Christian credentials he claimed moral inspiration from the American "progressive evangelical", Jim Wallis, and his father, John Ebenezer Brown. He was, as constantly emphasised, an ordained Church of Scotland minister. Though a self-declared atheist, his successor as Labour leader, Ed Miliband, pandered to Christianity too - "the Labour Party and Christianity share a proud history and we share common values."²⁹ Going somewhat further, Blue Labour's Jack Reid argued that to "rescue" Britain from the danger of "consumerist despotism", the Labour Party must "refocus our train of thought upon a fresh openness towards religion, and the redeeming qualities it holds".³⁰

- Coalition: Michael Gove's first wave of so-called free schools included a swathe run by religious organisations. Almost exclusively Christian. Around a fifth of Britain's secondary schools were already faith-based. With only a few exceptions Christian. His boss, David Cameron, made play of his Christian values both in the run up to the 2010 general election and after. Ditto the Liberal Democrats' Simon Hughes. Before them there was Iain Duncan Smith, David Steel and Margaret Thatcher. She, of course, perversely justified her assault on the post-World War II welfare state by quoting the Jesus-attributed parable of the good Samaritan. Charitable work is only possible if people get off their backsides and enrich themselves. A characteristically Methodist line of reasoning.
- Far right: Having put away their politically childish Odenism, Nick Griffin and the British National Party claim to be "defending Britain's Christian culture" against the threat of "Islamification".³¹

Jesus of many voices

Historically, the Christian religion has unmistakably shaped the development of Britain's working class movement and national psychology. "There is no country in Europe," remarked Leon Trotsky, "where church influence in political, social and family life is so great as in Great Britain."³² In a 1926 *Pravda* article Trotsky described his first visit to Britain a couple of dozen years before. Obviously it left a lasting impression. Along with Lenin and Krupskaya, he attended a free church service in London:

We heard socialist speeches interspersed with psalms. The preacher was a printer who had just returned from Australia. He spoke about the social revolution. The congregation begged god in the psalms that he establish such an order where there would be neither poor nor rich. Such was my first practical acquaintance with the British labour movement ... What role, I asked myself at the time, does a psalm play in connection with a revolutionary speech? That of a safety valve. Concentrated vapours of discontent issued forth beneath the dome of the church and rose to the sky. This is the basic function of the church in class society.³³

Religious notions, even the most socialistic, helped smother or divert class-consciousness and served as an alternative to Marxism. It is commonplace, though nonetheless historically accurate, to describe the Labour Party as more coloured by Methodism than Marxism. In his *The making of the English working class* Edward Thompson showed that Methodism came to the fore during the period 1790-1830 (that is, after the revolutionary movement had palpably failed). Religious revivalism "took over just at the point where 'political' or temporal aspirations met with defeat".³⁴

Following that deflected course of political development, Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden promised voters a new Jerusalem; and to that end they demanded class peace. Socialism must come through parliament and the existing constitution. In 1910 Hardie humbly explained "that the impetus which drove me first into the labour movement, and the inspiration which has carried me on in it, has been derived more from the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth than from all other sources combined".³⁵ Even Tom Mann - a leader of the 1910-14 syndicalist revolt and chair of the

early CPGB - was rumoured to be seriously considering entering the priesthood at about the same time when he was secretary of the Independent Labour Party. James Connolly himself bowed a knee before the Catholic faith of Ireland - it should take care of belief and other such spiritual matters; meanwhile socialists will concentrate on the struggle to obtain the nationalisation of the means of production and exchange. What characterised the early 20th century also characterised the late 20th century. Leftwingers such as Tony Benn, Jimmy Reid, Arthur Scargill and George Galloway freely, embarrassingly, pronounced upon their Christian ideals and their inspirational value. Jesus is therefore a vehicle for just about every contending political viewpoint.

Jesus is also a contested figure in culture. Let us begin with Mel Gibson's *The passion of the Christ* - first released over Easter 2004. On the one hand, his film generated a deal of enthusiastic support and is widely credited with giving a boost to George W Bush's 2004 presidential election campaign. On the other hand, there was a storm of protest - in particular from leftist, liberal and Jewish circles. Basically Gibson - the film's writer, director, producer and main financier - was charged by these critics with consciously, or unconsciously, legitimising anti-Semitism by reviving the hoary old idea that the Jews bear collective responsibility for killing the man-god, Jesus.

Eg, Mike Davis compared Gibson's film with the anti-Semitic *Jud Suess* (1940), made under the supervision of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister. The Romans were portrayed as "liberal imperialists", seethed Davis, while the Jews were the guilty ones.³⁶ Rabbi Julia Neuberger agreed and added a patronising warning: "This movie could lead to people taking on Gibson's simplistic, uneducated, uncritical and anti-Semitic message: the Jews are the Christ-killers - the baddies; the Romans did not want to do it - they are the goodies".³⁷ The US-based Anti-Defamation League reasoned along exactly the same lines. Many people will use the film "as the very basis of hatred towards Jews".³⁸

Mel Gibson undoubtedly entertains some very funny ideas. Following his father, Hutton Gibson, he belongs to an obscure sect of Catholic dissidents - the Traditionalist Catholics - who reject the 'modernisation' brought about under the guidance of John XXIII in the early 1960s. (In 2005 he donated \$5 million of his profits from *The passion* to the cult.) It conducts church

services in Latin and adheres to an almost medieval anti-Semitism. The reforms of Vatican II are put down to a sinister Masonic-Jewish conspiracy. Their esoteric doctrines rely in no small part on Anne-Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), an Augustinian nun and mystic whose visions of Jesus's last days were recorded in her *The dolorous passion of our lord and saviour Jesus Christ*, which was first published in 1832.³⁹ She considered that Jesus's self-sacrifice, his willingness to be crucified, was more significant in religious terms than his resurrection. Hence the main focus of Gibson's film.

Not that Gibson junior repeats Gibson senior's outright denial of the Nazi ethnocide. A parishioner at his church - the Holy Family Chapel in Agoura, California - assured journalists that he "doesn't go along with a lot of what his dad says".⁴⁰ The congregation numbers less than a hundred. Anyway, in response to accusations of anti-Semitism, Gibson quietly removed Matthew's infamous line, "His blood be on us and on our children", shouted by the Jewish high priest in front of the hand-washing Pontius Pilate.⁴¹ Apparently they did "not work" in focus screenings and might be "hurtful" and even be "misused". Yet though the English subtitles were exorcised, the loaded words, albeit in Aramaic, remained.

Meanwhile, John Paul II 'the great' welcomed the film and aloofly brushed aside critics: "It is as it was," he curtly announced. Protestant evangelists in the US were rather more loquacious. Billy Graham was enthusiastic. The Christian Coalition details why "Christians and their families" should see Mel Gibson's film.⁴² Whatever their differences when it comes to theology, for many years both Catholic and protestant fundamentalists had been trying their damndest to get Hollywood to bankroll Jesus - not as a backdrop point of historical reference, not told through metaphor, not as a mere quasi-religious motif - but once again played 'big' and 'straight' as the human face of god.⁴³ And after the launch of Gibson's *The passion*, both traditions energetically used it as a god-given recruiting sergeant. Block bookings at cinemas, leaflets for audiences, pamphlets, private showings, internet promotion, etc.

Quite frankly, the critics are mostly well wide of the mark. Gibson's "message" was neither "simplistic" nor "uneducated". They also lack

courage. With the minor touches and additions provided courtesy of Emmerich, Gibson's film more or less faithfully reproduces the Jesus story as told in the *New Testament*. Here, in this account, Jesus was a sacrificial man-god betrayed by the Jewish mob - yes, the "baddies" - who masochistically suffered an agonising execution at the hands of the unknowing Romans - not quite the "goodies", but nearly so - in order to redeem a sinful humanity.

Gibson does seem to be haunted by anti-Semitic inner-demons (though, when a top box office asset, he happily mixed and socialised with the filmocracy in Hollywood and Malibu beach, which includes many Jews). But, if he is judged and found guilty simply on the basis of his *Passion*, then it is definitely a case of shooting the messenger. Christianity, in terms of its key foundational texts and historical practices, oozes anti-Semitism (indeed, as I shall show, this religious anti-Semitism, revived in the late 19th century by Catholic and Orthodox church reactionaries, paved the way and provided fertile ideological conditions for the pseudo-scientific, racial anti-Semitism of the Nazi kind).

Attacking a film director for anti-Semitism is, of course, easy. Attacking a whole religion in such terms is another matter entirely. Incidentally, it should be pointed out, Islam takes as good coin the accusation that collectively the Jews tried to kill god's "messenger", Jesus - of course, in this tradition Jesus is not killed on the cross, but is raised directly to heaven through divine intervention.⁴⁴

While the ideology of multiculturalism allows, even encourages, the witch-hunting of individuals for all manner of thought crimes, it frowns upon anything deemed 'offensive', crucially in the field of religion. Multiculturalism amounts to giving a green light to the promotion of religious separatism and therefore a politically motivated oversensitivity. Five examples.

- A Christian hue and cry greeted Monty Python's *Life of Brian* - which actually poked fun at the revolutionary left. The same 'community' was outraged by BBC2's transmission of *Jerry Springer - the opera* in 2005. Christian fundamentalists and the BNP joined together in an attempt to stop its 2006 national tour. Theatres were picketed.

- Orchestrated bookburning by the Muslim ‘community’ followed the publication of *The Satanic verses*. Salman Rushdie was forced into hiding after ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* in 1989.
- In February 2006 came the death threats and outraged demonstrations against the 12 cartoons mocking the prophet Mohammed which were first published in September 2005 by the rightwing Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten*.
- The Royal Court pulled Jim Allen’s play *Perdition* in 1987 because of protests by the Jewish ‘community’ against its supposed ‘anti-Semitism’.
- Gurpeet Kaur Bhatti’s *Behzti* was abandoned by Birmingham rep after the local Sikh ‘community’ laid siege to the building in December 2004. The Muslim Association of Britain and the Catholic bishop of Birmingham, Vincent Nichols, also condemned her play, as did a string of mainstream politicians: eg, Khalid Mahmood, Labour MP for Birmingham Perry Barr.

New Labour went into the 2005 general election committed to introducing legislation which would make it an offence to incite religious hatred. Despite successful amendments, what is deemed “a legitimate religion”, “legitimate debate” and “legitimate freedom of expression” will now be decided by the courts.

The missing Jesus

As well as being useful, Jesus is an unnatural and elusive figure too.

In the *New Testament*, he is, of course, presented as possessing supernatural powers. As I have said, Christian fundamentalists insist upon the inerrancy (absence of error) in the *Bible*. For them, Jesus would miraculously cure individual, presumably deserving, lepers, but not banish leprosy as a disease. However, even the most ‘progressive’ Church of England bishop pretends, or might actually believe, that Jesus worked wonders and roused the minds of millions.

Suffice to say, in early modern times, leading deists were busily pouring the cold water of doubt upon these claims and thereby laying the foundation

stones of the materialist critique of religion. Benedict de Spinoza (1632-77) subtly mocked the idea that god acted in a way that “contravened nature’s universal laws” in service of religion, as recorded from the time of the patriarchs. Anyone who made such an assertion, reasoned the philosopher, “would [*ipso facto*] be compelled to assert that god acted against his own nature - an evident absurdity”.⁴⁵ In their turn, Charles Blount (1654-93) and Thomas Chubb (1699-1747) argued that the miracles incorporated into, or claimed by, paganism must be given the same status as Christian miracles. Henry St John, viscount Bolingbroke (1678-1751), also considered that miracles “are incredible because [they are] contrary to all experience, and to the established course of nature”.⁴⁶ And, let us not forget, even during the Enlightenment, such thinkers had to formulate their ideas with extreme care, if they were to avoid charges of atheism and the possibility of heavy fines, imprisonment or worse.

In this deist tradition, the historian, Edward Gibbon (1737-94) pointed out in his *Decline and fall*, surely with intended irony, that, though god had supposedly allowed Jesus and his disciples to regularly suspend “the laws of nature”, the sages and philosophers of Greece and Rome remained somewhat unconvinced. In fact they “rejected and derided” all such Christian claims of miracles.⁴⁷ And the simple fact of the matter is that during his own time *not one* pagan or Jewish observer that we know of devoted even a single word to Jesus, let alone his supernatural cures.

The first non-Christian to mention the saviour’s name was Flavius Josephus, the pro-Roman eyewitness to the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 73. He expresses indignation at the killing by a sadducee high priest of “a man named James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ”.⁴⁸ Better still, in the chapter devoted to events during the reign of Tiberius, he included a passage which in Christian hands has become known as *Testimonium Flavianum*:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was Christ. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned

him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of god had prophesised these countless other marvellous things about him. And the sect of Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.⁴⁹

The words of this self-justifying and sometimes highly untrustworthy aristocratic Jew, who was a near contemporary of Jesus, were much valued by Christians. From the 2nd century he was translated and widely read by them almost as an additional biblical testament. He splendidly corroborated the gospels. However, even in the 17th century critical voices were being raised. The Enlightenment thinker, Voltaire (1694-1778), exasperatedly complained in his essay, 'The sermon of the fifty', that "the historian Josephus is falsified and made to speak of Jesus, though Josephus is too serious an historian to mention such a man".⁵⁰ Voltaire thought that reason alone mitigated against the fraud. If Josephus had merely written the words, "he was Christ", that would have made him a Christian. And, needless to say, Josephus was no Christian. He was in his own peculiar way loyal to Judaism.

Nowadays, all worthwhile scholars agree that what we are dealing with is a Christian interpolation, not Josephus himself. Whether this was by accident or design, opinion is divided. Some hold that it was nothing but a clumsy forgery; others maintain that perhaps marginal notes by some pious monk were later integrated into the text by a copyist. Either way, says Mireille Hadas-Lebel, "No-one believes that Josephus' hand wrote the words 'if, indeed, one ought to call him a man' or 'He was the messiah'".⁵¹ Interestingly, but hardly surprisingly, neither of these formulations appears in the recently discovered old Arabic version.

Two possible conclusions broadly present themselves from all this. The first is that Jesus simply did not exist. More than a few thinkers have come to this conclusion. In his *Critique of the gospels and history of their origin*, former left Hegelian and eminent German *Bible* critic, Bruno Bauer, argued that Jesus was "constructed, for the most part, to meet the needs of Christian propaganda"; he was not an historical figure.⁵² In a famous Secular Society lecture in 1927, Bertrand Russell put forward a similar idea.

“Historically, it is quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all, and if he did we do not know anything about him.”⁵³ John Allegro, a translator of the Dead Sea scrolls, argued that the whole Jesus story was a “fictional” cover for a secret drug-using cult.⁵⁴ More recently, the idea of Jesus as a non-historical figure has been argued in the extensive writings of GA Wells.⁵⁵ Amusingly, in this spirit, the militant atheist, Luigi Cascioli, took his old school friend, Enrico Righi, parish priest in the Italian town of Bagnoregio, to court in January 2006, complaining that for 2,000 years the Catholic church had perpetrated the fraud that Jesus was a real person. Father Righi had repeated this in his local parish bulletin. Cascioli filed a criminal lawsuit alleging that: “When somebody states a wrong fact, abusing the ignorance of people, and gains from that, then that is one of the gravest crimes.”⁵⁶

I hold to a second conclusion. That there were so many saviours, or messiahs (ie, ‘christs’ in the Greek tongue) in 1st century Palestine, that, while others were given a passing mention, Jesus did not rate any specific treatment. Josephus rails against numerous “religious frauds and bandit chiefs” who joined forces in an attempt to win Jewish freedom from Rome. He also writes sneeringly of an “Egyptian false prophet”, who, posing as a seer, “collected about 30,000 dupes” and after leading them around the desert took them to the Mount of Olives; “and from there was ready to force entry into Jerusalem” so as to seize “supreme power”. Roman heavy infantry scattered the “mob” and killed or captured “most of his followers”.⁵⁷

Given this combination of the absent messiah and an abundance of messiahs, is there any realistic possibility of knowing anything about the real Jesus and finding out what he really represented? Yes, there is, albeit within definite limits. If we start not with the myth of the persona, but, on the contrary, if we work from the outside and investigate indirectly, socially and historically, by applying the method of deduction and inference, eventually a credible outline of Jesus and who he was will come into view, along with what he did during the turbulent final few years of his short life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Roman society and decline

To grasp why the Roman world, crucially its emperors, took up Jesus as its man-god and the whole Christian cult, it is necessary first to understand the dynamics and contradictions of its dominant mode of production and the drives and ideologies of its different classes of people. Needless to say, for Marxism, in the *last analysis*, economic life - or, to put it more scientifically, the continuous conditions for the production of society's prime wants - determines intellectual development.

We can safely dismiss notions of the isolated individual used, for example, by Adam Smith and Thomas Hobbes as their methodological starting point. Our starting point is rightly humanity, as existing within and living through definite *social* relations. Individuals only become human individuals as social individuals. So let us begin our discussion of early Christianity and its elevation into the official religion of the Roman empire not with Jesus or even the emperor Constantine and his convenient visions of Christ. Instead we shall outline a materialist theory of Greco-Roman society as a system.

Every *exploitative* system is characterised by definite social forms, crucially the *essential* means through which surplus product (surplus labour) is continuously extracted from the basic or immediate producers. There is invariably a combination of methods here, ranging from pure ideological mystification to unmediated violence. Obviously, the exact mix depends in no small part on the degree to which the exploited see themselves as exploited and are able to effectively resist. Forces of production and the relations of production therefore interpenetrate. They are not autonomous spheres. For example, under capitalism the introduction, or non-introduction, of dead labour - ie, machines - to replace living labour is carried out in direct response to the shortage, price and combativity of living labour.

The economic foundations of civilisation in the ancient Greco-Roman world were land and agricultural labour. Wealth was always essentially wealth in land and with that came social standing. Xenophon (c435-354 BCE), a Greek traditionalist, writes of the “great delight” that comes from farming.¹ Indeed, apart from war, managing a landed estate is considered the only noble way for a man of wealth and taste to gain a living. Centuries later, Marcus Cicero (106-43 BCE) and other conservative Roman orators extol the virtues of “working the land” in almost exactly the same snooty terms.²

Greco-Roman society is typically thought of in terms of glittering cities and their magnificent monuments, squares, temples and other such well planned public buildings. Yet behind the marble facades of Athens, Corinth, Alexandria, Carthage and Rome there lay the endless routine of the agricultural year. The great cities were primarily centres of consumption, not production. Aristocratic landowners spent much of their time in palatial town houses, but derived the bulk of their wealth from the countryside. Compared with agriculture, city-based mercantile trade and artisan industry were entirely subsidiary for the system as a whole.

Roman society was highly urbanised - nowhere more so than Italy, where it is estimated that some 20% of the total population lived in cities and towns. Country-dwellers, says Michael Rostovtzeff, “formed an enormous majority of the population” elsewhere in the empire.³ The same author reckons that, in terms of the empire’s gross product, agriculture accounted for 95%, industry and trade the other five percent. More recently, Arnold Jones has suggested similar proportions. Tax derived from agriculture “was something like 20 times” that derived from trade and industry in the late Roman empire.⁴

Industry could not overcome the barrier set by limited consumption. Transport by land was painfully slow and prohibitively expensive. So industry lacked a unified mass market and rarely transcended simple, essentially individualised techniques. Local circumstances provided the stimulus and fixed the parameters. For its part, mercantile trade derived the bulk of its surplus from moving products - typically luxuries, grain, olive oil and wine - over long distances, mainly by sea, between locations or

zones which were in terms of necessary labour inputs and skills disconnected and profoundly uneven. Because there was in antiquity no abstract labour or socially established average labour time, profits were fabulously high. Products could be bought cheaply and sold dear. But risks were almost as high as returns.

Sailing ships had to landhug or navigate by the stars (lacking compasses). On top of that handicap, these slow, fragile craft faced the danger of pirates, especially active in the 1st century BCE. Above all there were the fickle gods of nature, with their sudden storms, countervailing winds, punishing shallows and deadly rocks. So, if by good luck a citizen-merchant amassed a fortune, he would retire, purchase land and settle down as a gentleman farmer. It was more than a matter of financial safety. Status and honour, and thereby valuable reciprocal personal connections, were the spur. Successful foreign merchants in the Roman empire transformed themselves into Roman citizens and *landed aristocrats* through marriage and other methods of social climbing and integration.

Let me add that, in the main, agricultural production was carried out for direct consumption. Most inhabitants of the Roman empire were peasant farmers - who ranged from those whom we might dub kulaks down to those holding tiny, garden-sized plots. In general, they practised an agriculture that “aimed at subsistence rather than the production of an exportable surplus”.⁵ Put another way, commodity production was a secondary feature within the overall social metabolism. Numerous sources and authorities could be quoted, but the domination of self-sufficient agriculture over other forms of production is widely accepted. Even merchants and artisans frequently engaged in farming, and once again this was closely associated with their domestic life: ie, food for the kitchen, wood for heat, flax for clothes, etc.

Land in the Greco-Roman world was predominantly alienable and held privately. Suffice to say, class differentiation set in early. One tightly knit group of people - the rich, the patricians, the aristocracy - won for themselves a privileged position whereby they accumulated ownership of large tracts of land and/or extracted by political-military means product or direct labour time from the primary producers: ie, the peasants. Such an *exploitative* relationship, whereby a surplus is obtained by the minority

class from the labour of the majority class of peasants, inevitably affects every facet of society.

Aristocrats might constitute a tiny fraction of the overall population. However, by dint of wealth and power, they function as the ruling class. Such people have many and varied national and international connections and a socially constructed and carefully maintained cohesion. Schooling, intermarriage, homosexual bonding, military service, patronage and politico-religious high office all help. Unlimited leisure time and abundant resources also allow them to culturally rise far above the cramped mental horizons of the rural and urban masses. All the arts, literature, science and philosophy of the ancient world are viewed as theirs by right. And together they generously promote and haughtily defend a thoroughgoing class supremacist ideology. Homer, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Virgil and Livy all agree: the rich are rich because they are the best of men by virtue of birth and breeding. The masses are poor, live in dirt, ignorance and squalor, not due to ruthless exploitation. No, they are lazy, stupid, feckless or simply come from mongrel stock. Crucially, of course, the aristocracy establish special bodies of armed men (the state) to stand guard over their privileges, along with laws, prisons and other forms of political oppression. As a concomitant, oligarchical constitutions are inaugurated and craftily backdated to the days of the mythical gods and heroes. Not surprisingly they enshrine the principle of governance of the people by the rich, for the rich (tyrannies and monarchies are, to all intents and purposes, variants).

Class struggles and their different outcomes

Of course, those below constantly fought back and, given sufficient determination - and a "rich or even blue-blooded" leader - the *demos* (ie, the masses) could overturn the oligarchy and replace it with a democracy.⁶ So peasant-citizens and aristocrats battled with each other. Sometimes to the point where the masses were reduced to poverty and rightlessness. Sometimes to the mutual exhaustion and ruination of both classes. Sometimes to the benefit of ordinary citizens (nowhere more so than Athens).*

*The compact home territory of Athens helped. Attica was about the size of Luxembourg and therefore the capital was within one day's journey for even the most distant citizen.

Either way, the *absolute general tendency* in the ancient world was for the aristocracy to accumulate more and more farms and thereby remorselessly liquidate the free peasantry as a class. Radical reforms might temporarily counteract this tendency: eg, those of Solon in 594-93 or 591 BCE, which abolished debts and debt-bondage in the *polis* of Athens. In Rome, with its half-democratic, half-aristocratic mixed constitution, *populares* like Tiberius Gracchus, Gaius Gracchus, Publius Colidus and Julius Caesar set out similar programmes. Plutarch, the last of the great Greek historians, gives these strangely familiar words for Tiberius Gracchus to speak: "The wild beasts of Italy have their dens and holes to lurk in, but the men who fight and die for our country enjoy the common air and light and nothing else."⁷

But, once the countervailing power of those below wobbled or weakened, the land hunger of the oligarchical elite would immediately reassert itself. In his admirably perceptive prologue to *Caesar and Cleopatra*, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) has the god Ra tell the audience that Rome had discovered that "the road to riches and greatness is through robbery of the poor and slaughter of the weak". "So," Shaw continues, "they robbed their own poor until they became great masters of that art, and knew by what laws it could be made to appear seemly and honest".⁸

From the dawn of class society the aristocracy sought to attach to its land and household forms of additional labour that were both cheap and reliable. With the growth in the size and number of their estates, the problem of labour became ever more pressing. Free peasants did on occasion hire themselves out as wage-labour. That, though, was relatively expensive to purchase and, more important, unreliable. They had their own farms and families and, especially during sowing and harvesting, showed little enthusiasm in selling their ability to labour. Wage-labour therefore existed only on the margins of society. Prime producer and means of production had not been separated. No readily available pool of 'free' labour yet existed within society.

Unfree labour offered a way out of the conundrum and became increasingly widespread. This took a number of forms, but, at least initially,

the usual form was as a result of debt-bondage: ie, labour that is performed as security for, or in repayment of, a debt. This tended to further impoverish the masses and therefore had its own contradictions and, as suggested above, was always subject to stiff resistance. Two polar opposites will suffice for purposes of illustration. Athens and Sparta.

The exact nature of Athenian democracy has been vigorously debated, mostly usefully, amongst Marxists in recent years. While traditionally Marxists often spoke of Athens as just another example of aristocratic rule, others have brought to light the role of class struggle in winning far-reaching measures of democracy *against* the aristocracy. Ellen Meiksins Wood has even claimed that a protracted period of class struggles lasting many hundreds of years resulted not only in Solon's land reforms, but in an "agriculture", and hence the "material base" of Athenian society, being "dominated by independent smallholders".⁹

Before Solon and his reforms, Plutarch writes of the Athenian people being "weighed down with the debts that they owed to a few rich men". The city "stood on the brink of revolution", he attests.¹⁰ The constitutional changes, land reforms and programme of debt cancellation introduced by Solon defused the revolutionary situation at the expense of these "few rich men". Naturally none of this is put down to the self-activity of the masses by Plutarch. The Athenian revolution of 508-07 BCE is likewise associated with one aristocrat name - Cleisthenes. But, as Josiah Ober stresses, though Cleisthenes is "indeed a very important player in Athens's revolutionary drama, the key role was played by the *demos*". Democracy was not "a gift from a benevolent elite", but the result of "collective decision, action and self-definition on the part of the *demos* itself".¹¹ Yet virtually all Greco-Roman writers, and most contemporary classics professors for that matter, dismiss the masses as a benighted, swinish mob, which is easily swayed by irresponsible demagogues (ie, leaders of the people); that or they simply make them invisible.

Suffice to say, through their political clubs, special religious celebrations, boycotts of military levies, riots and uprisings, the *demos* radically tilted the balance of class power. That helps explain why famous philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle - who were, of course, members of the upper class - express such coolness, even downright hatred for the Athenian

form of government. It was not that the aristocracy had been expropriated and reduced to powerlessness. They remained big landowners and key political figures. That said, supreme authority was directly concentrated in a popular assembly made up of all male Athenian citizens (women as a sex formed what Geoffrey de Ste Croix calls an oppressed 'class' throughout the ancient Greco-Roman world).¹² There was also a people's court which acted as another means of enforcing the will of the masses: eg, punishing the rich because they are rich. Administrative posts and religious offices - often their functions combined and carried a single title: eg, magistrate - were open to election, regularly rotated and sometimes chosen by lot. Hence there was an absence of a self-perpetuating bureaucracy. In general anyone willing to serve could put themselves forward (and that included women who wanted to be priestesses). Almost needless to say, there were "no theological seminaries, no rites of ordination".¹³

Obviously, this whole constitutional arrangement was thoroughly despised by the aristocracy. Birth no longer guaranteed political power. Instead the common people had to be asked for their votes and treated with respect. Moreover, the rich were liable to mandatory 'liturgies' (they had to finance one of the numerous religious festivals or the running of a warship). And in return for service in the navy, attendance at the assembly and sitting on a jury, poorer citizens received generous payments from public funds. For "nearly two centuries" this Athenian welfare state brought prosperity and internal peace, notes Moses Finley.¹⁴

While Athenian democracy preserved and entrenched the citizen-peasantry for a time by institutionalising popular counterweights to the socio-economic power of the aristocracy, this rested in no small part on the precarious foundations of imperialism, or indirect collective exploitation: namely overseas tribute extracted from often unwilling and restive allies. By 425 BCE, Athens's Delian League supposedly consisted of 400 'cities' (many must have been more the size of villages). Once this external source of surplus product was removed, not least with the intervention of Spartan soldiers and Spartan-backed tyrannical and oligarchical coups, above all during the Peloponnesian war, Athens faced nemesis as the hegemonic power in the Aegean and both those above and those below faced ruination.

What of Sparta? Though constitutionally an oligarchy, Sparta actually froze the class conflict between its rich and poor citizens. "Sparta was able to solve the problem of land-hunger," says Paul Cartledge.¹⁵ In 735 BCE they successfully invaded the neighbouring, and agriculturally rich, territory of Messenia. Land and labour was subsequently - crucially after the first Messenian revolt of 670 BCE - put under common ownership and allocated by the state to the citizenry in some 9,000 plots, known as *klaroi*. Antagonisms between rich and poor Spartans were thereby overlaid by the "cardinal fact" of the enslavement of the Messenian people.¹⁶

Class conflict between the Spartiates and the Messenian helots was more intense and more open than elsewhere in Greece. 'Helot' means 'captive' and they were treated and acted in a way equivalent to prisoners of war. Faced with a permanently hostile and compact people-class, who possessed what we would now call national consciousness, the Spartans were compelled to turn themselves defensively into a tightly-knit community of professional soldiers, dedicated not to foreign expansion, but to xenophobically maintaining internal discipline and order. Helots were ruled through a system that amounted to martial law. As a state, Sparta was therefore both highly vulnerable and inward-looking. Spartans had to act as unpaid bodyguards for each other against the permanent helot threat. Unmarried Spartan men lived in austere common quarters and, even when married, ate in a common mess hall. Cultural life became impoverished and dour, including for the elite. Sparta itself was like a well-administered military camp, lacking the splendid temples, theatres, columned squares and fine mansions normally associated with ancient capital cities. Yet ultimately the Spartan constitution failed to maintain the number of full citizens; by the 4th century BCE there are believed to be only some 1,000-1,200 of them (there was an intermediate class known as the *perioci*, the 'outdwellers' who were formally free, but not Spartan citizens). However, with the third great rising and final liberation of Messenia in 370-69 BCE, Sparta was reduced to limping on as a purely local power.

An additional point. With the removal of its internal colony, class struggle in Sparta took extreme form. Two kings, Agis IV (reigned 244-41 BCE), and Cleomenes III (reigned 235-19 BCE), attempted to carry through radical reforms - debt cancellation, land redistribution, widening the citizen

base. Many historians describe their intentions as revolutionary. Both kings were killed by upper class opponents. Despite those setbacks, under the “red king”, Nabis (reigned 207-192 BCE), those below made tremendous gains.¹⁷ The Roman historian Livy has Nabis saying of his social programme that he exiled the rightful king, fought for “an equalisation of wealth and position”, increased the citizen population by “freeing slaves”, and won larger numbers willing to bear arms for their country by “distributing land to the needy”.¹⁸

Back to the main thread of our argument. Without reliable supplies of additional labour, the accumulation of landed property is pointless. The Greco-Roman aristocracy solved the problem *in the main* by turning not just to unfree, but to slave labour. We must therefore modify somewhat our description of the foundations of ancient Greco-Roman society - ie, being land and agricultural labour, by specifying that in classical times this labour was *slave* labour. Mass slavery was “archetypal” and that is why it is correct to classify the successive phases of classical antiquity - first Greece, then Macedonia, and lastly Rome - as a slave mode of production.¹⁹ The ruling class reproduced itself socially and culturally through the forced (ie, extra-economic) extraction of surplus product from slave labour, and this essential relationship in turn moulded the class, ideological and power contours of the whole of society. This was especially so in Athens precisely because the peasant-citizens managed to end their exploitation by the aristocracy - a circumstance which *compelled* the aristocracy to turn to slave labour.

Shaw's Ra says that, once old Rome “had squeezed their own poor dry, they robbed the poor of other lands, and added those lands to Rome, until there came a new Rome, rich and huge”.²⁰ The Roman ruling class was ideologically driven to achieve what Polybius called “universal hegemony”.²¹ A mafia-like sense of honour prided itself on the ability to hold territory and inflict violence. There were all manner of excuses for their “defensive imperialism” - avenging insults to national honour, answering pleas by allied kings, preventative strikes against malign neighbours, etc. Nevertheless, the idea that “Rome, as of Great Britain, acquired her world-domination in a fit of absence of mind” is untenable.²²

Crude apologetics, surely. Rome, unlike the European powers in the late 19th century, did not embark on a systematic policy of imperial expansion according to some master plan. True, emperor Augustus appears to have entertained ambitions to go beyond the Rhine all the way to the China Sea (Romans did not possess a strong sense of geography). But the “more mundane” - ie, underlying - motives of Rome’s aristocrats are not hard to discern.²³ Indemnities, land, booty ... and slaves. Robin Blackburn evocatively talks of Roman “slave hauls”.²⁴

Figures have always been subject to dispute. Nevertheless even the most conservative estimate puts the slave population in classical Athens at somewhere between 60,000 and 80,000. There were something like 45,000 full citizens (all male, of course). Estimates for imperial Rome give not dissimilar proportions. Within Italy it is suggested that slaves constituted around a third of the population. Others argue for a higher figure: in 43 CE there are said to have been 3 million slaves compared with 4.4 million free inhabitants.²⁵

Housed in bleak, single-sex barracks and worked in gangs under a slave driver, agricultural slaves endured conditions that were unbelievably grim. Masters had the power of life or death over these poor wretches. “As many enemies as you have slaves” says Seneca, quoting a widespread saying of his time.²⁶ Branded or tattooed on faces or legs with their master’s initials, worked beyond exhaustion, they could be, and were, in cases of resistance, refusal, or even a wrong look, flogged, beaten, mutilated, starved, tortured or summarily put to death.

And, of course, the immeasurably better-off domestic slaves, both males and females, were expected to make themselves available sexually to their masters (and mistresses). Ancient writers, if not the moderns, are perfectly candid. The body of the slave is not their own; they were mere things to be bought, traded and used as owners saw fit. After alcohol-fuelled banquets, guests expected to be provided with a chosen slave to satisfy their drunken lusts. Handsome young boys and girls were particularly valued by slave merchants. Boys were often castrated. Showing their lowly status, mature male slaves were habitually described as ‘boys’ in both Greek and Roman literature.

Fear was crucial. If a slave murdered their master - unsurprisingly, a not infrequent occurrence - all other slaves in the household faced execution. Slaves were considered subhuman (that, or in the stoic tradition, mere unfortunates who should accept their sorry fate). In Roman law they were designated as mere speaking tools. Aristotle, perhaps the most outstanding thinker of antiquity, had justified this status, which put them just above animals, by coining the doctrine of natural slavery:

[W]henver there is the same wide discrepancy between soul and body or between man and beast, then those whose condition is such that their function is the use of their bodies and nothing better can be expected of them, those, I say, are slaves by nature.²⁷

No wonder Engels warns of classical philosophy carrying a poisonous barb.

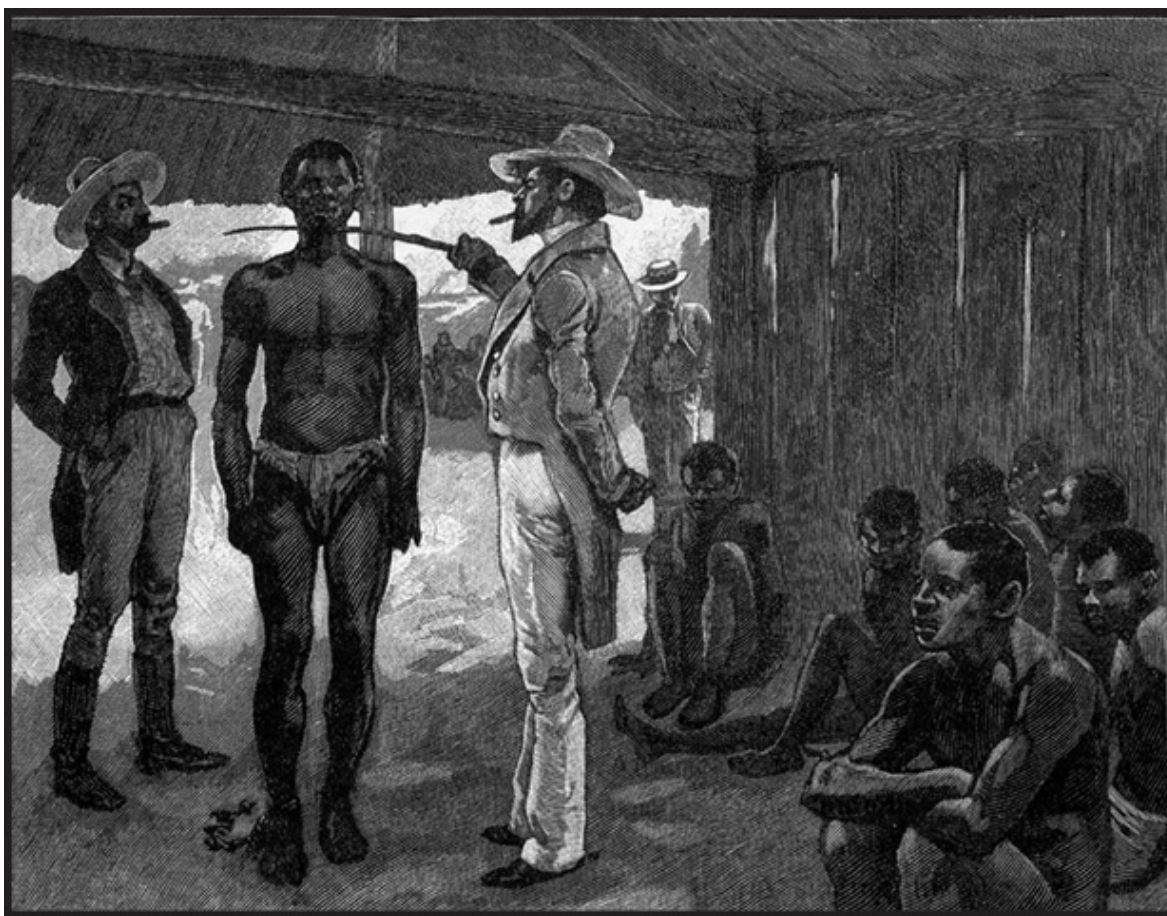
Almost invariably, slaves were disunited by a wide variety of languages - originating as they did from countless places around Europe and the Mediterranean world. The impossibility of effective communication - apart perhaps from a smattering of Greek or Latin gleaned from their oppressors - added to their powerlessness, lack of solidarity and therefore lessened the likelihood of coordinated resistance. Nevertheless there were numerous slave uprisings, including full-blown wars.²⁸ In 197 BCE there was a revolt by Carthaginian slaves in Italy - particularly notable because it provides perhaps the first example of Roman use of execution by crucifixion (originally a Carthaginian form of punishment). In 134 BCE the silver miners of Laurium rose and were only suppressed by the Athenian ruling class with the help of Roman legionaries. Between 134 and 129 BCE there was the first Sicilian slave war. The slave leader, a Syrian called Eunus, managed to practically drive the Romans off the island and he established a slave kingdom. They were defeated, though with much difficulty. During the 104-99 BCE Roman civil war a second slave war broke out in Sicily.

The greatest rising memorably occurred over the years 73-71 BCE and was begun by gladiators in the city of Capua in southern Italy. Under a Thracian called Spartacus - charismatic, a military genius and undoubtedly the best man we know of in antiquity - his army defeated and put to flight Roman legions one after another. We can surmise that his aim was to overthrow Roman power and, like Toussaint L'Ouverture in the 18th

century, free all slaves. It is also surely significant that Spartacus “never declared himself king”.²⁹ Naturally the spokespersons of the Roman ruling class, such as the historian, Florus, expressed nothing but profound loathing and spluttering contempt for the slave revolution. It was not a heroic struggle for freedom, but an outrage. The Spartacus army consisted of slaves and was commanded by gladiators: “men on the worst character ... eager to take vengeance on their masters”.³⁰

Apart from such exceptional circumstances, the slaves could never form themselves into a class: that is an organised force which acts according to common interests. Material conditions were loaded against collective action and collective consciousness. Slaves, in particular domestic slaves, sought individual freedom as clients under their former masters, not general freedom.

Roman slaveowners liked to portray themselves as superior, generous and paternalistic towards their slaves. In reality they were arrogant, cruel and grasping. Most of the slave population worked in agriculture. Only if they managed to survive into old age, and were therefore of less and less use, was there any likelihood of being granted their freedom (manumission). They were considered a burden, superfluous to requirements and therefore expendable.



Slavery and attempts to escape are synonymous.

Usually, however, the owner expected slaves to buy their own freedom at the original price of purchase. That was practical mainly for those in a position to slowly accumulate small tips: doormen, messengers, doctors, teachers, readers, prostitutes. Even then, that could mean leaving behind loved ones, spouses and children, trapped in slavery.

Not surprisingly, escape attempts were endemic. James Walvin writes: “Wherever slavery existed, there we find slave runaways”.³¹ Masters fumed at the loss of their property and hired professional slave-catchers. They hunted them down as if they were wild animals. To prevent slaves from making off, owners used leg irons, handcuffs, metal collars and cages. Strangely, nothing stopped these “speaking tools” from yearning for freedom.

Such a *system* of slave labour must be distinguished from earlier, less harsh, forms of slavery. From the first stages of civilisation, war-captives

had been put to work instead of being butchered. These ‘strangers’ existed outside the *polis* - having no blood relation to the community through tribe or gen. Nevertheless they were incorporated into the family, albeit in a lowly position.

In the event of total defeat, that fate befell populations of entire cities. Men, women and children were divided up between the conquering warrior elite. Eg, having sacked Troy, the Greeks - or Achaeans, as Homer calls them - enslaved all those inhabitants who had not managed to steal away, the lion’s share of the most valued captives going to the commander-in-chief, Agamemnon, king of Mycenae. Lesser kings and princes likewise returned to Greece with their allotted human cargo.

Drunken boasts by swaggering warrior-heroes aside, the numbers involved were small. Far less than in the classic era, for certain. Moreover, according to a standard history textbook, slaves during the Homeric age “appear to have been well treated”.³² Kautsky too reckons that their lot was “not very bad”.³³ In this context we can usefully cite the purported close relationship between Odysseus and the “divine swineherd”, Eumaeus. The slave is firmly convinced that his master “loved” him and “took thought for me beyond all others” and if he returned from the Trojan war would immediately give him a good-looking wife, a small farm and liberty.³⁴ Incidentally he claims to be a king’s son stolen by Phoenician pirate-merchants as a child.** Odysseus later assures him that he did not come off too badly. He was sold to a kind master, who “had carefully seen to it that you had plenty to eat and drink”.³⁵

** During these times merchants added to the supply of slaves by raiding lightly defended coastal towns and settlements - merchant and pirate then being indistinguishable.

Such tender descriptions of the faithful slave were common in classical Greco-Roman literature too. However, they ought to carry a health warning. After all, they were written by, or for, the slave-owning elite themselves. Some have celebrated such relationships as showing the essential humanity of Greco-Roman slavery.³⁶ However, the relationship between master and slave was manifestly not between equals. A grossly uneven power relationship ensured that the slave assumed flattering attitudes and mannerisms more out of self-preserving necessity than authentic regard. That is why the master’s affection is doubtless the more genuine. He

regards the slave as he might a favourite dog and will doubtless sincerely mourn their death. One can never know what the Eumaeuses of the ancient world really thought, but we can deploy our imaginations. During the US civil war, the second American revolution, slaveowners were often shocked by the sudden and unexpected disloyalty of their loyal ‘niggers’. They spoke insolently, refused to obey orders, sneaked away and even enlisted in the union army. Given the opportunity, there is every reason to believe that Eumaeus would have done something not dissimilar.

Nevertheless, in Homeric Greece relations between people were essentially personal. Exploitation was therefore limited. Slaves “often worked together” with their masters and mistresses on the land or in the household.³⁷ Agamemnon and Odysseus and other heroes ploughed the land and prepared their own meat. Their sons tended flocks of sheep. Their wives and daughters cooked, carried water and washed clothes. Production was for immediate consumption.

During classical civilisation there was no personal relationship between a slaveowner and the average agricultural slave. Such slaves were far too numerous. Aristocrats acquired a disdainful contempt for manual labour. They did not work alongside their slaves. Nor did they exhibit the slightest human feelings for them. Slaves were viewed purely instrumentally: they were no more than an objective means to an end. Production on their farms and in the gold, silver, iron and sulphur mines took place not for immediate consumption (needs), but exchange. These slaveowners wanted hard cash. The cycle of such *commodity production* begins with outlays of money in order to purchase slaves and other raw materials and ends with a sale and a money profit: ie, M-C-M’. In agriculture (and mining) labour was unremitting and life expectancy horribly short. However, the more labour that can be extracted from the slave, the greater the profit. A whole cornucopia of commodities was thereby made available for the aristocratic slaveowner to squander on themselves and their cronies. Largesse therefore grows in direct proportion to the degradation of the slave. Whereas in modern times there is accumulation of capital for its own sake, in Rome, in the ancient world in general, there was the pursuit of pleasure. A factor, Kautsky suggests, relevant to the rise of Christianity.

But for now let us concentrate on the essentials of the system. A notable feature of the slave mode of production was the tendency for the aristocracy to purchase more and more land and more and more slaves. However, that was not problem-free. Supervising and maintaining control over slaves was an expensive overhead necessitating many guards and overseers (themselves often slaves). Furthermore, slave labour detests with a passion its miserable day-to-day conditions and overall social position. Unlike the wage worker, the slave can neither choose their employer nor strike in order to improve their circumstances. Many made escape bids - but life for a branded runaway must have been precarious. Capture was frequent and then there followed a savage beating, torture or execution - Cato recommended a 'trial' in front of other slaves.³⁸ That way an internal overseer would be seared onto their minds.

Lewis Grassie Gibbon, in his novel *Spartacus* (1933), brilliantly evokes the burning hatred that existed between the *main* classes in Roman society. Slaves would exact the most terrible revenge on their tormentors - if they got the chance. The Roman state in turn had no compunction about ordering mass extermination (6,000 slaves are said to have been crucified after the defeat of the Spartacus uprising). Slaves were "extraordinarily" cheap.³⁹ One could purchase an average slave for just over the annual earnings of an artisan. Horace quotes a price of 500 drachmas during the reign of Augustus.⁴⁰ In contrast, in antebellum USA slaves were much more costly in comparative terms. The disposable slaves of the Roman empire resulted from constant warfare and constant expansion. When Julius Caesar conquered Gaul, there was mass enslavement: a million men, women and children were purportedly sold off to the highest bidder according to Appian.⁴¹

Rome and its empire are commonly thought of as stupendously rich. The caesars and the aristocratic elite undoubtedly lived in and expected absolute luxury. Honoured guests, so the story goes, were served with larks' tongues and for amusement were given fat pearls to dissolve in vinegar. Despite such extravagant consumption, in terms of productivity the Roman empire was "underdeveloped".⁴² Wealth resulted not from intensive, but extensive

agricultural exploitation. Aristocrats typically invested in neither technology nor industry.

Between 4th century BCE Greece and 4th century CE Rome there is no significantly discernible technological progress. Minor innovations took place. Wheeled ploughs were improved in Gaul, Greek-invented screw pumps were used for irrigation on some estates and novel plants and animals were introduced into Britannia. However, there is no equivalent of the European medieval industrial revolution: the harrow (1077), windmills (1180), horse collars (1180), compass (1195), water-powered saw (1240), stern-post rudder (1250), block printing (1289), calculation of latitude (1290), water-powered bellows (1323), wood lathe (1347), movable type (1445), etc.⁴³ Instead we find an almost total reliance on human and animal muscle power, not water or wind power (sailing ships being a notable exception). So the slave mode of production is much less productive than 14th century Europe. Let alone mature capitalism.

True, the large-scale production of commodities did involve a degree of specialisation. Eg, viniculture and olive oil. Nor should we forget the state's command system of edict-production-delivery, designed to meet the parasitic needs of Rome as a city and the huge Roman army. Selected farms were turned over to grain or cattle. This allowed for a division of labour and a more intense exploitation of nature. Irrigation and rotation systems were introduced and there existed a widespread literature on 'scientific' farming - not least concerning maximising the efficiency of slave labour. By such means the productivity of the great estates, the *latifundia*, was lifted. But whether or not this was higher than that practised on tiny peasant plots is questionable. There are, of course, no accurate or reliable contemporary statistics. Nevertheless the psychological factor must be taken into account and surely proved decisive.

Unfree labour, especially slave labour, is not only unmotivated and sullen, but prone to vent its frustration on the means of production. A slave would take private pleasure in maltreating valuable animals and tools. As a result, only the hardest of beasts were used for haulage power alongside the crudest and heaviest of instruments. That attitude hardly describes the free peasants on their little family concern. They willingly toil from dawn to dusk and with the utmost diligence and boundless energy in order to meet

their own household needs. They also drive, sometimes brutally, their own wives and children who work alongside them. Hence a latifundium might well be responsible for a greater mass of surplus product than a mosaic of peasant farms organised on a comparable piece of land. However, the latter would support far more people in what passed for prosperity than the former.

As Rome took over first Italy, then Macedonia, Asia Minor, the Carthaginian empire, Egypt, Gaul and with a final flourish the Armenian, Assyrian and Mesopotamian east, slaves and booty flooded back, crucially into the hands of the aristocracy and the Roman state. Slave labour assumed general form. Not only artisans, domestic servants, cooks, policemen, teachers and musicians, but even philosophers lived as chattel slaves. Slaves - usually Greeks - were also incorporated into the imperial household by the emperor. Therefore we find slaves and freed slaves constituting the state bureaucracy under the emperor. They amassed huge fortunes and counted amongst the richest of the rich. Of course, this whole elaborate superstructure existed on the back of agricultural slaves.

The cheapness and ready supply of slave labour on the one hand, and the crippling burden of peasant-citizen debt on the other, enabled the aristocracy to buy up numerous smallholdings and substitute slave labour for peasant labour. These conditions made the latifundia viable and promoted their asphyxiating spread across the face of the empire. No doubt labour productivity tumbles; however, the wealth the aristocracy grows by leaps and bounds. Here we find the social impulse behind the tendency towards *constant war* in antiquity.

The mob of Remus

Sweeping military successes and Rome's mastery of the whole of Italy resulted in a big increase in the surplus available to the elite. They took the bulk of any booty - gold, silver, precious objects, war captives. An aristocratic general could thereafter afford to be absent for lengthy periods of time. His overseers ensured the cycle of agricultural production continued as normal. It was a different story for peasant-citizen soldiers. Distant wars and extended conquests often portended their ruination as

farmers. Land remained unploughed. Crops went unweeded or unharvested. Short-term relief was sought in loans. The result then of *constant war* for the peasant was not enrichment, but *chronic* indebtedness.

On the one hand, the land hunger of aristocrats and, on the other, an intolerable burden of debt, saw free peasants systematically uprooted from the land and squeezed into the cities. Rome in particular. The populist attempts by the Gracchi brothers and, from then onwards, other would-be imperial reformers to reverse that tendency by returning or granting land to proletarians, army veterans, etc, merely put off social decay. At its zenith, the population of the capital probably reached one million (an urban conurbation not surpassed till the rise of 17th century commercial London - Lewis Mumford calls Rome the first “megapolis”).⁴⁴ Here the deracinated peasantry swelled the ranks of the proletariat and lumpenproletariat, a swathe of whom, as citizens of Rome, were entitled to the state handout of grain and just about managed to scratch a living through innumerable other avenues - from casual building work to street portering, from market hawking to water-carrying, from thievery to prostitution.

Michael Parenti tellingly describes their awful living conditions. Outside its well planned centre, Rome consisted of a warren of stinking, dangerous, narrow, crowded streets and alleyways. Think of the slum quarters of Mexico City, Mumbai and Cairo. Tenements were three or four storeys high, had no running water, no toilets and little ventilation or natural light. Rickety and badly maintained, they frequently collapsed. Landlords charged sky-high rents and that forced some families to double and even treble up. Charcoal braziers and oil lamps meant that outbreaks of fire were a constant hazard. Ditto disease and violent crime. If they travelled at night, the rich would be accompanied by armed bodyguards. The poor risked a mugging or even death.⁴⁵

There were those organic intellectuals amongst the proletariat, the Joseph Dietzgens of the ancient world, who developed, and from what we can gather, successfully promoted various programmes that held out the promise of an alternative society. Such ideas were spread in the main orally, not least by way of market square and wine-shop propagandists and agitators. There was graffiti, painted slogans and perhaps posters too.

Discontent was everywhere: it constituted the social ether. There was, as a result, a ready and receptive audience. Basically the vision was of a future without labour, a communism secured at the expense of the rich. In other words, the alternative religio-political programmes were premised on a redivision of existing wealth. People looked backwards to a golden age, to a garden of Eden, to before the fall. There was, however, no goal of a higher, more productive, society.

The far left amongst the ancient proletariat (surely a small minority) did envisage the abolition of slavery. History furnishes us with a few examples of agitation designed to unite the efforts of the proletariat and the slave class. Many proletarians were, of course, freed slaves, so we can guess at some degree of fellow feeling. GEM de Ste Croix cites the “ineffective protest” by the common people in 61 CE against the mass execution of the slaves of Pedanius Secundus.⁴⁶ But such incidents were apparently episodic and fleeting. The institution of slavery seems to have been generally accepted as a social given.

Besides perhaps being able to sign their names, most proletarians were illiterate. Moreover, unlike later periods, facilitated, of course, by the invention of the printing press, there were no popular news sheets or penny pamphlets in the ancient world. What we know of their views comes down to us indirectly, above all through the fine sieve of what little survives from the ancient orators, philosophers, historians and letter writers. Needless to say, these people were overwhelmingly and often aggressively pro-aristocratic. Cicero considered “artisans and shopkeepers and all that kind of social scum” akin to criminals and degenerates - “many of them simply out for revolution”.⁴⁷ Despite the smog of class interest and unconcealed contempt for everyone but the rich, we get vague, distorted, though precious, glimpses. Looking down their noses on the common herd and their unreasoning jealousy of their betters, they warn against the dangers of communism.

The people of Rome, the plebs and freedmen (former slaves), are typically dismissed as base, idle, heartless, sponging, vile, troublemaking and always willing to sell themselves to the highest bidder. They were the “mob of Remus”. Supposedly all that interested them was “bread and circuses”. That scornful comment comes straight from the pen of Juvenal,

another aristocratic ideologue, and has been echoed and reinforced down the centuries, especially by the 19th and 20th century classicists. Indeed so relentless have such descriptions been that even Marx can be found saying in a letter (not sent) that the dispossessed peasants of the late Roman republic were “a mob of do-nothings, more abject than the former ‘poor whites’ in the south of the United States”.⁴⁸

For his part, de Ste Croix finds nothing discreditable in poor Romans being interested in bread. They wanted to feed themselves and their families. Moreover, it should be pointed out that the distribution of the state grain ration was limited to relatively small numbers, the *plebs urbana*. It did not go to all 200,000-300,000 proletarians in Rome. Nor were they idle or lazy. As we have seen above, that describes the aristocracy, not the proletariat. They had to find work. As to circuses, the Roman games “grew out of religious festivals” and naturally that meant they were by tradition provided free of charge.⁴⁹ Even then, once again, only a minority would have been entitled to attend what became increasingly wanton displays of cruelty and bloodletting. Interestingly, despite on occasion decrying the vulgarity, it was the rich who staged these events, paid for them and occupied the best seats.

So who were the Roman proletariat? Who constituted the Roman mob which gathered in the Forum to listen to aristocratic *populares* and who under certain circumstances took to the streets in riot and insurrection? What motivated them? Once again, there are no reliable Roman records or journalistic descriptions. Upper class Romans loftily explain away popular movements as being the work of outside agitators, escaped slaves, discharged criminals and the mentally deranged. All transparently dishonest and thoroughly unconvincing.

Despite the obvious limitations of inference, we can surely get nearer the truth by turning to more recent times. Reactionaries like Lord Acton, Edmund Burke and in France Hyppolyte Taine, attacked the common people of 18th century London and Paris in almost exactly the same jaundiced terms as their Roman counterparts. They write about a turn-on, turn-off, fixed entity, consisting of beggars, former prisoners, pimps, vagabonds and other such lowlife detritus. They were “la canaille” or the “swinish multitude”.

Vitally, for our purposes, these times were literate, or at least literate-orientated, and leave behind a thick sediment of documentary evidence. Taking their cue from the ground-breaking work of George Lefèbvre, many historians have mined this historical material. Eg, George Rudé analysed in great detail who exactly composed the mob, or in his words the revolutionary crowd, of Paris in 1787-95. His main source being police interviews, court records and other seemingly mundane stuff.

Rudé convincingly shows that, far from being a fixed entity, the revolutionary crowd was, in fact, in constant flux and was changing in its composition, depending on what was the immediate issue that had been thrust to the fore by events and above all the underlying tempo and stage of the revolution.

Those who stormed the Bastille turn out not to consist of criminals or tramps. Actually a few hundred members of the national guard put themselves at the head of a determined body, which included a handful of prosperous merchants and other bourgeois, but overwhelmingly was made up of *sans culottes*: “craftsmen, shopkeepers, and journeymen, drawn from a wide variety of trades and occupations, though predominantly from the building, furnishing and luxury crafts”.⁵⁰

At other times wage-earners, water-carriers, building and barrel workers, the unemployed, housewives and other women come to the fore. In July 1791 the radical democrats of the Cordeliers Club launched their petition demanding the abdication of Louis XVI. Fifty thousand people gathered in the Champ de Mars to sign it, but before they could the national guard opened fire. Police reports indicate that about half those arrested or charged, or wounded or killed, were wage-labourers. The others were self-employed craftsmen, shopkeepers, petty traders, along with a “sprinkling” of bourgeois and professionals. About one in 20 were women. Then again, in the food riots of 1792 and 1793 women played the leading role. They demanded bread and popular price controls. Amongst those arrested were many market women, laundresses, cooks and domestic servants.

Rudé comprehensively disproves the contention that criminals and bandits played a significant part in the revolutionary events. Few of those arrested had previous convictions. Nor were people out for loot, let alone paid to go into action by dark forces, as upper class critics suggested. There

were instances of looting, but, says Rudé, “it has been greatly exaggerated and there is little sign at any stage of indiscriminate pillage”.⁵¹ What of the *sans culottes* being mere tools in the hands of middle class agitators? Rudé insists that the evidence conclusively shows that, far from being passive, they “absorbed and adapted the slogans and ideas of the political groups contending for power”.⁵² Indeed, the viewpoint of those who formed the revolutionary crowd was moulded by the direct experience of the *sans culottes* themselves. The ideas of Hébert, Marat and other revolutionary democrats filtered down to the masses from their journals, pamphlets and learned books by way of the literate minority and crucially took life through their own enrolment in the national guard and influx into the political clubs, sectional committees and fraternal societies. For a brief period, in Year III, these institutions were captured by the *sans culottes* and in many ways served their interests.

Roman proletarians, likewise, must surely have absorbed and adapted the ideas expounded by the imperial reformers, the *populares*. Fired by the promise/expectation of sweeping change, they too pursued their class interests. From aristocratic sources we learn that, under the late republic, proletarian organisations called *collegia* flourished. Membership ranged from mere dozens to many thousands. They were officially established to provide everything from honourable burials to fire fighting, to annual meals. But transparently, despite their often conservative rules and provisions, here we have examples of self-organisation of the skilled and the slightly better-off proletarians. They mobilised in support of Clodius and other *populares*. Under the principate they were certainly feared and distrusted. Hence, though he viewed self-help institutions somewhat sympathetically, Pliny, serving as special envoy in the troublesome province of Bithynia/Pontus, was told in no uncertain terms by emperor Trajan that in whatever city, however named or for whatever end, proletarian “common purpose” inevitably leads to “political clubs” emerging from them.⁵³

Nevertheless, given the Roman constitution, when it came to elections, the proletarian-citizen masses had no other option under the republic but to act through the medium of individual aristocrats who were, or who were believed to be, *populares*. During the chaotic transition from the republic to

principate, they backed Octavian/Augustus, whom - as heir of the great *popularis*, Julius Caesar - “they mistakenly regarded as their champion”.⁵⁴

Rome had never been a citizen-democracy on the pattern of Athens. The people did not directly legislate or hold high state positions. However, through 200 years of protracted class struggle, male citizens won for themselves the right to elect aristocrats and vote on legislative proposals (though the popular assemblies were gerrymandered in favour of the rich). This forced aspiring politicians to drop their haughty pride and actually mix with and even flatter ordinary citizens. Shades of plutocratic democracy in the USA. Inevitably though, with Rome’s imperial expansion, these very same citizens find themselves outcompeted, as slave labour comes to be ever more widespread. Opportunities to sell labour-power steadily narrow. Levels of class solidarity correspondingly decline. The proletariat sinks further and further into insecurity and dependence ... and into the lumpenproletariat.

Senatorial families would purchase their particular army of hangers-on, dependants and citizen voting fodder. Every morning loyal followers would dutifully assemble outside their patron’s house for the *salutatio* ... and receive small sums of money and daily orders. Often they were simply required to follow the senator about his humdrum business or applaud his speeches in court. This *displaced* citizen organisation went hand in hand with a malevolent divide and rule. Manipulation, desperation and narrow sectionalism became ubiquitous. Besides rival bands of obligated citizens, freedmen and slaves, the Roman population consisted of a jigsaw of migrants. Jews, Greeks, Gauls, Syrians, etc. Scapegoating national, linguistic and religious minorities, irrational hatreds, violent clashes and bloody pogroms were ever more frequent.

The more the degraded and buyable lumpen stratum predominates amongst the Roman population, the more the capital is prone to hire itself out to booty-rich generals and senators. On top of the state’s grain ration, there were cash handouts, banquets and lavish entertainments. Together they constituted *a form of social control*. Rome’s impoverished citizens thereby indirectly exploited, through ‘democracy’, an empire that contained at its height some 55-60 million people. Julius Caesar in particular, because of his youthful identification with the popular cause, programme of land

reform and stunning military successes in, and plunder of, Gaul and Egypt, was able to offer substantial gifts to a supportive, but not uncritical, citizen mass. Through their votes - and semi-autonomous street manifestations - Julius Caesar was able to skilfully outmanoeuvre and eventually bludgeon his aristocratic rivals into submission. The lowering presence of his legions helped too.

He got himself appointed *imperator perpetuus*, or life-long commander-in-chief. A Bonapartist domination which by no stretch of the imagination equates to what Michael Parenti - an apologist for 'official communism' - calls "a dictatorship of the *proletarii*, an instance of ruling autocratically against plutocracy on behalf of the citizenry's substantive interests".⁵⁵ Such a description is akin to projecting back in time Stalin, Mao and Castro myths. Though Julius Caesar won himself a populist cutting edge, with his triumph over the conservative patricians we have not the supremacy of Rome's citizen masses: rather the definite beginnings of state autonomy and the closure of the half-democratic, half-oligarchic republic.

Gift-obligation is reproduced on a higher level with Augustus and the principate constitution (a hidden monarchy with republican residues), till the tattered republican garb is finally discarded by Constantine. The empire finally leaves behind its specific historical origins and reconstitutes itself on the social base of the state itself. In fact, the sheer geographical size of the Roman empire drove it inexorably towards monocracy. The means of communication were too primitive to allow for a traditional oligarchy. As the caste of senatorial rulers fanned out to live in and exploit the far-flung provinces, the realities of actually running that world empire demanded decisive and, in relative terms, immediate responses. The senate became progressively enfeebled. It survived the transfer to Constantinople and into the Byzantine period ... but only as a town council with pretensions.

Long before that, the growing autonomy of the state saw the elite praetorian guard usurp the senate's right to formally choose the emperor. They famously enthroned Claudius ... as a joke. In 193 CE the praetorians publicly auctioned the title of emperor to the highest bidder. The wealthy senator Didius Julianus bought the title for 6,250 drachmas to be given to each member of the guard. There was no general principle of heredity. Supposedly the best person was chosen by the senate - or the army.

Between 235 and 305 there was a rash of soldier-emperors. Maximinus Thrace, Gordian III, Decius, Trebonius Gallus, Valerian, Gallienus, Claudius II, Aurelian, Probus, Carus, Diocletian. Most of them were proclaimed by their own provincial legions. Most were murdered. These conditions of what Rostovtzeff calls “military anarchy” led him to believe that the common soldier had wrested control of the empire from the educated and wealthy classes: a dictatorship of the *legionarii*. Nothing could be further from the truth. Those who assumed the imperial purple were not rank and file soldiers, but ambitious generals. What was happening was simple. State and society were becoming steadily divorced and opposed. That paved the way for the despotism of Constantine and Christianity.

Military and economic contradictions

Before showing how Christianity emerged as the official religion, we must trace the main contradictions of the slave mode of production to the point where they resolve themselves into the new, transitional, forms. Two particular, interlinked, contradictions follow from the replacement of free peasant labour by slaves. The first is military. The other is economic. Let us begin with the military.

Roman military prowess had its source in well drilled and highly motivated citizen armies. Before the second Punic war (218-01 BCE) Roman army units were formed on the basis of a universal obligation on all suitable male citizens to perform military service. Organisation within the legions reflected class distinctions and the mobilisation of the whole of society. Richer citizens served as cavalry, middling citizens as heavy infantry, while poorer citizens were the light infantry and skirmishers. This militia enabled Rome, as a city-state, to resist and then overpower culturally more advanced rivals within its near-abroad. Eg, the Latins and Etruscans, then the Greek and Carthaginian cities in southern Italy and Sicily.

With the decline of the free peasantry, the calibre of individual recruits decreases markedly. Lumpenproletarians or proletarians who live in filthy slums and gain a living by casual labour or forming part of a senatorial entourage are not natural fighting material. When put to the test in forced

marches, moving at speed in full armour and throwing the heavy *pila*, they performed badly in training. Peasant-citizens were well fed, physically fit and habitually used to hard work. Faced with the shrinkage of this class of natural soldiers, the Roman state turned to mercenaries - the old division of the army into three orders ended. The core of the army remained, to begin with, Roman, or at least Italian, albeit recruited from the desperate poor and, in the case of non-commissioned officers, from “veteran families”.⁵⁶

As they had to be marshalled into an unthinking chess set, the tactical role of the general assumed cardinal importance. Unlike Alexander the Great, who preplanned his battles and fought alongside his men, Roman generals from Scipio onwards remained at the rear, from where they could direct events. For example, at the battle of Zama, he was “able, in mid-battle, to pull back and realign his entire army for the final attack”.⁵⁷ Individually the Roman soldier might not have been up to much, but, toughened-up and trained to act as pawns under the command of a single intelligence, they could perform awesome military feats.

Yet this socio-ethnic composition proved unsustainable. Rome progressively drafted in less civilised conquered peoples too - Gauls, Illyrians, Thracians, Moors, Arabs and Dacians - and lastly and above all, semi-independent German settlers and Germans recruited from beyond the frontiers. Even during the late republic, specifically Roman cavalry had disappeared and what horse units remained consisted of foreign mercenaries or allied contingents. All such hired forces are notoriously unreliable and conservative. They served to defend, not expand, the empire. Therefore constant expansionist war inevitably turned into constant defensive war.

Once this shift occurs, we can say that the classical Roman mode of production entered its declining phase. All essential forms undergo decay or decomposition and visibly change, or begin to change, into their opposites. In this sense, if no other, we should locate the decline of Rome not in the retreat from Germania magna (9 CE) or the failure to hold Mesopotamia against the Parthians, let alone the establishment of Visigoth, Vandal, Frankish and Burgundian kingdoms on the ruins of the western empire during the 5th century. Rather, at least for the sake of neatness, we should equate the onset of decline with the assumption of power by Augustus and the inauguration of the principate, which is dated 27 BCE (the principate -

from first amongst equals - was preceded by a whole series of devastating civil wars between various aristocratic generals and aristocratic cliques).

Paradoxical though it might seem, decline - in the Marxist account - sets in *before* maximum territorial expansion (see figure 3). Nevertheless, with the principate the further additions to the empire are typically either fleeting, like Germania Magna (up to the Elbe), marginal, such as Britannia, or designed to strengthen defensive lines by securing natural barriers: eg, the banks of the Danube.

Due to constant expansionist war giving way to constant defensive war, the army's brass and iron armour and the traditional short sword were abandoned. In place of the terrifying, physically draining and always brief, and often indecisive, clash of well drilled units in close combat, came moats and long limes (walls), frontier forts and archers and javelin-throwers. The Roman empire thus came to resemble imperial China. However, barbarian war bands regularly penetrated the carapace. In response, the Romans turned to a strategy of "defence in depth".⁵⁸ Besides the fortification of towns and farmhouses, and a decentralised system of local militia, there came a highly centralised force of heavy cavalry. This rapid reaction force was first established by the emperor Gallienus (218-68) and served to chase down and trap raiders, most of whom were out for booty and wished to avoid serious engagements. Such highly trained, mobile, forces became ever more important to successive emperors, as countless enemies pressed in from every side.

For the slave mode of production, the ending of expansionist war poses another obvious problem. The cheap cost of slaves is conjoined with constant military aggression. Defensive wars closed the abundant supply of war-captives. From now on slaves have to be bred and raised within, or purchased from without, both solutions - ie, modified forms of social reproduction - being expensive for the exploiters. The market price of slaves soars, along with outgoings for their upkeep. Slaves are no longer disposable items. They have to be given spouses, huts and a family life of sorts.

In a society where productivity is essentially static, the rate of surplus extraction must fall. Exploitation of labour being what Marx called absolute, not relative (ie, not expanded through constantly improving

technique), that had to be the case. There was a downward pressure on the mass of surplus available to the ruling class, crucially the state, and thus a drive “to increase the rate of exploitation of the humbler free population”.⁵⁹

The burden of militarism needed for defence therefore arrives at the point where it must become all-consuming. The standing army, which



Figure 3. Roman empire at its height.

was 300,000 at the time of Augustus, had to be doubled (some authorities suggest a trebling by the time of Constantine). We therefore find a classic scissors: on the one side, steeply rising military expenditure and, on the other, downward overall economic activity. Taxes had to be made more socially widespread, onerous and numerous (Roman citizens were included in the net - by custom they had been exempt). Indeed, taxation reaches dimensions little short of legally shrouded expropriation. State power and society thereby progressively become opposed. Not only the exploited masses, but the curial class of richer citizens comes to hate the state.

Slave society proves to be a dead end. As the state's tax demands squeeze the population dry, countless people from all classes flee to wilderness areas, desert over the empire's borders or turn to begging. Rural revolts erupt in Hispania and Gaul, but thanks to the legions none succeed. Newborn children are left on rubbish dumps, sold into slavery or simply killed. Fields and artisan professions are abandoned. The division of labour and markets break down and are replaced by the autarchy of the *latifundia*. Some scholars see here the birth of the manorial system which was carried over from the late Roman empire into feudalism. There does seem to be conceptual and linguistic "connections" between the *villa rustica* of the late Roman empire and the *villicatio* of the Franks.⁶⁰ Anyhow, the great landlords, especially in frontier regions, form their own bands of armed men. They defend the "military household" - not the empire.⁶¹ The state takes over production in more and more areas and recruits labour on a military or semi-military basis. But with each attempt to stave off decline, contradictions intensify and multiply. Society tends towards disintegration.

The population cannot reproduce itself and starts to shrink. Cities and towns become depopulated. Public buildings are left to become ruins. Frontier defences fall into decay. Even Rome sees a population decrease: in the Severi age (193-235) a rapid one. The population problem is solved with partial solutions. German incomers are handed large parcels of land and much of the rural population are transformed into *coloni*. This status might well have been originally introduced largely as a fiscal measure. The state wanting to ensure regular tax returns. Nevertheless, while Roman law only knew two categories of human being - "all men are either free or

slaves” - the fact of the matter is that the *coloni* were tied to the land.⁶² The peasants became not mere “tenants” - an almost timeless phrase insisted upon by Chris Wickham in his account of the transition from late antiquity⁶³ - but serfs: ie, half-free ‘slaves of the land’, who were under the authority/control of landlords. By the time of Constantine, any *coloni* who tried to runaway could be brought back in manacles - like a slave.

From Diocletian (240-311) on, a general turn towards compulsion happens. Price and wage controls are introduced. Breach of them is supposedly subject to the death penalty. But because the state is systematically devaluing the coinage, inflation makes a mockery of all such edicts. During the period of Commodus the silver *denarius* sank to one-third of its former value. People fell back onto barter. The 3rd century saw further inflation and the minting of bad coinage (till Constantine’s stabilisation in the early 4th century and the gold *solidus*).

Social reproduction increasingly relies on chaining all manner of individuals to their place of residence and heredity. Not only must the tiller of the soil stay put and pass his allotted burden on to his son. So must blacksmiths, potters, silversmiths, inn-keepers, shipowners, etc. Even the position of town councillors and other municipal officials became hereditary. What once had been a profitable honour had become a constant financial drain. The *collegia* are turned into their opposite too. They become a means of control. Under Severus Alexander (reigned 208-35) membership of *collegia* or guilds is made compulsory for one occupation after another. They are expected to supply the state at fixed prices and operate under close state supervision. By 403, bakers were forbidden to marry outside the families of their fellow *collegia* members. Guilds hardened into castes.

Although the Roman empire in the Greek-speaking east survived the fall of Rome by something like a thousand years, slavery as the dominant mode of exploitation had already long before evolved into a form of serfdom, which itself proceeds to freeze.

Incidentally, I do not treat serfdom and feudalism as “virtually identical”.⁶⁴ As if with serfdom there automatically follows corresponding feudal relations of production. There has been a lengthy, highly contested and ongoing debate between scholars, including a fair number of Marxists,

about this whole issue. The results are not particularly illuminating. Problems with old definitions, applications and treatments have been usefully highlighted, but nothing convincing has been put in their place. The tendency is to reduce *all* pre-capitalist social formations to a bland uniformity.

The main thing is to be clear about what content we give to terms. I take feudalism to be a mode of production characterised by the system of vassalage and fief, which relied on serf labour, but whose fragmentation and disunity provides space for peasant manoeuvre and, later, from about the 11th century, capitalist development. Hence, the *classic* feudal mode of production was confined to western Europe and the crusader kingdom of Jerusalem (and perhaps Japan). By 'serfdom' I mean the historically established legal, ideological and actual position of peasants in relationship to their exploiters. Though tied to the land, they exercised a degree of control over their labour, the instruments of labour and the products of labour. Nevertheless, what exists over this social foundation can widely differ: eg, Norman England, Zhou-dynasty China and the late Roman empire.

The decline of ideas

Roman society tends towards the decline not only of socio-economic forms, but intellectual life and ways of seeing too. Latin and Greek literature loses all creativity and originality. The 'voices of protest', such as Livy, Horace and Virgil, are followed by epigones. The first generation following the establishment of the principate was acutely aware that they had secured an end to constantly reoccurring civil war, but at the cost of their freedom. Later writers merely quote past authors and fall into dull conformism. To actually investigate nature is alien to them. Introducing his *Natural history* - a vast, rambling work of 37 books - the elder Pliny boasts that he has incorporated 20,000 facts from 100 select authors. It does not occur to him to emulate Aristotle. He presents what others have said, after a fashion. But he does not study nature itself. Language is affected too. As economic activity declines into local autarchy, bilingualism - Latin and Greek - amongst educated people falls into disuse. Monolingualism becomes the

norm and in the west eventually produces Italian, French, Portuguese, Provençal and Spanish. Another indication of decline can be seen in the visual arts, especially paintings. As the emperor rises to the status of a god and then, with Constantine, an oriental despot, perspective - an artistic tool invented by the Greeks - becomes politically unacceptable and is eventually completely forgotten. The third dimension falls into confusion. Shadows - when they appear - are cast in all directions. Physical objectivity disappears and individuality is replaced by hierarchy. The emperor, like the pharaohs, must be “magnified”.⁶⁵ In the Byzantine period, status and the psychological approach dominates. Severe, almost cataleptic faces stare out to the viewer from icons and murals.

Traditional religion appears to decline too (the rise of ‘foreign’ cults is certain). By the time of the emperors, Rome is no longer inhabited by a majority of citizens united by ties of tribe and ancient custom. The parochial gods of Rome and the observation of their festivals less and less function as a social glue. Rome becomes fragmented and multicultural. The adopted and transmogrified gods of Greece offer neither comfort nor hope. Why sacrifice to Jove or Neptune? Such gods and their purported powers manifestly have their origins in the uncontrollable forces of nature and a rural existence. Rome and Roman society are now subject to uncontrollable *social* forces.

Nevertheless, large swathes of the degraded population pray for a saviour. The more someone feels impotent, the more they rely on the fantastic to save them. Certain people are commonly believed to possess superhuman powers; religious showmen are credited with the ability to overturn the laws of nature at will; the dead are raised and demons exorcised. There is, claims Kautsky, a tremendous growth of “credulity”.⁶⁶ Other, more modern, writers agree with this and offer social-physiological explanations of both credulity and miracles - in subject-peoples, cases of mental illness are particularly numerous.⁶⁷ In *The wretched of the earth* (1961) Franz Fanon made this very observation about colonial Algeria under the French and provided a number of case studies.

The phenomenon of looking for a saviour is thoroughly rooted in material life and everyday experience. Great aristocratic patrons regularly doled out extra food and other provisions. Later, that vital function transfers to the

state and the person of the emperor himself. Such a man - who invariably claimed to be a god - could, according to whim, be cruel and avaricious or benign and generous. Either way, those who are powerless long for a redeemer.

As the emperor system closes in on itself, desperation grows, along with a rejection of this world. Cynics, followers of the Greek philosopher Diogenes - who caused an outrage in polite Athenian society by living in a barrel and who openly displayed his contempt for Alexander the Great - rejected work, preached poverty and despised all existing power structures. Such anti-establishment outlooks found many adherents in the late Roman empire. So did imported religious cults, which promised fantastic, unworldly solutions.

These tendencies were not confined to the poor. With caesarism, the patrician class loses its traditional social functions. Where senators were once the power in the land, they become a mere republican residue, or a figleaf for a monarchy that dares not speak its name. Genuine debate amongst them is replaced by unseemly toadying and totally insincere attempts to heap extravagant praise upon the emperor. There are mutterings of discontent. Tacitus and other authors complain about the decline of oratory - a highly prized art that once marked out the educated and cultured Roman aristocrat. But the upper classes can offer nothing much practically beyond obstruction. They are increasingly atomised. A secret police force - the *frumentarii* - is formed under Hadrian and quickly extends its tentacles. Free speech gives way to pervasive fear. The *frumentarii* denounce, arrest and execute even prominent citizens - their wealth passes into the hands of the all-consuming state. Political life is thereby completely extinguished and replaced by a purposeless individualism. All that remains to the senators is pleasure-seeking. Inward-looking versions of Epicurean and Stoic philosophies come into vogue. Life loses all meaning for those who neither labour nor engage in meaningful decision-making. Indifference grows, along with feelings of disgust, guilt and despair. Like everyone else, the old aristocracy is reduced to powerlessness and its members become merely - highly taxed - subjects of the emperor. Hostility develops towards the state, and solutions are sought in *universal* and often *monotheistic* religions.

CHAPTER NINE

Jesus - a man of his times

Palestine lay at the crossroads of Middle Eastern civilisations. This made it a land of milk and honey for the superpowers of the ancient world. As already mentioned in previous chapters, that is why one foreign invasion followed another. Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and after them the Macedonian Greeks and finally in the 1st century BCE the Romans. Between these seismic events there were occasional power vacuums, and given decisive action, brief interludes of Judean independence. Eg, the guerrilla leader Judas Maccabee, led a revolt against the Syrian-based Seleucid empire and their Hellenised allies, which saw him seize power in 164 BCE.* Independence was not only fleeting, but often purely notional. All in all, the Jews became an oppressed nationality, which, given the dominant ideology of the time, bred “national fanaticism to the highest degree”.¹

* The Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, had taken the highly unusual step of imposing draconian measures, which in effect outlawed Jewish religious practices. The orthodox amongst the population rebelled. The first target of Judas Maccabaeus and his guerrilla army were Hellenised Jews. Temples dedicated to Greek gods were destroyed. There was a protracted struggle. However, after scoring a stunning victory at the mountain pass of Beth-horon, the Maccabees eventually sent the Seleucid army packing. The festival of Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the Jerusalem temple to the worship of Yahweh. Though the Maccabees won a large measure of autonomy, their kingdom formally remained a province in the Seleucid empire. In 63 BCE the Romans finally put an end to the Maccabee (Hasmonean) dynasty. They appointed Herod as king.

Adherence to Judean ethnic purity, the Ezraite historical outlook, the sexual taboos, the dietary stipulations and intolerant Yahweh monotheism had over the span of a couple of centuries become something entirely different. What was originally designed to cohere the elite and exclude the people of the land had been progressively taken over, colonised, by the people of the land themselves. The lower classes, in part instinctively, in part cunningly, in part goadingly, wielded the holy texts against their oppressors. The rallying slogan of the “downtrodden and disaffected” in 1st

century BCE Palestine was loyalty to god and his law.² It was, after all, the rich and powerful who were now the ones happily mixing with ritualistically unclean foreigners and who aped their abominable heathen ways. They became the heretics, the law-breakers, the outsiders. Their wanton ungodliness was blamed for bringing defeat and humiliation down upon Israel.

Literacy was no longer the exclusive preserve of the upper classes. Villagers and humble townspeople had their own teachers (rabbis). They scoured the *established* canon for guidance. The books of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, etc, were read as if they contained hidden codes of class and national liberation. Whole passages were committed to memory. Commentaries, inspired readings and interpretations were also carefully written down and circulated; new, dissident, holy books were thereby created. Prophecy and sects flourished.

With the coming of the Romans there was a widespread feeling that the last times had arrived. Family and everyday social relations were lived under the palpable idea of an impending apocalypse. Soon the dead will rise from their graves and face Yahweh's judgement. A new, communistic world was ready to be born. The poor will inherit the earth and be avenged. Jewish eschatology (the lore of the last times) taught that Yahweh would destroy all earthly powers and institute his divine rule on earth. Naturally, god will rescue his chosen people and bring terrible retribution against foreign oppressors and their quislings: namely the Herodians. The royal household and its parasitic circle were virtually alone amongst the Jews in being positively pro-Roman. Not that the sadducees, the conservative priest-caste, would be spared.

A range of religious/political factions existed. Josephus lists what he calls the three schools of thought. Sadducees, pharisees and essenes. Nowadays the sadducee party would be described as hidebound, self-interested, cowardly, rightwing but relatively rational. Being worldly-wise and educated, the sadducees could not believe in the resurrection of the dead, angels or predestination. The sadducees must be distinguished from the Herodian royal family and the internationalised Jewish aristocracy - who proudly adopted Greek customs and served as client-state agents of Roman exploitation. Sadducee is virtually synonymous with the caste of temple

high priests and those who were related to them. According to Josephus, 1,500 priests received tithes and religiously served the community. However, a rapid class differentiation took place. Half a dozen families elevated themselves above the common priesthood and secured a tight grip over key appointments. Disdainful of their social 'inferiors', the high priests had no compunction about stealing the tithes allocated to other, less grand, priests. Occasionally violence erupted. It was, though, mostly an uneven contest. High priests had temple guards, many servants and other such dependants and hangers-on. They could also afford to hire baying mobs and gangs of heavies.

The functions of the priesthood centred on ritual, collecting the obligatory religious taxes and the sacrifice of animals. The Jerusalem temple was a giant slaughterhouse. Anyhow, though the sadducees occupied the top tier of the Jewish social hierarchy, they, like the post-Babylon priesthood, lacked anything that can reasonably be called state power. The returning priests substituted moral authority for commanding physical force. Needless to say, by the 1st century CE this method of social control was much reduced, fragile and ready for overthrow.

Sadducees resented the prerogatives over the temple secured by the Herodian kings and the Roman procurators. They could, though, do little about it. Herod ruthlessly purged the priesthood of Maccabees (Hasmonaeans) and made the high priests into his subordinates. As for the Romans, they even took charge of the sacred vestments used on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Hiring and firing became their preserve too. Eg, Valerius Gratus, predecessor of Pontius Pilate, deposed and appointed four high priests. One consequence of such cavalier interference was that the popular esteem of the priesthood stood at less than zero. Temple ceremony was not invalidated as such, but the high priests as individuals were widely viewed as frauds, polluted and even outright enemy agents.

Sadducees, for their part, felt themselves to be conducting a rearguard battle on two fronts. Roman interference and the founding and growth of Greek cities in Palestine - along with their gymnasiums, athletic contests and polytheistic temples - must have been hated. Yet, being aristocratic and in possession of large landed estates, they also loathed notions of democracy and feared the common people more. With their sober-minded understanding of the geo-political realities of the eastern Mediterranean, the

sadducees rejected all notions of actively resisting the Romans. Broadly speaking, therefore, they fall into the category of unwilling collaborators.

Judaism defined itself as a religion of the book. The age of prophesy was formally closed with Persian domination. With a few notable exceptions the Hebrew canon was finalised by the time of Ezra (the writer, Edras, in the *Bible*) and Nehemiah (the governor appointed by Cyrus). In religious terms, that froze the meaning of the past from the time of creation to the building of the 'second temple'. However, future generations of priests are thereby condemned to merely preside over forms which inevitably lose their content. The medium therefore becomes the message. They can neither reinterpret text nor initiate.

But life moves on and constantly creates new needs. Between the written word and the changing requirements of the everyday there stepped the pharisees. A religious intelligentsia, expert in the obscure methods of scholastic dispute and adept at bending the law, the pharisees formed a party which not only rivalled the discredited temple priesthood, but sunk far deeper organisational roots amongst the masses. Josephus writes glowingly about the pharisees being the "most authoritative exponents of the law". He also credits them as the "leading sect".³ A widely accepted designation. From Karl Kautsky to Hyam Maccoby, the pharisees are held to be the popular party of the 1st century.

Robert Eisenman disagrees. For him the pharisees were part of the establishment and had a programme of accommodation with both the Herodian state and its Roman sponsor. As evidence he cites countless passages in the Dead Sea scrolls against "seekers after smooth things" and the historic fact that the pharisee party nowhere led the way against foreign occupation, but everywhere sought compromise. Phariseic Judaism emerged as the dominant school of thought only after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.**

** Johanan ben Zakkai - rabbi Jochanan in the *Talmud* - had himself safely smuggled out of the besieged city in a coffin, after which he "made his way to the enemy camp".³⁶ Here he obtained permission from the Roman general and future emperor Vespasian to establish an academy in Jamnia (Jabna). Modern Judaism - orthodox, liberal, conservative and reform - traces back its origins to this defining moment. Even before that, however, during the initial phase of Roman expansionism, we find pharisees cooperating with Roman troops and Herod's father, Antipater, storming the Jerusalem temple against the will of the people. The purist priests are slaughtered by the pharisees. Under

Herodian rule they get their reward. The pharisee party dominated the 70-strong sanhedrin - the appointed council which regulated Jewish religious matters.

Finally, going down the threefold list given by Josephus, we arrive at the essenes. Interestingly, where he gives the sadducees and pharisees a rather pinched treatment, the essenes are afforded considerable space. In part this is no doubt due to a desire to entertain high-class Roman readers with their unusual monastic lifestyle and strange doctrines - of which Josephus had first-hand knowledge. He spent a year as an initiate. According to Josephus, the essenes rejected slavery. More than that, maintaining a strict discipline in their isolated, but “large”, communities, they “eschew pleasure-seeking”. Sexual intercourse was outlawed, it seems. Despite that they are “peculiarly attached to each other”.⁴ Josephus does, though, report that one branch allowed marital relations between men and women, albeit purely for reasons of procreation.

The essenes were “contemptuous of wealth” and “communists to perfection”. All possessions were pooled. Members gave what they had and took what they needed.⁵ Universal suffrage was used to elect those in authority over the community. Dietary laws were rigorous. No-one was allowed to defile themselves by eating “any creature or creeping thing”. Nor was alcohol permitted. Life was materially simple. Everyone wore the same white linen till it was threadbare with age. Ritualistic washing was performed round the clock. Josephus chuckles that they even cleaned themselves after defecating - “though emptying the bowels is quite natural”.⁶ The idea of a clean body had nothing to do with our modern notions of hygiene. It was to render oneself fit for god’s knowledge and purpose. Something gained by painstaking study of the holy books and the special insights of the sect. Not that the community was merely contemplative. Essenes took part in the anti-Roman uprising of 66.

Despite certain differences there is a striking parallel with the group at Qumran responsible for the Dead Sea scrolls (written between 200 BCE and 68 CE). The Qumran community likewise demands that those “entering the sect transfer their property to the order”. Extreme communism is practised. Ritual is laid down in great detail. Key decisions are taken by majority vote. Meals are eaten in common. There is an annual membership review. Clearly the essenes and the Qumran community belong to, or stem from, the same

tradition. Qumran itself seems to have been overrun by the future emperor, Vespasian, and his army in 68.

It is germane too that Qumran members living in wilderness camps are described as “volunteers” and are supposed to be organised into thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. An echo of the way the mythological Moses and Joshua marshalled the men under their command for their invasion of Canaan. Elsewhere the scrolls envisage the recruitment of virtually every Jewish male over the age of 20 into the holy army. Only the very old, the mentally impaired and those deemed religiously unclean are to be excluded.

The Qumran community, and the movement of which it was a part, were apocalyptic revolutionaries, or holy warriors, awaiting their predetermined fate. They fasted, prayed for and expected Yahweh’s divine intervention against the Romans and a messiah (in the Dead Sea scrolls there were to be two messiahs - one in charge of religious affairs; the other a military leader). After the hour appointed by god, there would ensue a protracted, 33-year war in what were the last days:

[Then ther]e shall be a time of salvation for the people of god, and a time of domination for all the men of his forces and eternal annihilation for all the forces of Belial [the devil]. There shall be g[reat] panic [among] the son of Japheth, Assyria shall fall with no one to come to his aid, and the supremacy of the Kittim (Rome - JC) shall cease, that wickedness be overcome without a remnant. There shall be no survivors of [all the sons of] darkness.⁷

The people’s party

Thankfully Josephus extends his list. He writes of a so-called ‘fourth philosophy’. Here at last we surely have a description, no matter how crude, of what must have been the highly fragmented and complex people’s party. Mostly Josephus simply writes of “bandits” and “brigands”. Clearly what he means, though, are not normal thieves who are simply out for personal gain. He is referring to what we now call the left; a left that inevitably combined national liberation and class vengeance with religion. Josephus mentions the *sicarii*. A movement of urban guerrillas which “committed

numerous murders in broad daylight”.⁸ Their preferred tactic was to “mingle with the festival crowd” in Jerusalem. Concealing razor-sharp curved daggers underneath their cloaks, they would stab to death their target. Like fish the *sicarii* would then disappear in the sea of people. Evidently they enjoyed wide support. One of their first victims was Jonathan, the high priest. But there were many more. Roman collaborators lived in constant fear.

During the final years of Herod there were numerous urban and rural rebellions. Riots erupted in Jerusalem. In Galilee guerrilla foci found themselves gaining enough adherents to allow regular military units to be formed. Their leaders sometimes had themselves crowned kings on the messianic model. Among them was Simon, a former slave of Herod and Athronges, who was once a shepherd. However, the most successful liberation fighter was Judas, whose father, Ezechias, was a well known “bandit” who was executed in 47 BCE. Josephus rages against Judas because he “tried to stir the natives to revolt” by encouraging them not to pay taxes to the Romans. Judas “was a rabbi” (teacher), says Josephus, “with a sect of his own, and was quite unlike the others”.⁹ His message was republican, not monarchist. The people should have no master except god.

The Romans felt compelled to intervene and decided to establish direct rule over Judea. Resistance was crushed. There was much bloodshed. Two thousand captives were reportedly crucified and many sold into slavery. Amongst the first measures enacted by Quirinius, the Roman legate of Syria, was to order a census in 6 CE. There was, to state the obvious, no stipulation that every adult male had to register at their place of birth - a purely literary device invented by *Bible* writers in order to move Joseph and the pregnant Mary from what was at the time a non-Roman-administered Galilee in the north to Bethlehem, the family town of the biblical king, David, in the south. Nor, once again to state the obvious, was the census anything to do with the provision of public services or population projections. Like the famed Domesday book of William I, its purpose was quite unambiguous. Assessing a new acquisition for purposes of taxation: ie, surplus extraction. As such it was deeply resented and triggered another popular rebellion.

Judas in Galilee aligned himself with the dissident pharisee, Zaddok, whose agreed task was to rouse the people of Jerusalem. What Josephus calls the fourth philosophy was born. It had many names, including 'the way', 'the sons of Zaddok', 'the holy ones', 'the poor ones of piety', 'the zealots of righteousness', 'the poor', 'the meek', etc. Its various components and factions would dominate popular politics till the fall of Jerusalem in 70 and the final heroic stand at the desert fortress of Massada in 74 - rather than surrender to the Romans they preferred mass suicide. Despite being a member of the establishment, and someone seeking to ingratiate himself with the Romans, Josephus has to admit that these "bandits" and "false prophets" inspired the masses "to bold deeds". Their "madness infected the entire people", Josephus writes sorrowfully.

Josephus exhibits mixed feelings towards this fourth party. He was upper class, but also a proud Jew. On the one hand, he indignantly attacks them as "bandits" because they butchered "distinguished people" and because eventually they "brought about our ruin". Supposedly due to such revolutionaries the Romans sacked Jerusalem and crucified tens of thousands - a moral stance akin to blaming the Bund for the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto rather than the Nazis. On the other hand, he cannot but admire their religious and moral conviction. Judas and the most audacious of the liberation fighters "showed a stubborn love for liberty" and would rather suffer torture than "call any human being their master".

This party combined religious nationalism with physical force - they were committed to a realistic, long-term guerrilla war against the Romans. Formally the odds were hopeless. However, their 'zeal' would triumph, as with Judas Maccabee, Samson, Gideon and Joshua before them. God would lend aid; but they did not expect miracles. During the 66-70 revolution in Jerusalem the zealot party emerged under Eleazar to lead the poorer quarters of the city. Together revolutionary preachers, messianic prophets and zealot guerrilla leaders turned biblical texts against the Herodian aristocracy and the sadducee priest-caste. Their subservience to the 'beast' - ie, Rome - was denounced as blasphemy against god and religious law. Because of their heinous sins Yahweh no longer brought Israel victory, but punishment in the form of defeat, poverty and humiliation. To cap it all, the Romans were not averse to parading images of their god-emperor in Jerusalem - sacrilege for any Jew. They even proposed in 39-40 to erect a

statue of Gaius Caligula in their temple. No wonder the Jewish populous detested the Romans, much like the Poles detested the Nazis.

For over a hundred years Palestine was a hotbed of revolt within the Roman empire - the uprisings of 6 CE and 66-70 CE and the Bar-Kokhba kingdom in the 2nd century being outstanding examples. However, if Palestine was the Romans' Ireland, Galilee in the far north, where Jesus was supposed to have grown from childhood, was its county Fermanagh. Set against the nationalist-religious background I have outlined above, the *New Testament* Jesus is a very strange person, to say the least. Nowhere does he challenge or even question Roman occupation of Judea and indirect rule of Galilee (at the time of Jesus it was ruled by a pro-Roman Jewish satrap - Herod Antipas). Instead he appears to positively love the Roman tyrant. It is the pharisees who earn his condemnation and rebukes. Jesus even urges fellow Jews to dutifully pay Roman taxes: "Render unto Caesar ..." Frankly that would have been akin to Tommy Sheridan telling the people of Glasgow the rightness of paying the hated poll tax under Margaret Thatcher. And yet Jesus manages to gain an enthusiastic mass following among the rural and urban poor.

His birth and infancy are even harder to swallow. The Roman census in what is now 1 BCE - as we said, there was one in 6 CE - unbelievably requires subjects of the empire to travel to the place of their birth! If such a stipulation had been made, the subsequent movement of people would surely have caused complete chaos. In fact all the Romans required was registration at one's normal place of residence. Galileans incidentally would not have been affected. Anyway, or so the story goes, Joseph, the 'father' of Jesus, and his heavily pregnant, but virgin, wife trek all the way from a place supposedly called Nazareth in the far north to Bethlehem in Judea.***

*** It is quite possible that the writers of the *New Testament* invented the town of Nazareth in an attempt to obscure Jesus's party name: ie, his being a nazorite or nazorean. These terms derive not from the town, Nazareth, but from the Hebrew for being 'separated' or 'consecrated'.

There, guided by a wondrous star, shepherds and wise men shower the child with praise and gifts, just before king Herod, the father of Herod Antipas, orders the massacre of the innocents. But only after Joseph and Mary, having been warned by an angel, flee towards Egypt. All pure invention, as was the ability of Jesus to outwit the temple priests in theology when he later visits Jerusalem as a 12-year-old child.

Here, as with much else, we have the heavy hand of propaganda and later Greek rewriters. In general it has to be said that the gospels - written between 40 and 90 years after Jesus's death - display profound ignorance of the elementary facts of Jewish life. Moreover they become progressively more anti-Jewish. In John, the last of the four official gospels, Jesus is a pro-Roman, Mithras-like man-god who was put to death solely due to the collective wish of the Jewish people. In this tradition he knowingly sacrifices himself in order to atone for the sins of humanity.

Yet by drawing on what we know of the Jews at the time and removing obvious invention, we can arrive at a much more probable version of events. Charismatic, fearless and well educated, Jesus was probably a rabbi (teacher and preacher). He appears to have come to believe, during the course of his ministry, that he was not only a prophet, but the messiah (or anointed one), who would deliver the Jewish people from Rome (and end the days of the robber empires). He therefore spoke of himself as the 'Son of David' or 'Son of god'. By saying this he certainly did not mean to imply that he was a man-god - a blasphemous concept for Jews. That is why two of the gospels - Matthew and Luke - are interesting in that they leave in the great lengths earlier *source* accounts had gone to in order to prove that *through Joseph* he was biologically directly related to king David "14 generations" before¹⁰ ... and before that to Adam himself. Luke iii provides a much longer list compared with Matthew and a genealogy which also contains many different names (passages in the *Old Testament*, such as 1 Chronicles iii,19, contradict both Matthew and Luke - so much for the inerrancy of the *Bible*).

The prophet Micah had predicted that the messiah would be born in Bethlehem - the royal seat of David. By placing his birth in this town, Jesus and his early propagandists were proclaiming him to be the lawful king, as opposed to the Herodian upstarts. It was like some medieval peasant leader announcing themselves to be the direct heir of Harold Godwinson and hence the true Saxon king of England against the Plantagenet or Angevine descendants of William of Normandy. Roman domination was initially imposed through Herodian kings, who were Idumean (ie, from the area to the south of Judea) and therefore at most only semi-Jewish in background and religious observance. The Dead Sea scrolls exude an uncompromising

rejection, disgust and hostility for the king - presumably Herod, or one of his successors - who was appointed by the Romans. He is condemned as a “foreigner” and a “covenant breaker”.

Jesus’s claim to be king of the Jews was unmistakably political. He was proclaiming himself to be the leader of a popular revolution that would bring forth a communistic ‘kingdom of god’. No pie in the sky when you die. The slogan, ‘kingdom of god’, was of this world and was widely used by fourth party, zealot and other such anti-Roman forces. It conjured up for Jews an idealised vision of the old theocratic system - which could only be realised by defeating the Romans. In the new days it will be the poor who benefit and the rich who suffer:

[B]lessed be you poor, for yours is the kingdom of god But woe unto you that are rich ... Woe unto you that are full now, for you shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.¹¹

This imminent class retribution was not to be confined to Israel alone. The Jews were Yahweh’s revolutionary vanguard. Through them Jesus’s plan was for a universal utopia. From Jerusalem a “world theocracy”, with Jesus at its head, would redeem “all nations”.¹² Then onwards peace reigns; swords are beaten into ploughshares and the wolf lies down with the lamb.

Samuel Brandon (1907-71) argued in his noted 1967 study that Jesus and the zealots were part of the same revolutionary movement.¹³ But I think it is obvious that Jesus was no zealot. He was an apocalyptic revolutionary similar to John the Baptist. He “believed in the miraculous character of the coming salvation, as described in the writings of the scriptural prophets”.¹⁴ Jesus was not interested in military strategy or tactics. Rome would be beaten without either conventional or guerrilla war. Nevertheless, though Jesus did not train his followers in the use of arms, five of his 12 inner circle of disciples clearly came from the ranks of the revolutionary ‘bandits’ and retained guerrilla nicknames (including Peter Barjonah - ‘outlaw’; Simon - the zealot; James and John - the ‘sons of thunder’; and Judas Iscariot - the ‘dagger-man’).

This is not surprising. Jesus was no pacifist: “I come not to send peace but a sword!”¹⁵ While liberation would have a military aspect, primarily it

depended on supernatural power. There would be a decisive battle where a tiny army of the righteous overcome overwhelmingly superior odds. In the *Bible* Gideon fought and won against the Midianites with only 300 men - he told the other 20,000 men in his army to “return home”.¹⁶ So the methods of Jesus and the guerrilla fighters differed, but were not entirely incompatible. They differed on the *degree* that their strategy relied on divine intervention. Either way, the zealots were unlikely to have actively opposed Jesus. He might have been a factional opponent. But he was no enemy. His mass movement would at the very least have been seen by the zealots as an tremendous opportunity.

Jesus was therefore not isolated from Jewish life and the political turmoil that swirled around him. On the contrary, he was its product and for a short time its personification. The notion that Jesus opposed violence is a pretty transparent Christian invention designed to placate the Roman authorities and overcome their fears that the followers of the dead man-god were dangerous subversives. The real Jesus would never have said, “Resist not evil.” The idea is a monstrosity, fit only for despairing appeasers. Jewish scripture is packed with countless examples of prophets fighting what they saw as evil - not least foreign oppressors. The real Jesus preached the ‘good news’ within the Jewish tradition against evil. He appears determined to save every ‘lost sheep of Israel’, including social outcasts and transgressors such as the hated tax-collectors, for the coming apocalypse. Salvation depended on a total life change.

After the execution of John the Baptist Jesus reveals himself to be not simply a prophetic ‘preparer of the way’, but the messiah. “Whom say you that I am?” he asks his disciples. “You are the christ,” answers Peter.¹⁷ This was an extraordinary claim, but one fully within the Jewish thought-world. He was not and would not have been thought of as mad. In biblical tradition there had been prophets and even prophet-rulers (Moses and Samuel). Jesus was claiming to be the messiah-king: ie, the final king. In Jesus the spiritual and secular would be joined. A bold idea which must have “aroused tremendous enthusiasm in his followers, and great hope in the country generally”.¹⁸ Perhaps this explains why after he was cruelly killed on a Roman cross the Jesus party refused to believe he had really died. His

claimed status put him in terms of myth at least on a par with Elijah: he would return at the appointed hour to lead them to victory.

Last days

New Testament (re)writers are at pains to play down or deny Jesus's assumed royal title. Claiming to be king of the Jews was to openly rebel against Rome. Instead they concentrate on terms like 'messiah' or 'christ', which they portray as being other-worldly. The Jews, and the disciples, are shown as not understanding this concept, though it existed in their sacred writings which they had surely studied and knew all about. Nevertheless, even in the gospels, the truth occasionally flashes through the fog of falsification and makes it possible to reconstruct the probable pattern of Jesus's brief revolutionary career.

The account of the so-called transfiguration on Mount Hermon - though it could have been Mount Tabor - described in Mark was no mystical event, but the crowning (or anointing) of king Jesus by his closest disciples, Peter, James and John. Having travelled to the far north country, one disciple seems to have crowned him, while the other two acted as the prophets, Moses and Elijah.¹⁹ Like Saul, David and Solomon, the new king was through the ceremony "turned into another man".²⁰ A ritual of which the gospel writers were only dimly aware. Having been crowned, the prophet-king began a carefully planned royal progress towards his capital city, Jerusalem (see figure 4). The idea would have been to evangelise at each stop and build up a fervent mass movement. All the time he has 12 close disciples acting for him - their number symbolising the so-called 12 tribes of Israel. He also sends out before him 70 more into "every city and place" - as we have already noted, this is a significant number in Jewish culture - the law-making council, the sanhedrin, had 70 members, El's children numbered 70, etc.

From Mount Hermon the royal procession makes its way south, into Galilee, then the down the banks of the Jordan and into Peraea, before reaching Jericho. King Jesus has a big entourage and is greeted by enthusiastic crowds. He preaches the coming kingdom of god and with it

“eternal life”.²¹ The poor are to inherit the world and unless the rich sell what they have and give to the poor they will be damned: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of god”.²² Jesus performs many miracles. The blind are given sight, cripples walk, etc (cities and towns were teeming with professional beggars, no doubt including the professionally crippled and blind).

Finally, he triumphantly enters a swollen Jerusalem - either during the spring Passover or possibly in the autumn festival of the Tabernacles. Pilgrims could double the normal population. Then there was the additional influx produced by the Jesus movement itself. Symbolism is vital for all such apocalyptic revolutionaries. Jesus rides upon an ass's foal (thus fulfilling the prophesy of Zechariah ix,9). There is no doubt what the masses think. They greet Jesus with unrestrained joy and proclaim him ‘Son of David’ and ‘King of Israel’ - as I have argued, both revolutionary/royal titles. Palm branches are strewn before him, and showing their defiance of Rome, the crowd cries out, ‘Hosanna’ (save us).

With the help of the masses Jesus and his lightly armed band of close followers force their way to the temple. Zealot and other fourth party cadre perhaps play a decisive, if discreet, role. Suffice to say, the religious police of the high priest are easily dispersed. Jesus angrily drives out the venal sadducee priesthood from the temple. They “have made it a den of robbers”.²³ Meanwhile, the other priests carry on with their duties.

The Romans and their agents would have viewed these events as a nuisance rather than anything much else. Little rebellions at festival times were not uncommon. Nevertheless, in possession of the temple, Jesus and his followers were protected by the “multitude” from the poor quarter of the city. The priesthood is said to have been “afraid of the people”.²⁴ It debated theology with Jesus but could do no more.

Jesus expected a miracle. There would be a tremendous battle. On the one side, the Romans and their quislings. On the other, his disciples alongside “12 legions of angels”.²⁵ Jesus, his disciples and his angels will assuredly win. The defiled temple will then be destroyed and rebuilt in “three days”.²⁶ Simultaneously, the dead rise and Yahweh, with Jesus sitting at his right hand, judge all the nations.

Jesus waited seven days for the apocalyptic arrival of god's kingdom. It was expected to come on the eighth. At the last supper he expectantly says:



Figure 4. The Palestine of Jesus. His brief career as a prophet-king can be traced from the far north. Mount Hermon, through Galilee, into Samaria over the Jordan and into Perea before his progress into Jerico and final, triumphant Jerusalem entry.

“I will drink no more of the fruit of the vine [juice, not alcohol] until that day I drink it in the new kingdom of god.” Having taken himself to the garden of Gethsemane - outside the temple complex and the city walls - Jesus prayed his heart out. But “the hour” did not arrive. A cohort of Roman soldiers (300-600 men) and the religious police did. Perhaps they were guided by Judas, perhaps not (Kautsky says the idea of anyone in the sadducee party not knowing what Jesus looked like is just too improbable).

Jesus was easily captured. (In Mark a naked youth narrowly escapes - frankly, I do not have a clue what this aspect of the story is about. Were Jesus and his closest lieutenants about to carry out a miracle-bringing human sacrifice?) It is a grossly unequal contest. His disciples only had “two swords”. “It is enough,” Jesus had assured them.²⁷ There was a brief skirmish, according to the biblical account. Supposedly Jesus then says, “No more of this”, and rebukes the disciple, Simon Peter, who injured Malchus, a “slave of the high priest”. His right ear had been lopped off. Miraculously, Jesus heals him. Jesus is thus presented as being opposed to bloodshed: “for all who take the sword will perish by the sword”.²⁸ Obviously a fabricated interpolation. We have already seen Jesus promising cataclysmic violence and arming his followers, albeit with only two swords (the angels though would have been fully equipped for the final battle).

Interrogated by the high priest, Jesus was quickly handed over to the Roman governor, Pilate, as a political prisoner. Without fuss or bother Jesus was found guilty of sedition - he was forbidding the payment of Caesar’s taxes and had proclaimed himself king of the Jews. Jesus had no thought or intent of delivering himself up as a sacrificial lamb. He had expected an awesome miracle and glory, not capture and total failure. The gospels report his dejection and refusal to “answer, not even to a single charge”.²⁹ Pilate was doubtless confronted by Jerusalem’s revolutionary crowd. It would have been demanding Jesus’s freedom, not crying, “Away with him, crucify him”.³⁰ There was certainly no custom in occupied Palestine whereby the

population could gain the release of any condemned prisoner “whom they wanted”.³¹ Pilate did not seek to “release him”. The notion of Pilate’s “innocence” is as absurd as the blood guilt of the Jews. Obviously yet another later pro-Roman insert.

After whipping, beating and spitting upon him, Pilate had Jesus thrown into prison. Then, perhaps straight away, perhaps after a number of months, had him sent to an agonising death (Pilate may well have waited till the spring Passover festival, so he could make Jesus an example before as many Jews as possible). Jesus was paraded through the streets



‘The darkness of the crucifixion’. Artist: Gustave Doré. According to Christian mythology, when Jesus died the sun was blotted out, saints rose

from the dead and the curtain of the Jerusalem temple was rent in two. , guarded by a “whole battalion”. Pilate’s plan was to humiliate the king of the Jews and demonstrate his powerlessness. Jesus is stripped and a (royal) scarlet robe is draped over his shoulders. To complete the picture, a “crown of thorns” is mockingly planted on his head and a “reed” placed in his right hand.³² He is crucified along with two other rebels and derided by the Romans and their collaborating allies. Over his head they, on Pilate’s orders, “put the charge against him” - “This is the king of the Jews”.³³ John has the chief priests objecting. That has the ring of truth. They wanted Pilate to write: “This man said he was king of the Jews”. A headstrong Pilate has none of it. John puts these blunt words in his mouth: “What I have written I have written”.³⁴ The last words of Jesus are heart-rending: ‘*Eli, eli, lama sabachthani?*’ (My god, my god, why hast thou forsaken me?) Yahweh had not acted. There were no angels, no last battle. Jesus was a brave revolutionary who wrongly staked his all not on the masses, but on a coup and divine intervention.

There are supposedly miraculous happenings at his moment of death. Saints rise from their graves and walk about. There are earthquakes. The curtain in the temple is torn in two. Even more fanciful, the *Bible* has it that it is the Roman centurion and guard who are first to declare that the man they have just killed is: “Truly son of god”.³⁵ Actually for them it was just like any other day’s work. The execution of rebel ringleaders was a common occurrence for the Roman garrison.

CHAPTER TEN

After king Jesus

The Romans' execution of Jesus surely came as a stunning shock. His followers must have been mortified. Nevertheless the Jesus party survives the death of its founder-leader. Indeed it grows rapidly. The Acts report a big increase from 120 cadre to several thousand in the immediate aftermath of his crucifixion. The recruits were, of course, fellow Jews - including perhaps essenes, baptists and guerrilla fighters. People undoubtedly inspired by Jesus's attempted apocalyptic coup and the subsequent story that his body had disappeared and had like Elijah risen to heaven (the Romans blamed his disciples, saying they had secretly removed the corpse from its tomb - a slightly more likely scenario). All fervently expected imminent deliverance through the return of Jesus: "the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of god is at hand".¹ That remains official Christian doctrine, though for most the second coming, the *parousia*, is no longer imminent. Incidentally, the Shia tradition of Islam has something similar. It still awaits the return of Abul-Qassem Mohammed, the 12th imam, the mahdi, who 'disappeared' in 941.

Anyway, the social atmosphere in 1st century Judea was feverish. People must also have been desperate - after all, they were banking on a dead leader and the armed intervention of Yahweh's legions of angels. The party, commonly called the nazarenes or nazoreans, was now led by James - the brother of Jesus. This is hardly surprising. The followers of Jesus presented him as king of the Jews. He was, they claimed, genealogically of David's line. The election of James, the brother of Jesus, by the nazoreans was therefore perfectly natural in terms of continuity and inheritance. The nazorean tradition being closely followed by the Sunni Muslims till March 1924, when Ottoman caliphate was abolished by Kemal Atatürk (the caliphs liked to see themselves as related to the prophet himself).

Surely it is a sound argument that to know James is to know Jesus. Who would be more like Jesus in terms of beliefs, expectations and practices? His closest living relative, who is chosen by Jesus's cadres as his successor? Or Paul, who never saw Jesus alive, only in visions? Who defended and continued Jesus's programme? Was it James and other intimates in Palestine? Or was it Paul, a Roman citizen, who, as Saul or Saulus, admits he was a persecutor of Jesus's followers? Suffice to say, *all* Christian churches maintain that it was the latter. Paul with his convenient dreams and reliance on the doctrine of faith was apparently more in touch with the authentic Jesus, the so-called christ in heaven, than James and the family of Jesus.

To establish this reversal of common sense, and reality, the gospels go to great lengths to denigrate the family of Jesus, his brothers and disciples. They are constantly belittled, portrayed as stupid and lacking in faith. "I have no family," says the Jesus of the gospels. The disciples are repeatedly rebuked for failing to understand that Jesus and his kingdom are "not of this world". Weak-minded and weak-willed. Peter famously denies Jesus three times before the cock crows due to moral irresolution. Etc, etc.

Although James is elected head of the Jerusalem community and was also supposedly of the Davidic family line, he is almost entirely absent from the Christian tradition. He has been reduced or cut out altogether, so embarrassing is he. Nor does James appear in the *Koran* - though Muslim dietary laws are based on his directives set out for the overseas communities, as recorded in the Acts.² Arabs were being drawn to monotheism before Mohammed - and the ideological influence of the Jews (and perhaps the nazoreans) is unmistakable in Islam.

The gospels, as they come down to us, have obviously been overwritten to remove or downgrade Jesus's family, not least his brother and successor. James peers out as a shadowy figure as if through frosted glass. Sometimes he is disguised as James the Lesser, in other places as James, the brother of John, or James, the son of Zebedee. Such characters make a fleeting and insubstantial appearance in the gospels. However, James does suddenly pop up in the 12th book of the Acts as the main source of authority in Jerusalem. Evidently his other *obscure* titles are due to redaction. Paul's

letters openly acknowledge the true relationship between James and Jesus. James is straightforwardly called “the brother of the lord”.

Not surprisingly church fathers faced acute problems. The more ethereal Jesus is made, the more James sticks out like a sore thumb. Surviving nazorean, ebionite and other ‘Jamesian’ sects had to be branded heretics. Origen (185-254) therefore roundly attacked those of his contemporaries who on the basis of reading Josephus unproblematically credited James with being biologically related to Jesus and linked the fall of Jerusalem in 70 with the death of James rather than Jesus. In *Contra Celsus* Origen quotes from what we now know are forged passages inserted into in Josephus’s *Jewish antiquities*:

Now this writer, although not believing in Jesus as the Christ, in seeking after the cause of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, whereas he ought to have said that the conspiracy against Jesus was the cause of these calamities befalling the people, since they put to death Christ, who was a prophet, says nevertheless - being, although against his will, not far from the truth - that these disasters happened to the Jews as a punishment for the death of James the Just, who was a brother of Jesus (called Christ), - the Jews having put him to death, although he was a man most distinguished for his justice. Paul, a genuine disciple of Jesus, says that he regarded this James as a brother of the lord, not so much on account of their relationship by blood, or of their being brought up together, as because of his virtue and doctrine. If, then, he says that it was on account of James that the desolation of Jerusalem was made to overtake the Jews, how should it not be more in accordance with reason to say that it happened on account (of the death) of Jesus Christ, of whose divinity so many churches are witnesses, composed of those who have been convened from a flood of sins, and who have joined themselves to the creator, and who refer all their actions to his good pleasure.³

In book two of his *Church history* Eusebius (260-340), bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, cites Josephus in a similar vein:

James was so admirable a man and so celebrated among all for his justice, that the more sensible even of the Jews were of the opinion that

this was the cause of the siege of Jerusalem, which happened to them immediately after his martyrdom for no other reason than their daring act against him Josephus, at least, has not hesitated to testify this in his writings, where he says, these things happened to the Jews to avenge James the Just, who was a brother of Jesus, that is called the Christ. For the Jews slew him, although he was a most just man.⁴

Obviously we must discount the idea that Josephus authored anything about Jerusalem being destroyed because the Jews bear collective guilt for the death of James (as they are supposed to have done for the killing of Jesus in official church doctrine). That said, while Eusebius unambiguously writes of the election of James, like Origen, he too seeks to divorce Jesus from all earthly biological relations:

Then James, whom the ancients surnamed the Just on account of the excellence of his virtue, is recorded to have been the first to be made bishop of the church of Jerusalem. This James was called the brother of the lord because he was known as a son of Joseph, and Joseph was supposed to be the father of Christ, because the virgin, being betrothed to him, was found with child by the holy ghost before they came together, as the account of the holy gospels shows.⁵

Eusebius was prepared to grant that the *New Testament* letter of James, “the first of the so-called Catholic epistles”, might be used for instructional purposes, but questioned its authenticity.⁶ For Eisenman this was in part because “its content and theological approach were so alien to him”.⁷ It exudes wonderful class hatred and promises the certainty of retribution: “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.”⁸

In the 4th century Jerome finally decides that Jesus and James were cousins. In other sources too the relationship is distanced. Jesus’s brothers, including James, become half-brothers, stepbrothers or milk brothers. A theological construction carried over into the *Koran* by Mohammed and his followers in the 7th century. A divine Jesus has no need for an earthly father, uncles, brothers or sisters. There is also the growing cult of Mary’s

perpetual virginity. Joseph could not have had any children with her. Augustine, in the 5th century, firmly establishes this as Catholic doctrine.

That does not mean James cannot be restored to his rightful place. We can unearth James and in so doing his brother, Jesus, also comes into fuller view. Actually the most reliable biblical testimonies concerning James and his role in the nazorean party can be found in Paul's letters. Given all we know, they seem to be accurate, above all because they paint a picture of conflict between Paul and James. Paul, repeatedly, disagrees with the rulings on diet, circumcision and observation of Jewish laws and taboos handed down by the Jerusalem council. Paul even denigrates what he calls "leaders", "pillars", "archapostles" and those "who consider themselves important" or "write their own references".⁹ In other words the apostles, chief amongst them James. Paul freely admits those leaders whom he calls Peter and Cephas were willing to defer to the authority of James.¹⁰

So the relationship between Jesus and James and the latter's standing is attested to in the Acts and Paul's letters. In them and tangential gospel accounts we find that besides James, there were three other brothers of Jesus - they are called Simon, Jude and Joses. A sister, Salome, is also mentioned in Matthew. Furthermore, where the established canon is evasive or eerily silent about James, the early and non-canonical (gnostic) gospel of Thomas puts these words into the mouth of Jesus. Having been asked, "who will be great over us" after "you have gone?", 'Thomas' has Jesus say this: "In the place where you are to go, go to James the Just for whose sake heaven and earth came into existence."¹¹ The mystical gnostics, it should be noted, deemed that James possessed almost supernatural powers. Of course, it is not that the gospel of Thomas (written in Coptic in something like 90) should be thought of as historically reliable. It is full of mythological invention. What distinguishes its account is simply that in certain key areas it is not inverted by the *same* mythology as the standard versions.

A profusion of other competing gospels are known to have existed before the *New Testament* was finalised with Constantine and the incorporation of the church as an arm of the Roman state. The first is called the Q gospel by scholars (Q standing for '*Quelle*' which means 'source' in German). It was

apparently written in the 50s.¹² We know of it from fragments discovered in the Egyptian desert. But there are others which exist in part or whole and which were excluded from the final canon. Eg, the gospel of Ebonites, the gospel of Philip, the gospel of the Hebrews, the gospel of Mathias. the gospel of Peter, the gospel of Mary, etc.¹³ It is said by upright Christians, that they lacked historical and literary merit and thereby “excluded” themselves “from the *New Testament*”.¹⁴ Clearly, this is untrue. Such gospels were destroyed, forgotten, discounted or driven underground because they contradicted established Christian doctrine ... not least when it came to James. From them and other such literature we certainly learn that James plays a role of “overarching importance”.¹⁵

There is further evidence about the standing of James to be found in the writings of Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis, (c310/20-403) and the priest and saint Jerome (347-420). Epiphanius suggests that James was appointed directly by Jesus from the heights of heaven. Hence James was the “first whom the lord entrusted his throne upon earth”. Jerome too provides an account of how James was either “ordained” or “elected” as bishop of Jerusalem.¹⁶ By their own admission these authors base themselves on earlier sources, writers whose works have either been destroyed or lost. Eg, Hegesippus (c90-180), a church leader in Palestine, and Clement of Alexandria (c150-215). There is another Clement (c30-97), this time of Rome, whose name was attached to what we now know as the Pseudoclementine (‘pseudo’ as in ‘falsely attributed’).

Works such as the *Recognitions of Clement*, as Eisenman reminds us, are “no more ‘pseudo’” than the gospels, Acts and the other Christian literature we now possess from that period.¹⁷ Eg, none of the now standard four gospels were authored by a single individual - hence we certainly have a Pseudomathew, a Pseudomark, a Pseudoluke and a Pseudojohn. Revealingly, though the account of the Pseudoclementine material is highly mythologised, it includes letters purportedly from Paul to James and from Clement to James. James is straightforwardly addressed as “bishop of bishops” or “archbishop”. So there is not a shadow of doubt that James was elected leader of the Jesus party after the death of his brother and served in

that capacity till his own execution in 62 (he was succeeded by Cephas, a first cousin).

Strangely, the Acts exhibit a highly significant silence about the election of James, surely a defining moment for the post-Jesus nazorean movement. The first chapter, which deals with the replacement of Judas Iscariot after his purported treachery and suicide, is a crude mythical invention - Judas is in all probability Jude: ie, one of the brothers of Jesus. That aside, the story of the “eleven” getting together to elect another apostle is in all likelihood a cynical overwrite for the election of James. In the Acts it is rather a non-event with which to begin the official history of the early church. “Mattias” is chosen, after the casting of “lots”, over “Joseph called Barabas”.¹⁸ The redactors were determined to blacken the name of Jesus’s closest associates or remove them where they could. There is a striking parallel here to the way Stalin’s propagandists demonised or airbrushed out Kamenev, Trotsky, Zinoviev and other members of Lenin’s inner circle after his death.

Whatever the exact truth, an obvious question presents itself. Why was the early church so eager to play down or obliterate the role of James? We have already touched upon the embarrassment concerning the blood relationship between Jesus and James. But there was more to it than that. The answer, already in part alluded to, is threefold.

Firstly, James, the successor of “the lord”, has to be counted amongst those who opposed the Roman oppressors. That in turn would put Jesus in the same camp as the Jewish revolution. The Jesus party, headed by James, took an active role - perhaps a leading one - in preparing the ground for the great anti-Roman uprising of 66.

Secondly, James exhibited neither in thought nor practice the slightest trace or hint of Christianity. He was single-mindedly, not to say fanatically, Jewish. He observed the minutiae of Jewish religious law and demanded that other Jews did the same.

Thirdly, there is abundant evidence that there was a fundamental and acrimonious schism between the community led by James and Paul - the real founder of Christianity. There is the distinct possibility that Paul was involved in an attempt on the life of James. None of this would have been to the liking of the early church.

Nazoreans in political context

The seething discontent that characterised the period from the imposition of Roman direct rule in 6 to the revolution of May 66 worked like an acid on the old methods of social control and produced a crop of charismatic messiahs who found themselves a substantial following. Josephus mentions a handful by name or title - eg, Theudas, a “false” prophet from Egypt - but all the indications are that as a type they were numerous. After the defeat of one, another arose. Some - for example, John the Baptist, who though he never claimed to be the messiah, led a messianic movement - were relatively peaceful. Though such “religious frauds” did not “murder”, Josephus calls them “evil men”. They were “cheats and deceivers” and “schemed to bring about revolutionary changes”. The Romans typically responded by sending in troops. John was beheaded by Herod Antipas. Others fought fire with fire. These “wizards” gained “many adherents”, reports Josephus. They agitated for the masses to “seize” their “liberty” and “threatened with death those that would henceforth continue to be subject and obedient to the Roman authority”. There was an unmistakable class content. The “well-to-do” were killed and their houses “plundered”.¹⁹

Clearly there existed a blurred line between the rural revolutionary and the criminal rebel. Kautsky draws a parallel between 1st century Palestine and the situation in 1905-08 Russia, when anarchist bands looted the countryside. We in our time have seen similar manifestations occur in Northern Ireland. Mainstream loyalist and fringe republican paramilitaries indulged in drug-running, protectionism and plain theft. Certain individuals enriched themselves and lived in plebeian luxury. Having said that, it is clear that Josephus, just like present-day establishment political, media and business figures, cannot but concede the moral superiority of revolutionaries who give their all fighting for the interests of those below: eg, Rosa Luxemburg, John Maclean, James Connolly, Antonio Gramsci, Leon Trotsky, Che Guevara, Bobby Sands. Josephus wants to dismiss them as mere bandits. But they are, he grudgingly admits, prepared to suffer torture rather than submit. Josephus himself fatefully chose the slippery road of self-seeking, treachery and surrender. Obeisance being no guarantee

in a life whose only certainty is death. Josephus appears to have come to a sticky end at the hands of his imperial Roman masters.

From Josephus it is clear that the masses were not united behind a single party leadership. Yet, inhabiting the rarefied atmosphere of the aristocracy, Josephus appears to have had only the vaguest knowledge of the politics of the extreme left of his day. That despite his brief flirtation with the essenes and leading role in the first phase of the Jewish revolution. One should take his description as a rough sketch on a par with the dismissive caricatures of the left occasionally found in the mainstream bourgeois press. Instinct alone tells us that mass politics in 1st century Palestine were far more variegated than described by Josephus. In the *Talmud* we find the claim that “Israel did not go into captivity until there had come into existence 24 varieties of sectaries”.²⁰ A pared down version of the modern 57 varieties quip.

Where do James and the post-Jesus nazoreans fit in here? Obviously there are differences between them and the essenes and the zealots. They were not monastic like the essenes. Nor were they republicans and practical guerrilla fighters along zealot lines. Nonetheless, as we have said, at least five of Jesus’s so-called 12 disciples were associated with, or came from, the ranks of the freedom fighters and *retained* guerrilla nicknames. More than that, their founder, Jesus, was crucified as a rebel by the Romans. Broadly speaking then, the nazoreans should be thought of as belonging to the same political-religious current as the essenes and zealots, and certainly shared broadly similar aims.

The party name, nazorean, reinforces this thesis. There is a common misconception that nazorean derives from the town in Galilee where the youthful Jesus and his family are supposed to have lived: ie, Jesus of Nazareth. The origins of this are to be found in Mark and are repeated for the church by Epiphanius. Yet, as already noted, in Hebrew the term conveys ‘consecrated’ or ‘separated’. It conjures up the idea of keeping the customs of the ancestors, and as such was an esoteric term, or party name, associated with zealotism or messiahism. So ‘nazorean’ “cannot mean ‘from Nazareth’ ... though all such plays on words were probably purposeful”.²¹ In all likelihood the town Nazareth, if it existed in ancient times, derives from ‘nazorean’, not the other way round.

Nazoreans were apocalyptic revolutionaries only different from the movement founded by John the Baptist in that they could confidently name the messiah. It was surely another advantage that their man had safely risen to heaven. He was still alive and yet could neither be captured nor killed. Jesus would come and deliver his people at the appointed hour (in this respect the nazorean story of king Jesus is akin to the British myth of the sleeping king Arthur). The potency of this Elijah-like combination is shown in the Acts. In spite of itself the Acts also cast light on the true nature of the nazorean party.

Seven weeks after the crucifixion of Jesus the nazorean party was gaining many recruits and was widely acclaimed by a Jewish population that had, according to the gospels, just been clamouring for his death. Here is what Acts says:

And all that believed were together, and had all things in common; and sold their possessions and goods, and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising god and having favour with all the people. And the lord god added to their number day by day those who should be saved.²²

Acts was composed in the 2nd century and is overtly Pauline. Nevertheless, though an apologia for Paul and unmistakably Christian, Acts not only shows the communistic nazoreans finding “favour with all the people”. As a community the party uses and worships in the Jerusalem temple. Evidently the nazoreans were neither Christian nor Jewish-Christians. They were Jews by birth and Jews by conviction. The nazoreans were a leftwing Jewish sect that primarily distinguished itself from other similar groups by proclaiming Jesus as the prophesied messiah, a descendant of the house of David, who is the legitimate king. Hence they diligently kept the laws of Moses and observed the Sabbath.

James - their prince regent - in particular was renowned for his saintly devotion. Jerome refers to a story about James which says that such was his religious fame that people “earnestly sought to touch the hem of his clothing”.²³ Eusebius quotes Hegesippus (c110-c180) and his now lost *Memoirs* (book five). So frequently did James pray that his knees became

“hard like those of a camel”. As with the most extreme Jews of his day he “drank no wine nor strong drink, nor did he eat flesh”. Furthermore James seems to have taken a vow of celibacy in order to preserve his ‘righteousness’ (*zaddik* in Hebrew). “[H]e was holy from his mother’s womb.” So it was James, not Mary, who was the perpetual virgin. Making sure no-one missed his holiness, “he wore not woollen but linen garments” and refused to use a “razor on his head”.²⁴

Besides such documentary evidence we can also arrive at similar results from passages in the Acts and Paul’s letters to the Galatians and Corinthians, albeit using simple inference. For example, unlike the “pillars” in Jerusalem, Paul tells his followers that they can eat “everything sold in the meat market”.²⁵ He also instructs Jews to break the taboo outlawing table fellowship with gentiles. The biblical image of Jesus magically transforming water into wine, the man-god who like a heathen equates the bread and wine of the last supper with his body and blood and who freely associates with prostitutes and Roman centurions was unmistakably designed to produce apoplexy amongst the nazoreans. A deliberately insulting reversal of their beliefs, laws and attitudes.

It is of the greatest significance that Jerome and Eusebius insist that James wore the mitre of the high priest and actually entered the inner sanctum, or holy of holies, in the Jerusalem temple. “He alone was permitted to enter into the holy place,” says Eusebius (by tradition no-one apart from the high priest, who enacted the annual Yom Kippur ritual there, was allowed in).²⁶ So it appears that James functioned as an opposition (righteous or *zaddokite*) high priest. Whether he stood before the ark in the holy of holies just once or on a regular, annual, basis is a moot point. Either way, James could only have crossed the threshold of the inner sanctum, to pray for the people on Yom Kippur, if he had the active support of the masses (both the proletariat of Jerusalem and pilgrims). In other words, against the morality, ritual and the feeble statelet wielded by the high priesthood there stood another power - the morality, ritual and mobilised masses of the fourth philosophy. Put yet another way, Jerusalem was gripped by dual power. Josephus candidly admits that there was “mutual

enmity and class warfare” between the high priests on the one hand and the “priests and leaders of the masses in Jerusalem on the other”.²⁷

With all this in mind it is hardly surprising that the nazoreans were overwhelmingly lower class. One of their party names - along with the Qumran community - was ‘the poor’. This sociological make-up continued after the first beginnings and is referred to by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians:

[N]ot many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were noble of birth; but god chose what is foolish in the world to shame the strong, god chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of god.²⁸

The proletarian character of the nazorean mass base is one of the reasons why we possess so little direct evidence of exact organisation and ideology. The leaders were surely persuasive, eloquent and educated. But their party culture was oral, not written. The apostles were unlikely to have been humble fishermen - a reading which arguably stems from a misunderstanding of fourth philosophy parables relating to preachers who cast their nets. That aside, the rank and file were overwhelmingly illiterate. The teachings and sayings of Jesus were therefore, to begin with, transmitted by word of mouth. That afforded considerable room for exaggeration and downright fabrication. But, of course, it should be stressed once again that the myth-making of the nazoreans about Jesus, his mission and his miracles occurred fully within the traditions of Jewish communistic sects.

Nazoreans fulminated against the rich. We find such antagonistic attitudes cropping up here and there in the *New Testament*. Being seared into the minds of even the most unsophisticated amongst the congregation, the most famous phrases and stories could not be easily expunged by later redactors. Eg, Acts tells of a well-off married couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who, having joined the nazoreans, “kept back some of the proceeds” from the sale of their property.²⁹ They both instantly fall down dead when reproached by the apostles. In Luke we read that a man, “clothed in purple and fine linen” who goes to Hades and “torment” and the “flames” simply

because he is rich. The poor man, Lazarus, in contrast finds comfort in “Abraham’s bosom”.³⁰ The letter of James - written down in the first half of the second century, as we have already seen, is full of loathing for the rich, once more simply because they are rich. The poor have been “chosen by god” to be “heirs of the kingdom which he has promised”. The rich “oppress you”, “drag you to court” and “blaspheme”, thunder the words of the top apostle.³¹ The poor are urged to await the “coming of the lord” and class revenge. Grasp the fact that from the 30s the masses in Jerusalem were in sympathy with the nazoreans and their messianic programme, then the events reported in the *New Testament* and other sources about the strength of the community make sense. Likewise, understand that and you understand why the Romans and sadducees viewed them as a threat.

As we have said, almost immediately after the execution of Jesus, his followers find a remarkable response to their message in the poor quarters of Jerusalem. Their headquarters were situated in a district called Ophel in the cramped lower city (see figure 5). The atmosphere must have been close to collective madness. There is ecstatic talk of miracles and cures. Of the coming messiah and ending Roman rule. In modern terminology, the masses were refusing to be ruled in the old way. Recruits came in their thousands and they brought all their possessions with them. The nazorean leaders address huge crowds from the steps of the temple. Only the temple enclosure has space enough to accommodate those who want to hear them. Any fear that might have demoralised, or held them back, after Jesus was executed vanishes. The masses breathe courage into the cadre. Psychologically they become inspired. The ‘spirit’ is upon them.

The sadducees respond by having the religious police arrest those whom the Acts call Peter and John. They were preaching resurrection - Jesus being their proof. But the actual interrogation that followed the next day concerns the healing of a cripple. He is hauled in as a witness. The apostles refuse to be intimidated and boldly proclaim the name of their messiah. No religious or state crime has been committed, or so they reportedly maintain. The high priest made threats, but he decides to release them “because of the people”.³² The nazoreans had scored an important tactical victory and were further emboldened. Some 5,000 more purportedly join their ranks.

Not long after, worried by the ever increasing numbers attracted to the nazorean meetings in the temple enclosure, the high priest and sadducees have all the apostles arrested and confined to a “common prison” - presumably the temple dungeon.³³ However, when the religious police go to fetch them for interrogation, they are horrified to discover them vanished, gone, spirited away. Presumably sympathisers, not an angel, had sprung them. Far from keeping heads down, the apostles are once again found “standing in the temple and teaching the people”.³⁴ Without violence, “for they are afraid of being stoned by the people”, the guards bring them before the sanhedrin (the 70-strong supreme religious council). They are ordered to stop their preaching. Speaking on behalf of them all, Peter refuses. A pharisee named Gamaliel eloquently urges caution. So after roughing them up and warning them not to “speak in the name of Jesus” they “let them go”.³⁵ Again to no effect. Every day nazoreans continue their meetings at private homes and in the temple enclosure.

Paul and his party

Nazorean doctrine found support not only among the Palestinian Jews but numerous “Hellenists”: ie, Jews living in Jerusalem who spoke Greek. It is in this context that the Acts introduce Stephen. The sadducees have him seized and falsely accused of blasphemy. Stephen defends himself bravely, but, deaf to his pleas, they have him stoned to death.

There is, we know, an interregnum in terms of the Roman power structure in 36-37 with the departure of Pilate and the preparation for war against the Arabs. Under such conditions Jonathan, the high priest, exercises greater autonomy. The Acts report that Saul (Paul) takes a lead, not only in the killing of Stephen, but the “great persecution” against the “church in Jerusalem” initiated by Jonathan that followed. Robert Eisenman disputes the veracity of the Stephen story. He argues at length, and persuasively, that the martyrdom of Stephen (a Greek name) is an overwrite for an attempt on the life of James.

Eisenman reckons that James was attacked by Paul and a gang of hired thugs who participated in Jonathan’s pogrom against the nazoreans and

other oppositionists. We find confirmation of this thesis in the Pseudoclementine. A grand debate in the temple enclosure between the sadducean hierarchy, the pharisees, the baptists, the Samaritans and the nazoreans headed by James is reported in tit-for-tat detail. Of course, the nazoreans are presented as winning the argument hands down. So, on the second day of the debate, presumably at a prearranged moment, Saul (Paul) and his men stage a riot. Book one of *Recognitions* contains the following account:

[H]e began to drive all into confusion with shouting, and to undo what had been arranged with much labour, and at the same time to reproach the priests, and to enrage them with revilings and abuse, and, like a madman, to excite every one to murder, saying, ‘What do ye? Why do ye hesitate? Oh sluggish and inert, why do we not lay hands upon them, and pull all these fellows to pieces?’ When he had said this, he first, seizing a strong brand from the altar, set the example of smiting. Then others also, seeing him, were carried away with like readiness. Then ensued a tumult on either side, of the beating and the beaten. Much blood is shed; there is a confused flight, in the midst of which that enemy attacked James, and threw him headlong from the top of the steps; and supposing him to be dead, he [Saul-Paul] cared not to inflict further violence upon him.³⁶

Though with both legs broken, James survives. He retreats to Jericho, along with 5,000 followers. The standard narrative then proceeds with Saul (Paul) in chase - with the blessing of Jonathan the high priest - and then having his vision of Jesus and losing his sight for three days. He then turns nazorean and later adopts the Latinised form of his name.

Subsequently, the nazoreans launch themselves as active proselytisers outside Palestine. They recruit Jews living throughout the Roman empire - in particular in Rome, Syria and Alexandria. Through their work amongst well established Jewish communities, belief in Jesus as a resurrected messiah spreads. However, the key to why nazoreanism sired Christianity as a bastard child is found in its success in winning non-Jews to convert to a sympathising level of Judaism. Full conversion involved circumcision and observance of all of the laws and taboos. ‘God-fearers’ or ‘proselytes of the

gate' were a kind of partial or half-way conversion. They were not required to undergo circumcision nor change their nationality. God-fearers only had to accept the seven laws of the sons of Noah and revere the Jews as a 'nation of priests'.

Paul proves brilliant at winning people in the eastern part of the Roman empire to become god-fearers and winning god-fearers to recognise Jesus as the messiah. It is his converts who are first called Christians. Possibly James encouraged Paul to take up missionary work abroad when he presented himself to the Jerusalem council three years after his road-to-Damascus 'experience'. Paul says he tried to see the apostles but only met "James the brother of the lord".³⁷ He travelled widely and persuaded many of the uncircumcised to accept Jesus as redeemer. Yet so determined was Paul to maintain the growth of his overseas communities that he embarks on a process of whittling away the specifically Jewish elements of the faith. At first his programme would have been no more than implicit, a tendency. Laws and taboos should be moderated, not discarded. However, soon his teachings start to explicitly diverge from nazoreanism and Judaism itself. Paul's mature views are to be found in his letters or epistles. Written some time between 50 and 55, they are in the most part considered "the genuine work of Paul".³⁸ This Pauline material forms the earliest texts contained in the *New Testament*.

In them we find Paul expounding upon the divine nature of Jesus. The death of Jesus is recounted in terms of the self-sacrifice and rebirth of a man-god. Paul announces that Jewish laws are outdated and that the distinction between Jew and gentile ought to be abolished. He openly courts the Romans and the powers-that-be. Christian doctrine is still underdeveloped. There is no trinity, no virgin birth. But what we know as the gospels of today owe their mysticism and pro-Romanism to Paul. With his innovations acting as mediation, the whole Jesus story is gradually retold and turned into something entirely at odds with the nazorean tradition. The only nazorean document in the *New Testament* that survives the Pauline revision more, rather than less, intact, is the letter of James. Presumably due to its fame.

Paul made such headway in his first mission abroad that he was able to negotiate a compromise deal in Jerusalem with the apostles and elders of

the nazorean community to “make no distinction between us and them”: ie, Jews and god-fearers.³⁹ There had been much criticism of Paul by those who demanded that all male converts be circumcised. He even claims to have been physically assaulted by “unbelieving Jews”. For the nazoreans the compromise struck in Jerusalem officially signalled that the god-fearers would be treated as what Hugh Schonfield calls “resident aliens”.⁴⁰ A joint formulation is agreed. As long as gentiles refrain “from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and what is strangled and from unchastity”, then “you will do well”.⁴¹ Nevertheless, James rules that Paul confine his activities to gentiles and on no account should he attempt to water down the stipulation that Jews observe the laws of Moses. The face-saving deal gave Paul apostolic status amongst the gentiles; but in return he had to agree not to do anything that might interfere with the nazoreans’ reputation for strict orthodoxy amongst fellow Jews.

The agreement is broken. On his next two missions overseas, which begin in the spring of 50 and end in 58, Paul recounts that he preached in the synagogues of the diaspora how Jesus’s crucifixion was necessary and how equality between Jews and god-fearers ought to be established on the basis of his increasingly non-Jewish views about Jesus: ie, the christ who was born to suffer. Paul also reveals to the authorities in Macedonia who have imprisoned him that he is a Roman citizen. He not only demands his own release, but an apology.⁴² Certainly, wherever Paul goes, he stirs up the animosity of orthodox Jews. The nazoreans are therefore forced to counter him by sending out their own recommended cadre to his communities. Thereafter, not surprisingly, Paul exhibits some trepidation about returning to Jerusalem. Nor is it surprising that, when he does, the nazorean community fears guilt by association. Unnamed brethren complain to Paul of the “thousands” of their followers who have been told “about you and that you teach all the Jews who are among the gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs”.⁴³

It is agreed that Paul must present himself as a penitent at the temple and undergo purification. Yet before the seven-day purification process can be completed he is recognised by “the Jews from Asia”.⁴⁴ They, presumably backed by the *zealot/sicarii* underground, rouse the masses to protest

against the apostate. He is dragged out of the temple and would probably have been beaten to death had Roman troops not rushed to save him. Being a Roman citizen, Paul is taken into protective custody. A *sicarii* plot is uncovered to assassinate Paul. He leaves Jerusalem under a heavy guard: 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen accompany him to Caesarea.⁴⁵ Paul appeals to Nero and sails to Rome. However, Paul's fate appears to have become subsumed in the revolutionary situation rapidly developing in Judea.

The fourth philosophy in its various manifestations proves to be a real threat. The established order can no longer rule in the old way. Festus, the governor, is replaced by Nero and, while Albinus is still on his way, the high priest, Ananus, arranges the show trial and stoning of James. Discontent reaches new heights. Ananus will soon be executed by zealot state power in revolutionary Jerusalem. Paul himself was beheaded on the order of Nero in 64 because he was linked to Jewish subversion. A few months later the fire of Rome was blamed on the *Christiani*. Nero knew how to scapegoat at least.

A combined revolution

Let us examine the Jewish revolution of 66-70 and the events that led to the social explosion. Having imposed direct rule over Judea in 6, the Romans appear to have proceeded in a belligerent way and they certainly did nothing to mask or make palatable their ruthless exploitation. For whatever reason, the procurators appointed from Rome seemed determined to conduct affairs in such a way as to lose any consent they might otherwise have gained. The last two, Albinus and Florus, were particularly vile. Reportedly Albinus took bribes from criminals. On the completion of his term in office he opened the prisons so as to "fill the land with robbers". Florus plundered whole towns. Most outrageously he helped himself to the temple treasury. When the people objected, his troops cut them down. Individuals were picked out at random from the crowd and crucified. That included some who had been admitted to the Roman equestrian order. The

fact that Florus was prepared to trample on Roman norms gives credence to the hypothesis that there was a high-up plot to ferment a rebellion.

Either way, what took place in May 66 proved not to be a short-lived, easily snuffed-out revolt of the type led by Jesus some time in the 30s. Rather there was a full-blown national uprising. And one which drew into its vortex virtually all classes in Jewish society. Florus urgently called in Cestus Gallus, the legate of Syria, and his legions to restore order. All the while, in Egypt and Syria there were inter-ethnic clashes between Jewish and Greek inhabitants. Many Jews were killed. Greek towns in Palestine suffered a similar fate at the hands of Jews. Consequently Hyam Maccoby suggests there were two intertwined struggles taking place. On the one hand, a military uprising against Roman power; on the other hand, an ideological clash “between the Hellenistic and Jewish civilisations”.⁴⁶

The Romans swiftly mobilised to re-establish control. Having cut its way through Galilee and Samaria, the 30,000-strong force commanded by Gallus entered Judea. They consisted of the whole of the 12th Legion plus 2,000 men from “each of the three Syrian legions”. That is, 11,000 heavy infantry in all. Supporting them were 10 regular auxiliary units, at least 3,000 infantry and 2,000 cavalry, and almost 14,000 eastern allied troops, “mainly cavalry and archers”, supplied by king Herod Agrippa II and the client kings of Commagene and Emesa.⁴⁷ They were also joined by Greek irregulars determined to hit back against the Jews. Everything en route was put to fire and sword. No prisoners were taken. Everyone was killed. A scorched earth policy designed to terrorise.

Resistance stiffened as Gallus neared Jerusalem, but was soon overcome. Gallus successfully forced his way into the holy city. However, zealots, many of whom had beat a retreat from the north, seized key strategic points, including the heavily fortified temple enclosure. Well-aimed rocks and missiles rained down upon the Romans. Nevertheless, for reasons that are something of a mystery, Gallus decided to withdraw. Josephus seems to believe that the Romans could have won if they had pressed home their assault. Perhaps Gallus’s decision was connected to the political crisis gripping the empire. The fire of Rome happened in 64 and Nero was widely viewed as being completely mad. His forced suicide in 68 was followed by the rapid succession and downfall of Galba, Otho and Vitellius.

A more likely explanation is surely offered by Neil Faulkner. Tellingly, he contrasts the Roman and Jewish ways of making war. The Romans possessed an awesome military machine. At its core were the well drilled, highly disciplined and manoeuvrable legionnaires. In a conventional clash of army and army the Romans were during these times “close to invincible”.⁴⁸ But the Jews were well practised in the art of guerrilla warfare. Two hundred years before they had, using these methods, ground down and eventually defeated the Seleucid Greeks. Instead of attempting the impossible and trying to beat the Romans using conventional war, they organised hit-and-run ambushes, constantly harried, staged quick skirmishes and in general kept on the move and ready to retreat to upland areas. Their primary weapons in these engagements were the javelin, the sling shot and the bow and arrow. Above all though, they did everything to avoid encirclement and therefore a decisive battle with the Romans. They deserted their towns and villages and took to the hills. From such positions of relative safety, and organised in small groups, they struck at isolated or unprepared Roman units, supply lines and the rearguard. No set-piece battles, and no attempt to halt the much superior Roman army.

Mao Zedong outlined similar, time-honoured, principles of guerrilla warfare in his 1930s writings. Confronted by better equipped and more numerous Guomindang forces, he ordered the People’s Liberation Army to allow the enemy to penetrate deep into “our base area.” Then the Guomindang will taste all the “bitterness it holds for him”. From a “favourable” terrain, and having discovered the enemy’s “weak points” and having worn them down, he predicted that Guomindang commanders would be “induced to make mistakes”. Under these circumstances, the balance of military forces undergo a complete reversal. Who was once weak would now be strong and ready for offensive action.⁴⁹

Faulkner argues that the Jews were harrying and hitting at Gallus’s rear and “threatening to throttle the life out of his army”.⁵⁰ He had no choice. He had to retreat. But, whatever the reason for the sudden withdrawal from Jerusalem in September 66, on the route back through Judea Gallus’s ponderous, slow-moving columns were constantly ambushed, raided and tormented by zealot guerrillas and massed Jewish irregulars. The Romans faced a risen people. And at Beth-horon in November 66 they were given a

thoroughgoing mauling. Gallus only saved the day by sacrificing his entire rearguard. Six thousand died and huge quantities of arms, siege artillery and supplies were captured.

That the zealot victory took place at Beth-horon - the mountain pass where Judas Maccabaeus defeated the Seleucid Greek army in 166 BCE - gave it a miraculous quality. The world had been turned upside-down. The Jews had god on their side. This surely must be the end of days. Even sadducees joined the second revolution.

Under such conditions of national unity and patriotic class-collaboration, the zealots had no option but to allow the conduct of the war to pass to Hasmonaean aristocrats, who were by custom the military leaders of the people. They would have been the natural popular choice and it was leading aristocrats who formed the first revolutionary government.

Their conduct of the war against the Romans was half-hearted. Not to say perfidious. One of their number was a certain Flavius Josephus. Appointed general in command of Galilee, much squabbling between him and the Galilean zealot, John of Gischala, ensued. Due to Josephus's ineptitude, and the lackadaisical aristocratic government in Jerusalem, the defences of Galilee were left fatally weak. And, as a greatly reinforced Roman army renews its offensive, Josephus defects. He becomes an agent of Roman imperialism.

Meanwhile, in the revolutionary city of Jerusalem itself, the zealots took a vow to fight to the end. By contrast, sadducees and aristocrats clamoured for a negotiated surrender. They were out for compromise and had no stomach for the radical programme that would have mobilised, inspired and secured the loyalty of the broad masses for their government - measures such as debt cancellation and land redistribution, in Judea traditionally called the jubilee. Sectional interests prevented them from adopting such a radical programme. Instead the aristocratic government looked to stabilising the existing socio-economic order and curbing the power of the zealots and the urban and rural poor.

War greatly speeds up, concentrates, political developments. Class conflict erupts between those above and those below. National revolution against Rome takes the scope of social revolution. The third revolution sees "eminent people" assassinated. Others, such as Antipas, a member of the royal family, are arrested. The masses appoint their own high priest. Street

fighting breaks out between zealots and sadducees and their hired thugs. Nevertheless, with the help of Idumaeen allies, the first revolutionary government is ousted. A multidimensional phenomenon. It is the victory of the party of war over the party of peace. Of the countryside and the urban poor over the rich. Of revolutionary force over established order. Having been held under arrest, the high priest, Ananus, is executed, along with many young aristocrats. However, the zealot party itself splits under the pressure of the tasks of government it now confronts - that and pre-existing factional rivalries.

Menahem, son of Judas, the zealot founder-leader, is killed by republican zealots after he declares himself messiah. The zealot's 'redoubtable' wing withdraws to Massada in the south. The remaining zealots are at odds too. On one side is the faction following John of Gischala, who fled to Jerusalem after the collapse in Galilee. On the other, the extreme left behind Simon bar Giora. Much to the disgust of Josephus, he "proclaimed the liberty of slaves" and cancelled the debts of the poor. His three-pronged immediate programme was freedom from Rome, freedom from debt, freedom from bondage - this attracted to his banner "the scum of the whole district".⁵¹ Like Spartacus, his movement threatens the social order itself.

Having seized imperial power, Vespasian hands control of the Palestine campaign to his son, Titus. The Roman army soon surrounds Jerusalem. Giant mobile siege towers are constructed and remorselessly edged in. Adversity cements a certain unity amongst the zealots. Each faction defends its own districts and walls and courageously strikes back with lightning raids on the enemy. But there is no centralised coordination. Josephus boasts of the speeches he made before the revolutionary city urging surrender. He was met with insults, stones and anything else that came to hand. Yet fear and hunger causes some of the refugees and some of the middling elements trapped in the city to want to escape. Those who make the attempt have to evade both zealot guards and Roman troops. If caught by the latter they were crucified. Thousands of crosses soon litter the surrounding plain. Roman soldiers split open the bellies of those hanging on the crosses after finding an escapee extracting gold coins from his faeces. Titus ordered an end to that particular practice. But not an end to the crucifixions.

After a couple of months the well oiled Roman military machine breached the outer defences and legionnaires secured themselves on the third, north, wall. Months of fierce, sector-by-sector and street-by-street fighting followed. But Jerusalem was eventually taken. The temple was torched and the entire complex razed. In the end the whole city lay in ruins. Josephus's claim that over one million died in the siege and the butchery which followed owes much to lurid exaggeration - there is no way ancient Jerusalem could have held a population equivalent to Rome. More likely its *total* population - swollen by refugees and outside fighters - would have been around 250,000-500,000 according to Faulkner. He puts the "normal population" at "between 50,000 and 100,000".⁵² Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Titus allowed his troops to indulge in unrestrained slaughter. Only once their bloodlust had been satiated did he call a halt. Surviving females and male youths under 17 were auctioned off into slavery. Men were sent to labour in Egypt. From amongst the prisoners zealots were singled out for immediate crucifixion or killing by wild beast or the sword in the shows that Titus organised in Syria. Simon bar Giora and the "tallest and handsomest" captives are saved for the triumph in Rome.⁵³

In 71, before Vespasian and Titus, sitting in imperial splendour, the triumph took place. Cut into the stone of the arch of Titus we can still see legionnaires carrying the sacred menorah, or seven-stemmed candlestick. The climax of the proceedings was the strangulation of Simon bar Giora. News of his death reportedly brought forth a great cheer throughout Rome. Of course, he was no modern revolutionary. Nonetheless the determination of Simon bar Giora to give his all for freedom has universal significance and should be acclaimed and celebrated today. While there is unfreedom, there will be freedom fighters.

Counterrevolution and Christianity

It was the revolutionary uprising of May 66 and the destruction of Jerusalem four years later which definitively separated the gentile congregation from its Jewish roots. Roman terror much reduced the nazoreans in Palestine. The Pauline communities certainly had every

interest in distancing themselves from the Jewish national movement. They did everything possible to purge their doctrine of anything Jewish. The original gospel is overwritten and is again and again made as pro-Roman as established circumstances and the willingness of the congregation allow. Christianity thus begins with the defeat of the Jesus party.

The Christian church eventually Romanised itself ideologically and culturally. Jewish revolutionary national and social ideas were turned into their opposites. Kautsky points out that the kingdom of god ceased to be liberation in the real world and was instead “transferred to heaven”. The earthly programme of Jesus was replaced with the promise of “immortality of the soul”.⁵⁴ This Pauline Christianity - with its doctrine of rejecting the old gods, its promise of life after death, its universalism and its internationalism - articulated the needs of a declining social system and was perfectly acceptable to the upper classes. Indeed rich converts came in droves and quickly rose to prominence. As they did, so the communism and democracy practised by the primitive congregation was steadily emptied out and became reduced to mere ritual. The congregation’s communism did linger on in the form of common meals. In time, though, even that became purely symbolic - a sliver of bread and a sip of red wine.

Slaves and the servile orders were now told they had a *moral* duty to obey their masters. Far from challenging the institution of slavery, the church actually “sanctified slaveholder morality beyond the standard claims of the Greco-Roman ethos”.⁵⁵ In Timothy, Paul says:

Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their master as worthy of honour, so that the name of god and the teaching may not be defamed. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brethren; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved.⁵⁶

Paul demands that this doctrine must be accepted and propagated. Those who refuse to do so are accused of being “puffed up” and having a “craving for controversy” and “disputes about words”.⁵⁷ So Christian slaveowners could carry on inflicting corporal punishment on slaves, branding them and chaining them with a good conscience.

In the gospels the poor were safely transformed into the “poor in spirit”. Demands to sell everything gave way to charity-mongering and buying a place in heaven. Those who did willingly give up everything - property, possessions, sex - and practise communism were, of course, considered particularly holy and enjoyed high prestige. The church’s “radical elements” who renounced possessions, property and sex naturally felt that they were superior. They formed a church aristocracy. “Like every other aristocracy,” writes Kautsky, it “did not content itself with claiming the right to command the rest of the community, but also attempted to exploit the community.”⁵⁸ Radical communism thus becomes its bureaucratic opposite - bishops, deacons and abbots. The congregation loses all democratic power and declines into an inert mass. The property and organisation of the church effectively becomes the collective property of the clerical bureaucracy.

Incidentally, the ability to renounce sex in the name of moral purity actually underlines the exclusion and humiliation of the slave. They had no such option. Indeed the Acts of Andrew - dating from the 2nd century or early 3rd century - tell of a Christian woman, Maximilla, who refused to have sex with her husband out of religious conviction. Having decked her out with “wicked enticement and paintings”, she “substitutes” her slave, Egetes, to serve as a surrogate sexual partner for her husband.⁵⁹ While this purchased Maximilla’s stairway to heaven, no-one knows what the slave girl thought about being turned into an erotic body-double.

Christianity suffered savage persecution under various emperors. The church was seen as subversive. Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Decius and Valerian attempted to beat it. Diocletian eventually sought rapprochement and Constantine finally brought about unity between church and state. The church could neither be ignored nor conquered, but it could be incorporated as a privileged subaltern into the reorganised, Byzantine emperor system. Either that or it might have sought to realise its theocratic ambitions (most fully realised by the Muslim states of Mohammed and the first four caliphs).

Constantine oversaw the Council of Nicaea in 325, which formalised church doctrine and the absolute power of the bishops. The nazoreans were a dangerous threat to the authority of the state. The bureaucratic church

proved an invaluable adjunct to an imperial state, which had long since lost active support amongst Roman citizens. Septimus Severus (reigned 193-211) formally abolished the 'old-fashioned' prerogatives of Rome and Italy. Eventually in 297 the empire was completely 'updated' and proclaimed an absolute monarchy. Diocletian's 'modernisation' turned every citizen into a subject. Given the autonomy of the state and the equalisation of the entire population into mere subjects, the emperor too needed a *universal* ideology. Aurelian promoted the cult of Sol (the unconquered sun). But that had no lasting success, having no mass base and therefore no pacifying or controlling effect on those below. The Pauline church fitted the bill.

By degrees emperor Constantine went from being a protector of the church to undergoing an eventual death-bed baptism in 337 (delaying baptism till the last moment was common at the time for those who ordered torture and execution). Early in his reign, in 313, Constantine enacted laws, the edict of Milan, which restored to the Catholic church all confiscated lands and buildings without expense and without delay. Christianity ceases to be a purely urban phenomenon and plays an increasing role in the countryside. Because of inheritance the church is soon counted as the greatest landowner with no rival apart from the state itself. Its slaves and serfs alike are told that if they humbly perform their duties they will find their reward in heaven.

Christianity triumphed when it had fully become its opposite. The victory of Christianity was not the victory of the proletariat and peasantry. Rather it was the victory of the exploiting church bureaucracy over the proletariat and peasantry.



‘Peter’s pence’ (*Simplicissimus* 1904). Artist: Bruno Paul. Victory of the church was not a victory for the poor. Peter’s pence was a levy said to be first introduced by Ina, king of Wessex, in 725. From there it spread to Denmark, Poland, Sweden, Norway, France, etc. Every family was expected to pay a silver penny on June 29 to support the work of the fabulously wealthy papacy

Victory was obtained not by means of subversion. The church had become a conservative force, a tool in the hands of the emperor.

After Constantine secured an undisputed hold over the empire, east and west, with his military victory over Licinius (his eastern co-emperor and a pagan) in 324, he immediately published a general circular letter, which exhorted his subjects to follow the example of their sovereign and embrace the divine truth of Christianity. Constantine made Christianity the favoured, to all intents and purposes the official religion of the empire (dissenting Arian bishops who refused to accept the trinitarian doctrine of Nicea were exiled). But this, it must be stressed, was under the aegis of the empire. Emperor and church functioned as dual powers, but the former occupied the first place. Once this deal was hatched with Constantine, the ecclesiastical bureaucracy became secular princes who exploited the masses alongside the emperors. And in return for gold and landed wealth the church and its doctrine provided a much needed cloak of ideological mystification.

Christianity more than survived the ‘barbarian’ invasion and the collapse of the western empire. The baptism of the pagan Frankish king, Clovis, in 497 was a vital turning point for the Catholic church ... “your faith is our victory”, rejoiced St Avitus.⁶⁰ Once again catholicism became the religion of the military victors, no longer the vanquished. Looking back at the conversion, later church ideologues saw Clovis as the precursor of Charlemagne, St Bernard and St Louis and a France that was the “torch bearer”.⁶¹

Europe’s medieval wars were sprinkled with holy water. Book, relic and the name of Jesus served every lordly coalition. But the masses too developed their own Christian ideologies and associated personifications - priests ordained, defrocked or completely unofficial. Their heretical Christian sects, and even returning Jesuses, puncture the standard kings and queens history. Continuously alive in the murky theological underground, fed by discontent and class hatred, moving by whisper from parish to parish, cross-fertilising and mutating, they appear as if out of nowhere as violent eruptions. A many-headed phenomenon. The crusades of the poor, king Tafur, John Ball and Thomas Müntzer. In Bohemia the Taborites fought off the pope and the Catholic princes of Germany and briefly

established a communistic republic in the name of Jesus and his second coming.

Finally mention must be made of the propaganda parallel drawn by Engels between Christianity and the modern socialist-communist movement. Both withstood persecution, both preached human freedom - one in heaven, the other on earth. Furthermore, Engels cheekily claimed that the triumph of Christianity represented the triumph of socialism - "as far as it was possible at the time".⁶² Suffice to say, in an epoch of absolute and general regression, the Christian church, in the productive form of the monasteries, were no more than islands of surviving industrial and agricultural sophistication. The church did not contain within it the seeds of a higher social formation.

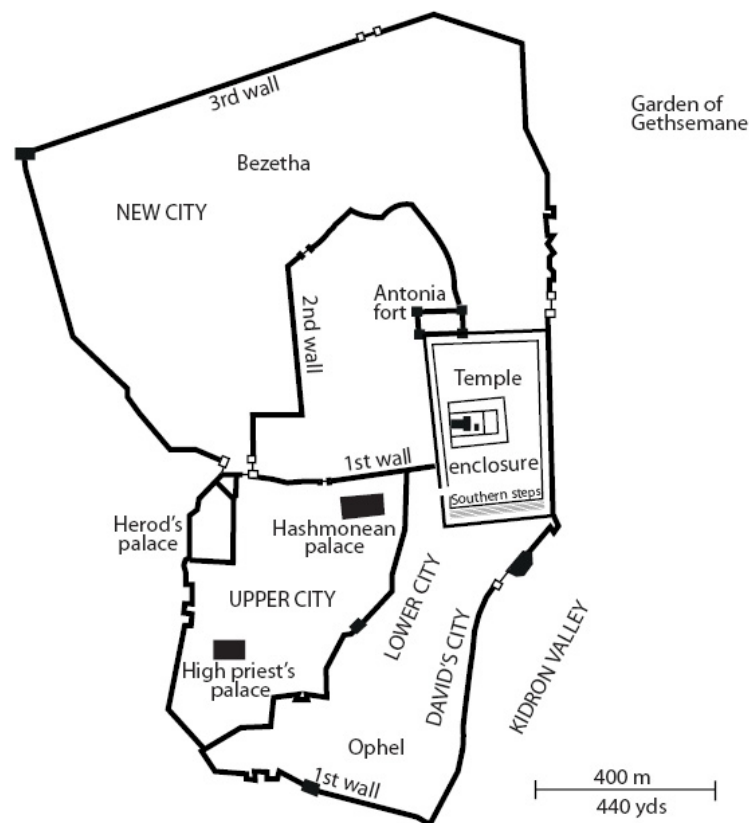
Within the monastery system we find the original principles of communism turned into their opposites too. The monasteries took over from the slave estates. With an enthusiastic source of cheap labour in the form of ascetic monks, and by exploiting their own serfs, these communities of production were able to maintain and even improve the agricultural and industrial methods of antiquity. Relying as they did on sexual segregation and sexual abstinence, such islands of productivity could not be generalised. However, because wealth was retained within the community and never divided by bequests, the various orders of monks and nuns grew into bureaucratic El Dorados.

True, in western Europe, after the collapse of the Roman empire, the church did stand out as an oasis of learning. Yet its methods and outlook were purely scholastic and often totally irrational. Faith substituted for reasoned thought. The church produced nothing remotely on a par with the ancient Greeks intellectually. Nor should we forget the role that the church took in systematically extinguishing anything that might challenge it. Huge numbers of ancient books were destroyed. A terrible, irreplaceable and criminal loss to human culture. Indeed the shelves of the famed library of Alexandria appear to have been emptied on the orders of leading churchmen. These fanatical bigots were determined to eliminate all alternative modes of thought; especially ones that were open-ended, critical and worldly. Voices of dissent there were. But with the blessing of the emperors, and then the feudal kings in the west, they were mercilessly

hunted down. Heretics died in excruciating agony. The persecuted became persecutors and, given the one and a half thousand years of state Christianity, on a scale almost without parallel.

In some respects the evolution of early Christianity parallels social democracy and 'official communism', in the 20th century. The labour movement has been turned against the working class. Social democracy fused with the bourgeois state. 'Official communism' in turn created a bureaucratic anti-capitalist state that lived off the exploitation of the working class. However, where the ancient proletariat was a class born of a society that relied on the productive labour of slaves, modern workers are the productive class that continues to grow both in terms of crude numbers and also in quality. The well educated and cultured working class of today has every interest in a higher, fully democratic society.

Figure 5. Jerusalem at the time of the 66-70 revolution. The base area of the Jesus party was in the tightly packed Ophel district of the lower city.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

John Paul II, liberation theology and US decline

In a seamless display of unity the lavish funeral of Karol Josef Wojtyla, on April 8 2005, was attended by leading representatives from virtually every state, political trend and religious faith the world over. They included the protestant fundamentalist, George W Bush - becoming the first US president to attend a pontifical funeral. He lauded John Paul II as “a hero for the ages”.¹ A devout Tony Blair treated British TV audiences to one of his vacuous homilies: “Even if you’re not a Catholic, even if you’re not a Christian, even if you have no religious faith at all, what people could see in pope John Paul was a man of true and profound spiritual faith, a shining example of what that faith should mean”.² Fausto Bertinotti, leader of Italy’s Partito della Rifondazione Comunista, gave Wojtyla the highest accolades. He was a “great pope” ... “on a secular gravestone I would write of him ‘prophet of peace’”.³ Fidel Castro too expressed his condolences and declared three days of official mourning, allowing Cuban Catholics to grieve with the blessing of state sanction. As for the ego-bound celebrity, Bono (Paul Hewson), with typical fatuousness he declared that John Paul II was “the first funky pope”.⁴

Wojtyla’s twilight days, death and finally his burial melded together into a single media event. Monumental exaggeration went hand in hand with utterly inane second-by-second coverage of every inconsequential detail. In the comment pages of *The Guardian*, Timothy Garton Ash definitely went over the top: “The world lived this death. It was a global Calvary. People from every corner of the earth gathered in St Peter’s Square, peering up at those two windows of the papal apartment, illuminated against the night sky. Across five continents, Christians, Jews and Muslims joined them

through television. Marcello, from Rio de Janeiro, emailed CNN: ‘We are watching the agony of the greatest man of our time’” - and so on and on.⁵

Alex Callinicos: joined the mourning for pope John Paul



Alex Callinicos of the Socialist Workers Party wanted to be counted amongst the mourners too.⁶ True, he offered some rather staunch (albeit, hypocritical) criticisms on abortion, gay rights, sexual choices, etc.⁷ However, that was within the overall context of what amounts to a smarmy

tribute: “John Paul leaves a highly contradictory legacy. He could powerfully dramatise the injustices of the world. But he promoted the illusion that these could only be remedied within a Catholic church that under his leadership was still in flight from the modern world.” Citing the dead pope from 1991, when he voiced some hand-wringing objections to the ‘unbridled free market’, Callinicos notes how his pronouncement “scandalised the *Wall Street Journal*”.⁸

Callinicos’s assessment of John Paul II’s platonic anti-capitalism is not dissimilar to the claims once made by progressive US Catholics. Except, where Callinicos possessed the cast-iron certainty of hindsight, they were swept up by the naive hopes of anticipation. Kenneth L Woodward - a leftwing Catholic - greeted the newly installed John Paul II as a “socialist”.⁹ Evidence for this absurd claim was found in the pope’s “love of the poor” and hollow utterances against some of the symptoms of capitalist development. Both in fact traditional Catholic themes. The Catholic church has endlessly condemned greed and presented itself as a friend of the poor. In a decaying Roman empire poverty grew enormously and the church took up the task of helping to relieve their dire situation. The begging bowl of charity always walks one step behind class exploitation. It should be stressed, therefore, that John Paul II “loved” the poor only insofar as they remained passive. Primarily, he viewed them as a collection of souls waiting to be saved by the church.

Insecurity

Wojtyla was a complex personality. As a youth he acted in the theatre, worked in a chemical factory and reportedly played the guitar. He also possessed a ready intelligence. Wojtyla authored a string of scholarly tracts, including a book on phenomenology (*Person and act* 1969). The murderous Nazi occupation of Poland left indelible mental scars. So did Soviet domination and oppression. From bitter first-hand experience he concluded that both Nazism and what he understood to be socialism were evil *as systems*. Needing certainty, he attached himself to Polish patriotism and the Catholic church like a limpet. Socially and politically that meant a mordant

opposition to all progressive ideas. He stood more in the tradition of Pius XI than that of John XXIII.

Yet capitalist restoration in eastern Europe often caused deep disquiet. Wojtyla described the squalid results as being not that much better than the “other secular materialism” - bureaucratic socialism. He wanted to replace both the culture of profit (capitalism) and the culture of envy (socialism) with “a culture of fellowship, solidarity, work, austerity and unity”.¹⁰ Such worthy, but totally empty, moralism relied on converting people, one by one, to a sheep-like acceptance of the doctrines espoused by his holiness himself. Not surprisingly some Catholics considered Wojtyla egotistic and puffed up. An angst-ridden Graham Greene once imagined waking up to see the newspaper headline, “John Paul canonises Jesus Christ”.¹¹

Those who fondly imagine human liberation coming via the supposedly inexorable forward momentum of technology ought to have been dumbfounded when in April 2005 people from across the globe were emotionally sucked into the John Paul II dying experience. After all, here was an old man who led an institution which engaged in mass child abuse, did little to discourage the spread of Aids/HIV and damned homosexual relationships as violations of divine law. How could this ultra-conservative throwback attract such sympathy, deference and even veneration?

One explanation lies in social psychology. Millions feel anxious, insecure and seek shelter under the reassuring roof of religion. Laboratory experiments have shown that an increase in a subject’s anxiety and insecurity “makes them say they are more religious”.¹² Likewise creating conditions where people feel they lack control strengthens their belief in a controlling god. In another study Kurt Gray demonstrates that people “invoke god as a moral agent” to explain negative events.¹³

Almost needless to say, capitalist development engenders perpetual turmoil, uncertainty and a tearing destruction of established social relationships. For those who need to “sell their labour to survive” the resulting anxiety goes way “beyond the workplace”; it extends to fear that they might lose their homes, fear that they might be robbed, fear that they are being poisoned by carbon-monoxide fumes, etc.¹⁴ And no surprise, since the 2007 financial crisis people feel “more insecure and

Clinging to what appears certain in an uncertain age.



vulnerable than ever”.¹⁵

Being anxious, insecure and feeling that life lacks meaning is not confined to the masses. Even billionaire capitalists and members of the political elite find themselves victims of events which are beyond their control. Hence they too seek community, validation, solace and guidance in religion. Given the requirements of necessity, and the dominant tradition of pragmatism, especially pronounced in the Anglo-Saxon world, there is inconsistency and muddle. Eg, John Paul II denounced contraception and abortion as an “intrinsic evil”, and stem-cell research was included as part of the “culture of death”. Naturally then, the ruling class and its representatives disregard what they find personally unacceptable or politically inexpedient.

Ordinary Catholics demonstrably turn a deaf ear to the church when it comes to their sexual lives. Social and medical progress means they have genuinely humane choices. Priests, of course, then solemnly absolve the ‘straying sheep’ at confession. But the growing gulf separating theology and practice does not necessarily chart an inexorable line pointing to the eventual extinction of the Catholic church as an institution. A piece of atheistic wishful thinking. There is an inbuilt doctrine-practice gulf. A moment’s thought shows that it could not be otherwise. Neither god nor heaven exist. Religion is a system of *reversed* and *projected* reality.

The retrogressive views of John Paul II are easily dismissed: more to do with the 13th than the 21st century. But that very dichotomy actually helps explain what is reassuring, what is attractive about the Catholic church. For many John Paul II appeared to uphold values that were transcendental, impervious and therefore somehow true. The flock readily admit their shortcomings, their transgressions, their fallibility, their humanity. But, given the certainty of tragic events, the grind of daily life and the emptying commercialisation of seemingly everything, the Catholic church becomes their hope for a better future. A rock to which they desperately cling.

The Catholic church has claimed since at least the 3rd century to be the living embodiment of the risen Jesus. Yet, though supposedly the depository of god’s grace and truth, the church is thoroughly hypocritical and in many ways the embodiment of exploitation and oppression. For centuries popes sold high offices with abandon, tortured and burnt opponents, fathered

numerous illegitimate offspring, ran brothels and amassed unprecedented wealth. Of course, today it is the scandal of paedophilia within the ranks of its clergy which is the cause of shame and cover-up. A secular organisation would surely have been totally discredited and perhaps even forced to close down if it admitted, or was shown to have engaged, in such systemic sexual abuse of children and young people.

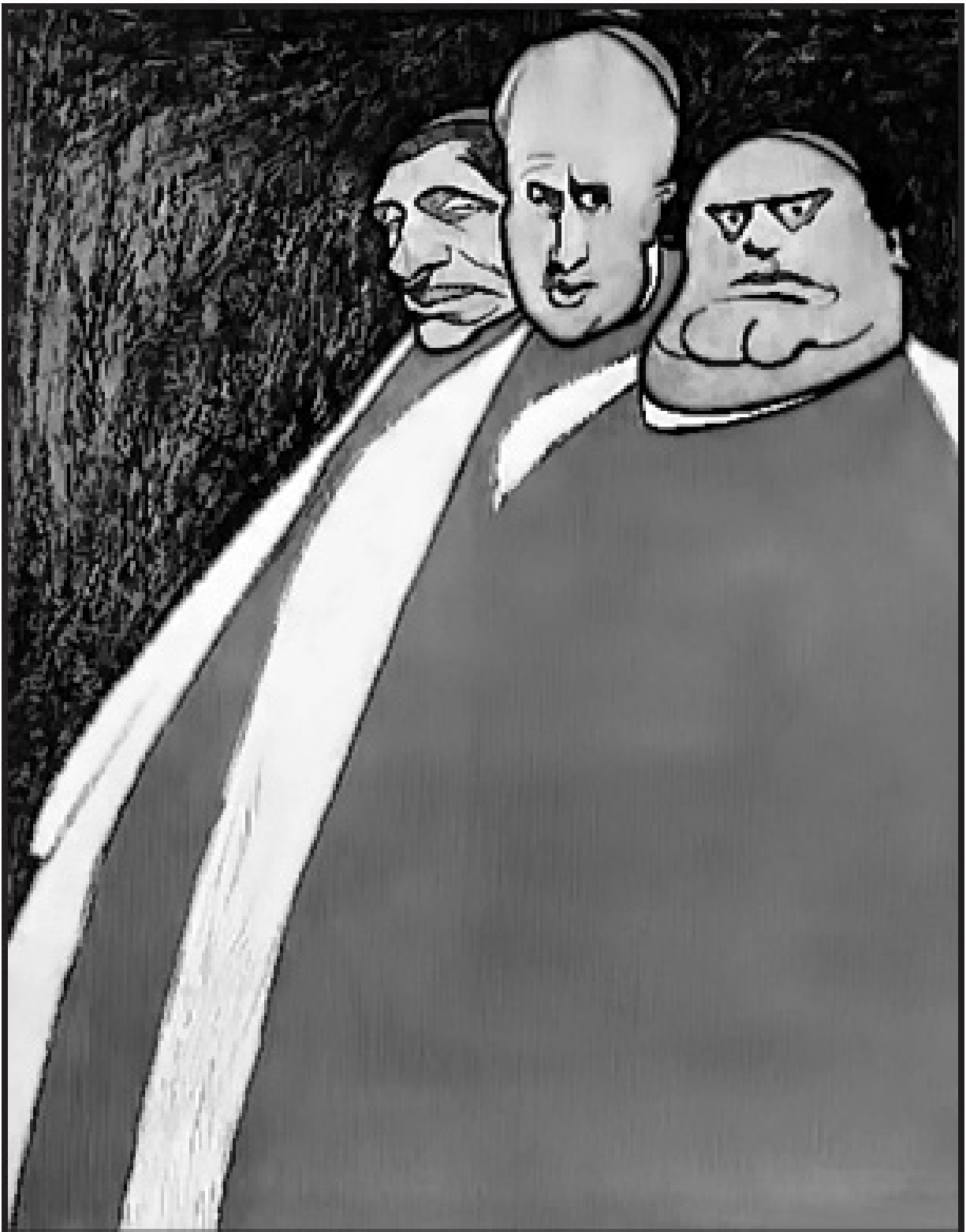
Not surprisingly, all of this went unmentioned by John Paul II's numerous establishment friends and admirers. They saw in the Catholic church a potent political ally, not a morally bankrupt feudal relic.

Benedict XVI desperately pressed ahead with a 'pre-emptive canonisation' of Wojtyla - fast-tracking him into sainthood and hence embedding his ultra-conservative doctrines almost at a theological stroke. On May 1 2011 Wojtyla was officially beatified, after a strange coffin-raising Vatican ceremony, in front of hundreds of thousands of the adoring faithful who packed St Peter's Square. A last step before sainthood which followed the Catholic church's claim to have verified a miracle attributed to his divine intervention: a French nun, Marie Simon-Pierre, had supposedly been cured of Parkinson's disease.

The first indication that the Catholic church was determined to elevate Wojtyla to the heavenly aristocracy came when cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican's secretary of state, or 'prime minister', described him as "John Paul the Great". Only three of John Paul II's 263 predecessors have been awarded this honorific, all of them from the dark ages and all of them canonised. Sainthood, when it is finally conferred, will clearly be a case of back to the future.

The worth of honours is measured by those conferring them. Angelo Sodano, it should never be forgotten, was charged with deepening links between the Vatican and Augusto Pinochet's regime in Chile. And, despite having courted sadistic torturers, he was supposedly overcome by the pope's 'beautiful death': "I saw him. He died with the serenity of the saints." Put another way, surrounded by colleagues, friends and doctors, and having instant access to all the latest medical-scientific technology, John Paul II exercised a high level of self-determination over the manner of his dying. A choice he tried to deny other victims of degenerative diseases. According to the strictures of Catholic doctrine there is no 'right to die'.

Feudalism and capitalism



‘Before the papal election’ (*Simplicissimus* 1903). Artist: Olaf Gulbransson. Pope Pius X was chosen by the conclave of bishops to replace Leo XIII on August 4 1903. Needless to say, not a few popes have died in mysterious circumstances. Hence the caption: “Your eminence, can I ask you to dinner?” - “Impossible, I have no antidote on me today.”

The Catholic church was ideologue, clerk and co-ruler of feudal Europe. Only the Catholic church had the ability and moral authority to take the lead against external foes - either by conversion and incorporation (eg, the Normans) or by “diverting” the feudal appetite for war into crusades against the “heathen”.¹⁶ The popes were the “organisers of the crusades, the Normans their champions”.¹⁷ Besides monasticism, retreating from the world and “pure asceticism”, the church was intimately bound up with “administering great wealth”.¹⁸ Something like a third of all land was under the command of the church.

Antonio Gramsci attributes the success and endurance of the Catholic church to the “fact” that it feels “very strongly the need for doctrinal unity of the whole mass of the faithful and strive[s] to ensure that the higher intellectual stratum does not get separated from the lower”.¹⁹ He could have added the formal imposition of celibacy upon the clergy. This helped ensure unity by avoiding *legitimate* children and therefore dynastic temptations and the division of church property along the fragmenting lines of heredity. On top of that every class under feudalism had an interest in sustaining the church - it served monarchs as intellectuals, promoted trade in towns and provided alms for the poor.

Being secular princes in Italy - the most advanced region in Europe, which also contained countless glorious reminders of antiquity - the popes happily sponsored the greatest artists and thinkers of the day. Hence the Renaissance and the reactionary-revolutionary humanism of the popes (humanism originally denoted not the non-divine; rather “studies which are ‘humane’ - worthy of the dignity of man”).²⁰ However, inevitably, popes and bishops opposed the *rise* of capitalism. Political economy rooted the church in the past. Almost needless to say, that soil had become exhausted. After the last of the crusades the church sank into corruption, absurdity and naked greed. Ecclesiastical posts, blessings and indulgences were sold on

an ever larger scale. New relics and saints were discovered and extravagantly marketed. In effect the Catholic church became a machine for enriching the papacy. Paradoxically, as the church grew richer, giving to the poor was increasingly begrudging and tight-fisted. Amongst those below the church became an object of hatred, derision and resentment.

Epistemologically there was a natural antagonism between the church's doctrines and the needs of rising capitalism. There had to be a breakout from the prison house of church scholasticism. In part that happened spontaneously. Advances in astronomy and navigation, the conquests in the Americas, the discovery of a sea route to, and unmediated trade and contact with, India, Indonesia, China and Japan - all created new mental horizons, which in turn discredited the church amongst the educated classes. The introduction of the printing press destroyed the church's virtual monopoly over knowledge.



‘Trading souls in the Ruhr’ (*Der Wahre Jacob* 1912). Artist: R Grosse.

Religion still serves capital.

Lay thinkers quickly left the hidebound priests far behind and came to regard them as amongst the most ignorant sections of the population. Finally, in terms of destroying the church’s intellectual ramparts, there was

the heavy artillery of Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume and the French materialists. State administration increasingly passed from the church elite into the hands of bureaucrats who just happened to be members of the church. As an institution the church became increasingly superfluous. Conditions were ripe for national schisms and the invention of protestantism.

Yet, once capitalism had firmly established itself as the dominant mode of production, the Catholic church moved to adapt. It shifted its main source of revenue from indulgences and selling posts, feudal tithes and traditional monastical enterprises onto new foundations: capitalistically renting out real estate and income from investments in stocks and shares. To the degree the Catholic church assisted in neutralising the working class danger, the legal system, the whole capitalist state apparatus, could be relied upon to defend its riches and privileged role in indoctrinating children in Catholic-run schools. That was the deal, the concordat, the social contract, the *quid pro quo*. Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum* marked a turning point. It was pro-capital, pro-private property, but also cynically claimed to be pro-labour. In Europe and Latin America the Catholic church sponsored Christian democrat parties and trade unions, preached social justice and simultaneously became an institution within, of and for capitalism.

John Paul II's criticisms of capitalism resulted in a few annoyed recriminations and brought about a certain friction. However, papal protests, it hardly needs saying, were intended to prop up, not undermine. Fundamentally an international organisation - it has national sections - the Catholic church, once stripped of its diminutive territorial dimension by Italian unification in 1870, has sought to stabilise the capitalist global order by promoting a counterrevolutionary peace. That was the effective content of John Paul II's oft repeated slogan: "Never again war!" In that same spirit, and equally ineffectively, Benedict XV said more or less the same thing during World War I.

Showing its moral worth, in the 1920s and 30s, Pius XI and the Catholic church callously stood aside as Mussolini and then Hitler imposed their fascist dictatorships. These strutting monsters were seen as antidotes to the revolutionary working class. Not that there was political indifference. The

Catholic church actively backed Franco's "crusade for god and Spain": it then formed the "second pillar" of his state.²¹

In the name of the same kind of peace Pius XII adopted a neutral position in World War II. This involved maintaining an unforgivable diplomatic silence. The Nazi extermination campaign was never condemned - though in 1943 Himmler's black tornado hit Rome itself.²² Seeing the French Revolution's emancipation of the Jews as a "tragic mistake", the papacy regarded their disenfranchisement by Nazi Germany and Vichy France as "a positive step forward".²³ Meanwhile, showing where the loyalties of the church lay, Pius XII aggressively and relentlessly issued instructions against Stalin, the Soviet Union and 'official communism'. One of Pius XII's last pronouncements was a call, *Ad apostolorum principis*, which urged Catholics to resist the Maoist regime in China.

During the early 1960s John XXIII did advocate east-west détente - in the age of the nuclear bomb, that helped promote the rapid growth of Catholic-pacifist organisations like Pax Christi. Indeed there was a definite rapprochement with the Soviet bloc. Eg, making amends, bishops in Cuba announced it was no longer the duty of Catholics to pray for counterrevolution. They also came out with belated opposition to the hated US blockade and recommended guarded cooperation with the Castro regime. If one thing concerns the Catholic church above all else, it is self-preservation. Certainly as an institution which is acutely sensitive to history, possesses unequalled international connections and enjoys a truly global popular following, the Catholic church has learnt how to smoothly manage the transition from one political order to another, even one socio-economic order to another. The post-World War II balance of forces appeared to be tilting in the direction of bureaucratic socialism and the Catholic hierarchy adjusted accordingly.

However, by the early 1970s, bureaucratic socialism had lost what dynamism it once possessed. There were unmistakable signs of decomposition for those who could see. Bureaucratic socialism proved to be not a mode of reproduction, but a dead end. Wojtyla had an insider's view of the whole process and wanted nothing to do with accords and compromises with Stalinism. More than that, as John Paul II he swung the whole weight of the Vatican machine behind the revived cold war policies

of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. 'Human rights' was the mantra of both presidents. Naturally then, John Paul II presented himself as a staunch defender of 'human rights' too. A claim which should not be taken at face value.

Though no Nazi sympathiser, John Paul II desperately wanted to draw a sanitising veil over the disgraceful role played by the Catholic church in the 1920s and 30s. Eg, he took the lead in moves towards canonising José María Ecrivá, the pro-fascist reactionary who in 1928 founded Opus Dei.* His own fast track to sainthood is, of course, in part, a posthumous reward for his role in ending the 'evil empire'. That is what he will most be remembered for by the ruling classes.²⁴ And there can be no denying it: John Paul II did play a lead part in defeating bureaucratic socialism in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. As detailed by Carl Bernstein, he negotiated and agreed a "secret alliance" with the Reagan administration and through priests and other agents helped channel \$50 million of CIA funds into the coffers of Solidarność.²⁵

* A highly secretive organisation of Catholic technocrats, it loyally served Francoism. In 1957 Franco appointed eight ministers who were members or sympathisers of Opus Dei - and over the next 10 years that number increased. In October 1969 out of 18 Franco ministers, at least 12 belonged to what satirists of the day dubbed the 'Opus-pocus tendency'.

However, the 1989-91 collapse came about first and foremost due to systemic breakdown. What happened over those tumultuous two years was a partially successful, partially unsuccessful attempt at an *organised* transition to capitalism. With a different leadership the popular movement could have had a decisive impact. But from the beginning there was encouragement, manipulation and direction, by at least a section of the Stalinist elite, which, given the comprehensive failure of bureaucratic socialism - economic, political, moral, artistic, scientific - was eager to join the capitalist club. The hand of the KGB was just as visible in these events as was the hand of the CIA.

Without Wojtyla perhaps things might have taken slightly longer. But not much longer. Even under Stalin himself, a section of the bureaucracy hankered after capitalism, not only as a socio-economic regulator, but as a means to put politically obtained privileges onto a reassuringly solid legal footing as private property. So it is facile to credit John Paul II as being responsible for the 'fall of communism' - any more than it is Ronald

Reagan or Margaret Thatcher. The unviability of these regimes made collapse inevitable.

There were far-fetched rumours flying about at the time to the effect that the election of a Polish pope was due to some German-American plot hatched by cardinal John Krol of Philadelphia and Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security adviser. A report to that effect apparently landed on the desk of Yuri Andropov when he was head of the KGB. The story goes that he then phoned the head of the KGB's Warsaw bureau and angrily demanded to know how the Polish regime allowed Wojtyla to get elected. His minion told him, presumably with cowering deference, to direct his enquiries to the Vatican.²⁶ Wojtyla won only after eight ballots ... which were to begin with dominated by the Italians Giuseppe Siri and Giovanni Benelli. Successful papal candidates require a two-thirds majority (plus one). Wojtyla emerged as the compromise candidate only after Benelli came within nine votes of being elected. He could get no further though. Only then did Wojtyla emerge from behind.

Till John Paul II there had not been a pope from anywhere except Italy for over 450 years. The last non-Italian, the Dutchman Adrian VI, died unmourned in 1523. Italians were preferred for a whole number of reasons: they would understand Rome better than a non-Italian; the papal bureaucracy was in the main Italian; especially while there were papal territories, the nuances of Italian politics were vital for the papacy. So when the white smoke finally rose over the Vatican and it was announced to the world that the archbishop of Kraków had been elected, there was a sudden flurry of excitement in the west. Not because there was a non-Italian pope; rather because the pope was Polish. Here was a god-sent opportunity to shove the cold war towards a decisive tipping point. Poland had long been viewed as a weak link in the Soviet empire by the US state department ... and the rest, as they say, is history.

Power, riches and services rendered

Despite using the pulpit to promote democracy in eastern Europe, it should never be thought that the Catholic church practises what it preaches.

Leonardo Boff - the Brazilian liberation theologian - calls it a “spiritualist absolute monarchy”.²⁷ Indeed the Catholic church was consciously constructed in imitation of the Byzantine empire. Till the 15th century popes claimed, on the basis of a crudely forged imperial document, *Donation of Constantine*, to be the direct source of spiritual and temporal power. The Catholic church remains in many ways unaltered - St Augustine (354-430) still exercises a powerful ideological influence. As recommended by him, it aspires to an alliance between *civitas dei* and *civitas terrena*: in other words the “city of god” and the dominant conservative states. Paul is quoted in scriptural justification: “there is no authority except from god, and those that exist have been instituted by god. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what god has appointed”.²⁸

Prior to Italian unification in 1870, the bishop of Rome was an earthly prince with all that that entailed: not only territories and glorious buildings, paintings and music, but prisons, torture chambers, garrisons of mercenaries, and wars. However, papal authority has always been primarily ideological - in religious terms its unique relationship to the kingdom of heaven. The pope is officially described as the “one vicar of Christ on earth”.²⁹ A notorious vote by Vatican I in 1870 - obviously a low point in terms of papal self-confidence - decided that the pope was deemed to be infallible. An extraordinary doctrine which still stands, though it is rarely, if ever, invoked nowadays.

Like a feudal monarch, popes surround themselves with obsequious advisers. There is no legislature in any meaningful sense. The general council, the college of cardinals and the synod of bishops are not sovereign bodies. The general council is first and foremost the pope’s way of constituting an “extraordinary governance”.³⁰ He sets and controls its agenda and conclusions. As he does with the synod of bishops. The college of cardinals has the most power - it does after all elect the pope. Yet everyone of them is a papal appointee. So an incumbent pope, at the very least, strongly influences who will succeed him. If he lives long enough it amounts to self-perpetuation. The pope also appoints the bishops - paradoxically, because of democracy and the looser ties between church and state, this ancient rule has nowadays, in general, been normalised (feudal

kings, absolute monarchs and fascist, military and Stalinist dictators thought that such appointments should be within their remit). Bishops rule over their own particular diocese. Each is a little pope. Every five years they report back to their master in Rome. Besides these national bishops, the pope has available to him parallel organisations. Eg, the Franciscan, Benedictine and Dominican and other monastical orders, the Jesuits, and mixed bodies such as Opus Dei. As to the Vatican's vast web of trusts and business fronts, they are run by the pope using a wide body of specialists within the papal curia. There can be no doubt, by the way, that the Vatican is fabulously wealthy. In terms of property alone one estimate gives it a net worth of \$316 billion in "visible titles" and around another \$2,623 billion in "hidden" assets.³¹ Of course, no-one really knows. There are no published accounts.

As noted above, the Polish pope received endless ruling class plaudits for his role in bringing bureaucratic socialism in the USSR and eastern Europe to a final end. And though it receives much less attention, he served US imperialism in the same measure in Latin America too. An area of the world that was at the time ripe with revolutionary possibilities. Here, before the John Paul II clampdown, under the rubric of liberation theology, Catholic bishops and priests came to identify with popular struggles. Doctrinally, this outlook found justification in the decisions of the second Vatican council (1962-65).

The longest and perhaps most influential document produced by Vatican II was *Gaudium et spes* issued on December 7 1965. As our extract shows, the tenor is unmistakably critical of the existing social order, even radical:

Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world's citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty

While an immense number of people still lack the absolute necessities of life, some, even in less advanced areas, live in luxury or squander wealth. Extravagance and wretchedness exist side by side. While a few enjoy very great power of choice, the majority are deprived of almost all possibility of acting on their own initiative and responsibility, and often subsist in living and working conditions unworthy of the human person

....

God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples ... The fathers and doctors of the church held this opinion, teaching that men are obliged to come to the relief of the poor and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods. If one is in extreme necessity, he has the right to procure for himself what he needs out of the riches of others ... it is the right of public authority to prevent anyone from abusing his private property to the detriment of the common good.³²

Not surprisingly the extreme right of the Catholic church rejected Vatican II as akin to heresy - the breakaway French archbishop, Marcel Lefèbvre, detected the pernicious influence of 1789.

John Paul II stayed true to Vatican II's rapprochement with other Christian denominations and worked hard to improve relations with Judaism and Islam. For example, during his March 2000 visit to Israel-Palestine he publicly apologised for the Catholic church's vile Judeophobia and proceeded to bless Israel. An act greeted by many Israelis as final church recognition of their state. Needless to say, liberation theology proved to be another matter. As soon as he was ensconced on the papal throne, John Paul II brought to bear his newly acquired powers in order to rid himself of troublesome liberation priests and bring the church in Latin America back into the fold of humble obedience.

Though a rigid, top-down autocracy, any organisation that boasts a billion-plus adherents must contain cadre who are to one degree or another influenced and shaped from below. That was certainly the case in 1960s Latin America. The faithful were organically moving: ie, neither to plan nor instruction. They were shifting, sneaking, seeping away from the conservative priests and their remote, desultory and saint-obsessed services. The same masses encouraged, steered and gave strength to younger, more progressive priests. By contrast their churches were packed. Carried along by what were deep running currents, a layer of Catholic thinkers, most notably amongst the Jesuit intellectual elite, created what soon came to be known as liberation theology (there was a parallel, though - given its much smaller congregations - more limited, movement amongst protestants in Latin America - it included in its ranks theologians such as Emilio Castro, Julio de Santa Ana, Rubem Alves and José Míguez Bonino).

The *practical* premise of liberation theology was that securing a tolerable living for people here on earth should not be counterposed to getting souls into heaven. Advocates put forward “three levels of liberation”: firstly, from unjust social situations; secondly, personal transformation; thirdly, liberation from sin. Put another way, liberation theology began as an attempt to carry through a cultural revolution within the Byzantine structural framework of the Catholic church.

Its influence rapidly spread. Liberation priests were often *more* popular and *more* attuned to Latin America’s masses than the tame ‘official communists’. These men lived alongside their parishioners. They felt for them. They gained insights through them. They spoke on their behalf. Then there was the green light seemingly given to them by Vatican II.

Liberation priests originally trained in European seminaries under ‘radical’ theologians who were influenced by the ideas of Edward Schillebeeckx, Hans Küng and their like. Yet this “higher intellectual stratum” found that what they had been taught in Europe did not fit the realities of a Latin America crippled by poverty and crushed under oligarchical cliques and military dictatorships. Leonardo Boff, Hugo Assmann, Frank Hinkelammert, Jon Sobrino, Gustavo Gutiérrez and others came to the conclusion that profound social conflict palpably existed and that it was impossible not to be partisan. They took the side of “the lower intellectual stratum” against the existing order and the “higher” ideologies supporting it. They began to reinterpret their Christian faith through the prism of the poor and their suffering. But there seemed to be no need for open dispute or schism. Quite the reverse.

Paul VI’s March 1967 encyclical *Populorum progressio*, in fact, provided added encouragement for them. It dared bring into question the sacred rights of private property:

As St Ambrose put it, ‘You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his. You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich ...’ These words indicate that the right to private property is not absolute and unconditional

This unbridled liberalism paves the way for a particular type of tyranny, rightly condemned by our predecessor Pius XI, for it results in the ‘international imperialism of money’.

Such improper manipulations of economic forces can never be condemned enough; let it be said once again that economics is supposed to be in the service of man. But if it is true that a type of capitalism, as it is commonly called, has given rise to hardships, unjust practices, and fratricidal conflicts that persist to this day, it would be a mistake to attribute these evils to the rise of industrialisation itself, for they really derive from the pernicious economic concepts that grew up along with it.³³

Despite being couched in moderate language and warning against revolution, *Populorum progressio* amounted to a stinging attack on the profoundly unequal international order. The *Wall Street Journal* branded it “warmed over Marxism”.³⁴

Eighteen Latin American bishops were then rallied to agree a joint statement - a statement which on balance went much further than Paul VI’s social clichés - while, of course, quoting him abundantly. The world was not only spinning but moving forward politically. The holy bureaucrats therefore took a sympathetic view of revolution and this found theological expression. Speaking during Vatican II, one bishop announced that: “Authentic socialism is Christianity lived to the full, in basic equality and with a fair distribution of goods.”³⁵ An excitement of blessed socialistic statements and holy manifestos followed. Righteous thunderbolts rained down on the capitalist order. There followed pointed questions about the role of the church. Should it serve as an opiate? Should priests give up their privileges and live like ordinary people? A line of thinking which invited communistic answers.

Genuine radicals were always a minority. But revolution was in the air. It emboldened, intoxicated. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff write in their book, *Introducing liberation theology* (1986), of “a great stirring for change among the popular sections of society, a truly pre-revolutionary atmosphere”.³⁶ This elemental force taking hold below - ever growing, ever widening, sweeping everything forward - found mediated expression

in the watershed general conference of the episcopate of Latin America, which met in Medellín, Colombia, in August 1968.

The bishops issued a memorable final declaration. Institutionalised violence was denounced as a “situation of sin” and, after admitting that a “deafening cry pours from the throats of millions of men, asking their pastors for a liberation”, it called for far-reaching and immediate social change.³⁷ Revolutionaries were described in not unfavourable terms and the bishops committed the church to share the condition of the poor. However, the Medellín document was deliberately vague on a whole number of areas. The terminologies of development and liberation blurred and it was assumed that progress would come about through individual conversion and a change of heart by the rich and powerful.

Leftwing priests eagerly seized upon Medellín to sanction “a whole new pastoral approach”.³⁸ They went to the people and, especially in Brazil, set up Christian base communities (CEBs) - ie, unofficial churches - in villages and shanty towns. Priests embraced voluntary poverty because of its ‘redemptive value’ - something akin to a workers’ representative living on an average skilled worker’s wage. Capitalism was denounced as godless, an accumulation of sin which produces poverty, sickness, hunger and death. The ‘third way’ Christian democrats were derided. Insisting on “praxis”, a few priests actually threw in their lot with leftist guerrilla groups - most famously Camilo Torres in Colombia. National chaplain of the university student movement, he had a long and proud record of working tirelessly to organise impoverished peasants. Torres died in combat in February 1966, a member of the Army of National Liberation. Meanwhile in Chile, left-moving Christians founded the United Popular Action Movement - that or they joined the Movement of the Revolutionary Left or the Socialist Party. In Brazil and El Salvador, in Argentina and Peru, there is a similar picture ... and over the years rightwing death squads killed hundreds of liberation priests and nuns.

Liberation theologians taught the *Bible* in terms that were meant to give the masses self-respect and a sense of optimism. Genesis and the story of Adam and Eve are used to initiate didactic discussions on whether or not god intended to produce a world divided between great landowners and poor peasants. No, god created men and women - not classes and vast

inequalities in wealth. Exodus is read as god's determination to liberate the common people. This is a god who knows the suffering of the oppressed and listens to their prayers. Jesus came to proclaim the liberty of captives and announce the cancellation of debt: "a year of favour from the lord".³⁹ Jesus lives amongst the poor, lives the life of the poor and preaches the kingdom of the poor. His message is not for the "poor in spirit" - a strange phrase dear to the heart of the official church - but the living, breathing, teeming masses. He wants to feed the hungry and house the homeless. Jesus is killed because he is a subversive. He doubts, he fears. Nothing is preordained. He rises from a real death and in that dramatic way shows that his struggle had not been in vain. Emphasis is placed not on faith in the doctrines of the church; rather action. The church - its vestments, orders, customs, cathedrals - are not important in and of themselves. They should be nothing more than means to an end. The early congregation described in the Acts sets the example to aspire to. Share goods in common, distribute wealth to the poor. In terms of society that means going beyond private ownership of the means of production and to a "world where the fruits of work will belong to everyone".⁴⁰

Sometimes Marx is painted as a prophet along the lines Moses, Amos or Jeremiah in the *Old Testament*. José Porfirio Miranda, a former Jesuit, finds "gospel roots" in Marx's thought and regards Marx as the "conscious continuation of early Christianity".⁴¹ But, as Phillip Berryman - an ex-priest and American leftwing Catholic - notes, there are "few" references to Marx and Marxists in the published works of liberation theologians.⁴² In part that was due to worries about Vatican retribution. In part it was simply the fact that their main point of reference was the *Bible*.

That does not mean Marxism has not been influential. Latin America has a long and deep Marxist tradition. Terms such as 'surplus value', 'exploitation' and 'commodity fetishism' form part of the common language used by liberation theologians. Not that the Soviet Union and its Marxism-Leninism served as their inspiration. Nor particularly did China, North Korea or Vietnam. Cuba was another matter. While there was a certain muddled discomfort about its lack of 'bourgeois' freedoms, there was glowing praise for its health service, provision of free education,

egalitarianism, etc. Nicaragua generated even higher hopes. While the Catholic hierarchy was against the Sandinistas, many Latin American Catholics, including in Nicaragua itself, of course, supported the anti-Somoza revolution. There were four priest-ministers in the first Sandinista government. But, given the impoverished reality and therefore the severe material limitations of both Cuba and Nicaragua, and their own lack of scientific understanding, liberation theologians describe the society they aspire to as a “utopia”.⁴³ In other words, an unachievable final goal. A heaven. A nowhere.

Obviously, their whole approach is an eclectic hodgepodge. Privilege and power is denounced as sinful. Economic dependence and neo-colonialism are major themes, as is the duty of Christianity to liberate humanity. The *Bible* is trawled for suitably radical quotes, parallels and approaches. But what is inconvenient is either ignored or explained away. So Marxist phrases and categories mix with selected *Bible* stories.

Liberation theologians were in their own way engaged in a god-building project. In early 20th century Russia, leftwingers such as Anatoly Lunarcharsky, Maxim Gorky and Alexander Bogdanov tried to do something similar. Rejecting materialism in the name of the latest, positivist, philosophy, they thought that religion was a socially necessary construct. The common people could not understand the world and themselves except through faith, myths and religious symbols - such was their culture. Therefore popular religion should be remade so as to serve the cause of socialism. Through guiding, re-engineering, pandering to existing consciousness, humanity would that way supposedly take into itself aspects of the divine. In the words of Gorky’s novel, *Confession*, the “unified and true path to common flowing” would then be revealed, along with the “mighty” common work - “the worldwide building of god!”⁴⁴ Of course, whereas the Russian god-builders imported religion and idealism into Marxism, the liberation theologians imported Marxism into Christianity. The first is something to be regretted and opposed, the second is something to be welcomed and encouraged.

As a historic reference, Jesuit liberation theologians landmarked their order’s opposition to rapacious exploitation in pre-independence South America. In the 17th century Jesuit missionaries founded, Christian-native

settlements called ‘reductions’. Coordinated by the local Jesuit authorities, they could muster a military force of around 12,000 men and proved strong enough to protect the Guarani Amerindians from Portuguese and Spanish paulistas (the name given to the slave traders based in Sao Paulo). At its height the population of this Jesuit state is thought to have been around 200,000-300,000 (amongst them were some 12,000 black slaves and between 150 and 300 Jesuits). The organisational principles were first laid down by father Diego de Torres. Significantly he began his career as a missionary in Peru, where the Inca empire still lingered, if only in the memory. The Inca system of ‘monarchical communism’ was copied in some of its essentials.**

** Moved deep into the jungle interior of Paraguay, the Jesuit state was difficult to control as far as the Portuguese and Spanish colonial authorities of the day were concerned. It was bordered on one side by the Andes and on the other by the rapids of the rivers Parana, La Plata and Uruguay. The missionaries seem to have had plans for a more extensive state with access to the Atlantic - the growth of the colonies scuppered those ambitions. In 1608, the Italian fathers Simon Maceta and Joseph Cataladino helped persuade the Spanish crown to grant the reductions semi-autonomous status; this excused them from the payment of tithes to the local bishop (an arrangement renewed in 1631, 1633 and 1647). Authorisation was also given to arm the Amerindians; an exemption from the absolute ban imposed upon them in other Spanish colonial realms.

There was nothing democratic about Jesuit socialism, however. Each local settlement, or reduction, was run by two Jesuit fathers, the elder being the confessor who devoted himself primarily to religious functions, while the younger acted as his assistant and directed economic matters. Together they possessed absolute power. Each reduction was divided into two parts: *tupambé* (god’s land, which was farmed collectively) and *abambé* (individual plots, which were allotted to each married man). Seeds and tools were the property of the reduction. Life was strictly regimented. Prayers were compulsory. So too was labour in the fields. The means of subsistence were distributed according to a rationing system decided by the Jesuits. There was no money. Shirkers faced punishment. The Jesuits constantly complained about lack of work done on common land. To this day explained as being due to the “indolence and fickleness of a primitive people” (Catholic Encyclopedia).

The whole experiment came to a shuddering end in 1767-68, when the Jesuits were ordered out of Paraguay as part of a general campaign by the Spanish crown against them. In 1773, the Society of Jesus was abolished by command of pope Clement XIV. The fall of the Jesuits was greatly hastened by widespread rumours of the enormous riches they were supposed to be accumulating in Paraguay. There was talk of gold and silver mines and of fabulous revenue from foreign trade. All proved entirely illusory. Interestingly, Enlightenment thinkers were full of praise for the Jesuit state in Paraguay, though the Jesuit order was considered one of their greatest enemies.

From its inception, Jesuits took the lead in developing liberation theology. Essentially what the best of them produced was a utopian socialism. So it ought to be stressed that liberation priests premise their theology on the *poor*, not the proletariat. Their programme - to the extent that such a diverse movement can be said to have one - envisages a division of the *latifundia*

and a return and entrenchment of small-scale peasant agriculture. Hardly a Marxist perspective. In general Marxists oppose the break-up of big farms into tiny units and instead look towards them being fully socialised and run using the most advanced methods. By the same measure, peasants should be encouraged to form cooperatives, but only *temporary* support should be given to individual peasant enterprises. Put another way, Marxists want peasants to become proletarians. Nevertheless, it would surely be churlish and self-defeating for Marxists to turn one's back on liberation priests. Take them at their word when they talk of ending poverty and achieving equality. Point out programmatic shortcomings, their umbilical ties with the counterrevolutionary church hierarchy, their political errors, etc. However, the main aim for Marxists must always be strengthening the struggle for democracy and socialism. That necessarily involves not just Marxists, but millions upon millions of people, including, of course, devout Christians, with all their hopes, prejudices and illusions.

And in the 1980s there came into existence a relatively strong Catholic left in the US too. Once again Jesuits were at the forefront. The Reagan administration was determined to roll back the forces of revolution in Latin America. This meant both manoeuvring against liberation theology and sponsoring rightwing terrorism. The main target of the contras was, of course, the common people and organised leftwing activists. However, they also killed many Catholics - in El Salvador most notoriously archbishop Oscar Romero and four female American missionaries. Penny Lernoux, a leftwing writer on El Salvador, says Romero was much admired in the US "because of his work on behalf of the poor and his support for democracy". His assassination shocked the US bishops, who took up Romero's "call for an end to US military aid to the Salvadoran junta". The subsequent rape and murder of three American nuns and a lay worker by Salvadoran soldiers "sharply increased US Catholic opposition, particularly after the incoming Reagan administration tried to dismiss the killing as an accident". Secretary of state Alexander Haig blunderingly maintained that the women were killed - presumably after being raped - driving through a roadblock. The "more Haig and other officials tried to whitewash the junta", the angrier grew US public reaction, particularly among Catholics.⁴⁵

Ratzinger letter

So Jesuits played a prominent role in both Latin American politics and in the US peace movement and pro-Cuba and pro-Sandinista campaigns. With encouragement coming from the Reagan administration, John Paul II determined to impose his authority. There followed a barrage of homilies, scholarly articles and pastoral letters. The most important text in the Vatican's ideological counteroffensive was written by Joseph Ratzinger - Benedict XVI - then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (known between 1542 and 1908 as the Universal Inquisition). There was another author, archbishop Alberto Bovone, but from the first it was commonly called the 'Ratzinger letter'. The 'Instruction on certain aspects of the "theology of liberation"' was issued in August 1984 after being approved by John Paul II. Incidentally, Ratzinger had been a progressive theologian and played an active role in the preparations for Vatican II. Evidently he had a change of heart. By the 1980s he was a diehard conservative and dedicated to reasserting central control and discipline.

Ratzinger's 10,000-word document is a devious work of Catholic theology. The first half consists of a discussion of liberation, church authority and the *Bible*. The second half is aimed squarely at Marxism. As Berryman readily appreciates, he does not "simply condemn" liberation theology. Unlike most rightwing critics Ratzinger is not so crude. He denies wanting to excuse those who maintain an attitude of "neutrality and indifference" in the face of the "tragic and pressing problems of human misery and injustice". Poverty is an offence to human dignity. It is also unnecessary, given the world's abundant resources and the advance of science and technology. Nor does he hold back in condemning waste, the arms industry and the "shocking inequality between the rich and poor - whether between rich and poor countries, or between social classes in a single nation". That situation can "no longer be tolerated". Though tolerating poverty is something the \$3 trillion-worth Catholic church has, of course, happily done. Ratzinger, laughably, stresses the church's claim to be on the side of the poor. They have awakened to consciousness in part because of the "leaven of the gospel". Indeed Ratzinger praises those "numerous Christians" who become involved in the struggle for "justice,

freedom and human dignity” because of their love for their “disinherited, oppressed and persecuted brothers and sisters”.

Ratzinger opens his letter with weasel words: “The gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of freedom and a force for liberation.” What Ratzinger objects to is “certain forms” of liberation theology. He therefore writes of “theologies of liberation” in the plural. In other words there is not one liberation theology; rather there are many ... and some are acceptable, while others - those which “uncritically” borrow from “various currents of Marxist thought” - are described as “deviations” or at “risk of deviation”.⁴⁶

To begin with, most liberation theologians refused to see themselves as the target of Ratzinger’s letter. Foolishly some wrote articles welcoming it. Turkeys voting for Christmas. He named no names. He wrote in vague terms. So perhaps the “deviations” Ratzinger was referring to were other, minor, figures, carried away with their own rhetoric. But Ratzinger’s congregation duly summoned Gutiérrez and Boff to Rome. They were central personalities in liberation theology. Clearly the Vatican was targeting major, not minor figures.

Ratzinger’s argument falls back onto traditional sophistry: liberation is first and foremost freedom from “sin” and from slavery to “the law and to the flesh”, which is the “mark of the condition of sinful mankind”. Consequently he calls for freedom from many “different kinds of slavery” in the cultural, economic, social and political spheres, all of which “derive ultimately from sin”. Hence people should not resort to combative political organisation, violence and revolution: “God, and not man, has the power to change the situations of suffering.” Ratzinger rightly points out that the *Bible* did not demand the freeing of slaves. That institution is simply taken for granted by the early church, as is wage-slavery today. So he warns against locating “evil principally or uniquely” in bad social, political or economic “structures” and replacing them with different economic and socio-political structures. Admittedly, some structures which “are evil and which cause evil” have to be changed. But, whether they are “good or bad”, structures are the “result of man’s actions and so are consequences more than causes”.

Ratzinger rounds on those who put a one-sided emphasis on “liberation from servitude of an earthly and temporal kind”. Those who “seem to put

liberation from sin in second place”. Clearly, the “liberation” Ratzinger has in mind is other-worldly. Earthly structures are almost dismissed as irrelevant: certainly they are not primary, because they are man-made. Referring to Jeremiah,⁴⁷ he writes: “The root of evil” lies in “free and responsible persons who have to be converted by the grace of Jesus Christ in order to live and act as new creatures in the love of neighbour and in the effective search for justice, self-control and the exercise of virtue”. In other words, the rich and powerful must be won to see the error of their ways through Christian conversion. Therefore to “demand first of all a radical revolution in social relations” and then to “criticise the search for personal perfection” is to set out on a road that leads to the “denial of the meaning of the person and his transcendence”. Supposedly, that destroys ethics and its “foundation, which is the absolute character of the distinction between good and evil”.⁴⁸

Ratzinger repeatedly accuses liberation priests of “reductionism”. They are told off for disregarding the basic elements of Christianity, of reducing sin to social structures, of making the struggle for liberation the essence of salvation. The *Bible*, argues Ratzinger, cannot be equated with purely partisan praxis. The kingdom of god cannot be reduced to earthly liberation and the class struggle. Those who claim to have a “novel interpretation” of both the “content of faith and of native existence” seriously depart from the faith of the church and, in fact, this actually “constitutes a practical negation”.

In the immediate aftermath of Ratzinger’s letter, the only serious attempt at an answer came from Juan Luis Segundo. He wrote a short book, *Theology and the church: a response to cardinal Ratzinger and a warning to the whole church*. He insists that there are not two histories - one of humanity and its struggle, and another history of redemption and sacredness. For him there is only one history; it is human history and the history of salvation. People are saved by what others do. Not their religious intentions. Segundo liberally quoted Paul VI and Vatican II. If he and his generation of liberation theologians are wrong, then so was Paul VI and Vatican II. The reader should note that it was practically unheard of for a Latin American theologian to engage in a head-to-head polemic with a leading Vatican figure. As Berryman innocently admits, both sides can find

support in official church pronouncements. But then that is the nature of religion. It is infinitely flexible.

The second half of Ratzinger's letter is concerned with attacking Marx and Marxism. Ratzinger is determined to castigate Marx and Marxism and associate an unnamed, unorthodox kind of liberation theology with it. Marxism has to be subjected to a "careful epistemological critique" and, as this "preliminary critical study is missing from more than one 'theology of liberation'", *ipso facto* it stands condemned. Indeed Ratzinger is more concerned with questioning the whole approach of Marxism, rather than discussing its impact on liberation theology. Reality is complex, he says, while the outlook of Marxism is predetermined. Though it claims to be scientific, it is not. Marx is dismissed as setting up a global vision that reduces all complexity to a predetermined system: this is what "theologians of liberation" borrow from Marxist authors.

The idea that Marxism consists of ready-made answers is, of course, simply untrue, at least in terms of authentic Marxism. Darwin remarked in the *Origin of the species* that "great is the power of steady misrepresentation" - a subject he knew a deal about.⁴⁹ Like Darwinism, Marxism too has been subject to "steady misrepresentation" - only far more so. Yes, Marxism has the answer for many questions. However, there are far more questions within Marxism than there are answers. Marxism certainly recognises and seeks to theoretically grasp multiple levels of determination, the role of contingency, the multidirectional movement of societies, their interaction, etc. In fact making such a charge is itself to reduce the complexity of Marxism down to a predetermined philosophical and ideological assumption. There is nothing "careful" about it. Ratzinger makes a whole string of equally unfounded claims about Marxism: there is no truth except through "partisan praxis" and the class struggle; society is founded on violence, so the only recourse is the "counterviolence of the revolution"; ethics is denied by the "perspective of the class struggle". Marxism is, in fact, not closed, but open-ended. Marxism is scientific not in the positivist, very English sense, which elevates and almost worships physics as an ideal: rather in the wider sense that it is rational and testable. Many scientists, quips Steven Rose, suffer from 'physics envy'. "Yet," he argues, "there is nothing inevitable" about the hierarchical view which

privileges physics, a science which deals with “relatively simple, reproducible phenomena which can be measured with exquisite precision and finds it hard to deal with complexity”.⁵⁰

Marxism is the science of humanity and human liberation. As such, Marxism must grapple with social forms and laws, classes and self-willed individuals rather than atoms, space and galaxies, which are in comparison with society hugely simple and easy to predict. Marxism certainly does not start with ready-made answers. Yes, the corpus of Marxism, not least as represented by the Marx-Engels collected works, contains many errors. What grand theoretico-political project does not? But to use these little puddles to drown the whole project in half-baked prejudices and so-called common-sensical dismissals, instead of assessing the errors in relationship to the mountainous achievements, is crass anti-intellectualism. So Marx predicted an economic crisis and a revolutionary wave in 1857 and it did not happen. But we should assess such predictions against his commitment to the working class and universal human freedom, his labour theory of value and his unequalled analysis of the workings of the capitalist system. As a result of that *engaged* approach and tireless theoretical work done by Marx and Engels, we start today with a rich, unmatched, body of thought, which because it is constantly added to, must reinforce, modify or even disprove various theories. Unlike the tardy Catholic church, Marxism is ready to recognise and embrace the many new truths - relative and absolute - revealed by all manner of scientists, academics and eminent thinkers.

We say that truth, especially when it comes to society, is *deepened* through “partisan praxis”. Eg, who would know more about daily life in a Latin American shanty town? Ratzinger sitting behind his big desk in Rome or a committed liberation priest actually living, organising and working in a barrio? One does not have to be a genius to suggest that it is most likely to be the latter rather than the former.

What of violence? Marxists do not fetishise any one particular form of struggle. Nothing is in principle ruled out. However, because we have the interests of the working class and the mass of humanity as our central and constant concern, we always prefer the least painful, least violent, least destructive methods. In general those who suffer in strikes, revolts and civil wars are the working class and the poor. The rich, the bureaucracy, the army

top brass always have the money and connections needed to extricate themselves from sticky situations. Given the choice, Marxists therefore prefer peaceful revolution to violent revolution. Our considered slogan is: 'Peacefully if we can, violently if we must'. It is the aloof forces in command of the capitalist state that habitually, easily and almost pleasurably reach for the methods of blood and iron. So the idea that Marxism denies ethics because of the "perspective of the class struggle" would be laughable, if it did not come with such a sinister history.

Ratzinger imagines that he had an ace: the "core" of Marxism is atheism and this threatens faith and leads to totalitarianism. This is not a case of deviations *from* Marxism: totalitarianism, he says, comes from those who stay true to Marxism and doctrines such as the class struggle, which is "not compatible with the Christian conception of humanity and society". With Marxism, "we are facing ... a real system, even if some hesitate to follow the logic to its conclusion". In other words those who "uncritically" borrow from Marxism are in danger of going down the road that led to Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot. Their regimes came to power promising liberation. Then they denied basic freedoms and imposed servitude. Those who adopt Marxist categories must equate redemption with the class struggle and reject the command to love one's enemies.

Liberation theology takes the mystery out of the church: it would divide the congregation into two categories. The church unites all. Rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed - all should share the same eucharist. Liberation priests are charged with challenging the "sacramental and hierarchical structure" of the church, which was "willed by the lord himself". They view bishops, "especially the Roman magisterium", as "objective representatives of the ruling class" and hold that church leaders should instead "take their origins from the people".

Jesus should not be approached politically. Nor historically. Ratzinger rightly counterpoises "faith" and "rationality" and, of course, comes down on the wrong side. In closing, Ratzinger emphasises the church's opposition to greed, military dictatorship and those who would keep the poor in misery. The church is committed to human rights, but this battle cannot be fought through the class struggle. The systematic and deliberate recourse to "blind violence", no matter from which side it comes, is condemned. To put one's trust in violent means in the hope of restoring justice is to become the

victim of fatal illusion: “violence begets violence and degrades man”. Conveniently, that turns a blind eye to the fact that *every* state is founded on violence. However, he asserts that it is only by making an “appeal to the moral potential of the person and to the constant need for interior conversion” that social change will be beneficial. Practically, that amounts to a church instruction for those on the receiving end of oppression to meekly pray for the salvation of their oppressors.

Who and what Ratzinger served by issuing his letter is quite clear. Given this, it is amazing how unradical the liberation theologians actually were. Segundo bemoans how guerrilla warfare destroys the “ecology” of society. Many liberation priests sought to follow in the footsteps of Gandhi, King and Mandela, not Robespierre, Marx and Lenin. They therefore effectively mislead the masses in Latin America by preaching non-violence as a *principle*. Nor do the liberation priests call for rebellion against the autocratic structures of the church.

The Swiss theologian, Hans Küng, offered muted criticism. He correctly states that Jesus never established a church. That came with his followers long after his death. Generation after generation, they then made and remade the Catholic church, so that “Every age has its own image of the church, arising out of a particular historical situation”. The present forms of the Catholic church are therefore seen as man-made. Not god-made. What is made by man can be remade by man. Küng saw no reason why women should not serve as priests and why the doctrine of papal infallibility should not be dropped. In this context he calls for “a voluntary abandonment of spiritual power”.⁵¹ The Vatican banned Küng as a teacher in Catholic educational institutions.

However, Segundo, a leading Latin American liberation theologian, explicitly accepts the notion of a “magisterium”, a term denoting the domain of faith and the authority vested in the pope by heaven. He merely seeks to uphold the greater authority of Vatican II compared with cardinal Ratzinger. A supine, flimsy and doomed argument. The liberation theologian that seems to be closest to Küng has been Leonardo Boff in his book *Church: charisma and power*. He does not deny the need for authority and structure. Rather he questions how structures are used from the point of view of the gospels and the poor. With good reason he suggests that there is

a parallel between the way John Paul II's Vatican operated and Stalin's Kremlin. An uncomfortable truth for both 'official Catholics' and the remnants of 'official communism'.

The Vatican and its supporters did not confine themselves to literary attacks. The hierarchy used organisational methods too. John Paul II suspended the Jesuit constitution in October 1981 and appointed Joseph Pittau, a safe conservative, as temporary superior general. The papal visit to Nicaragua in March 1983 was a defining moment. John Paul II denounced those who wanted a "people's church" and had adopted "unacceptable ideological commitments". In September 1983 a Jesuit congregation was finally held which elected Peter-Hans Kolvenbach on the first ballot. He proceeded to dismiss Nicaragua's Fernando Cardenal when he refused to resign his position as minister of education. By the end of the 1980s the Nicaraguan revolution had been extinguished - a setback for the popular movement in Latin America that lasted for a generation.

Spurred on by the Ratzinger letter, Latin American bishops cracked down. The *Sodalitium vitae* conference in Lima in 1985 decided to reassert episcopal control over pastoral training. Other similar moves followed. The Secretariats of Justice and Peace, formed after Medellín, and a prized institutional possession in the hands of the liberation theologians, were closed or had conservative loyalists imposed on them. Scott Mainwaring, an author sympathetic to liberation theology, lamented that John Paul II "orphaned" the progressive church.⁵² Awkward bishops in Brazil were given their marching orders. Nine were replaced. Nor did John Paul II's appointees hesitate to exercise their prerogatives. Leonardo Boff, then a Franciscan, was officially ordered to observe a prolonged silence. Slavishly he obeyed. In Peru bishops dismantled liberationist social centres. These sorts of measures were reproduced across Latin America.

As conservative Catholics gleefully point out, in using ecclesiastical power in this manner, John Paul II was able to exploit "one of the inherent weaknesses of liberation theology". Adherents were determined to "remain inside the church", even if they had "strong and frequent disagreements with its teachings".⁵³ To remain part of the church is to remain subordinated to its autocratic command structure. Liberationists were successful when they were able to use persuasion - in truth popular

intimidation - to bend the bishops' conferences to their agenda. That was when they had the stormforce winds of revolution driving them forward. Once that dissipated, the bishops returned to type. That left the liberation theologians with a stark choice. Break with the church and lose established institutional links with their congregations; that or submission. They chose submission. Under these conditions the conservatives seized the CEBs and trounced the liberationists across the board. Trapped in the undemocratic structures of the church, both the theory and practice of liberation theology has undergone a steady decay - though advocates vehemently deny it. Marxism and dependency theory is now doubted or viewed sceptically. Their enthusiasm for socialism also wanes. By the same measure, their theological interest in popular religion, spirituality and soup-kitchen charity work waxes.

Liberation priests have largely lost their mass base. Their intellectual and moral influence has become much reduced too. In the 1990s evangelical protestants began to seriously eat into the Catholic church's following in Latin America. They stand for self-transformation, not social transformation. These cults offer hope in this world. Like John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, they praise the wealthy, the successful and hold them up as shining examples of those rewarded by god. The poor are urged to "gain all you can" and thereby enrich themselves ... all the better to "give all you can" to charity.

However, despite the headlong retreat of liberation theology, a revival is quite conceivable. Latin America has been ravaged by neoliberalism. The old social safety nets have been removed, state industries privatised, and unemployment and poverty allowed to soar. And things are on the move again - that might bring forth the rebirth of liberation theology ... on the other hand, it might bring about what is really required - mass workers' parties solidly based on Marxism.

America and Europe

Benedict XVI's highly controversial Regensburg speech on September 12 2006 marked a reassertion of a specifically Catholic outlook, agenda and claim to universality. His predecessor strove to cement a united front of

religious reactionaries. The hand of friendship had been held out not only to the orthodox and protestant traditions within Christianity, but conservative Jews and Muslims too. John Paul II had begged forgiveness for the Catholic church's long and grisly record of anti-Semitism and famously kissed the *Koran*. Not Benedict XVI.

Following his Regensburg speech, he insisted that he was "deeply sorry" for giving offence to hypersensitive Muslim feelings. Yet there can be no doubt whatsoever that the words he used were chosen with consummate care. A church intellectual, he was addressing the academic hierarchy. His Regensburg speech would have been months in the making, involving consultation with close colleagues and countless redraftings.

"Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new and you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." Not the words of Benedict XVI himself. As we all know now, they come from the Byzantine emperor, Manuel II Paleologos. Purportedly, there had been a "dialogue" between the "erudite" emperor and an "educated Persian" held at the Byzantine army's winter barracks near Ankara perhaps in the year 1391.

But the pope did not take hold of this jaundiced, and quite frankly thoroughly ignorant, statement, in order to put the record straight. The Byzantine empire was in terminal decline and desperately clung to a religious pacifism which promised salvation from the westward-expanding Ottoman Turks. When Manuel II committed his "dialogue" to paper, Constantinople was subject to what was to be an eight-year, if somewhat lacklustre, siege (1394-1402). Of course, the Ottomans were not religious fanatics. Adding to their power, exploitable assets and gaining a strategic gateway to Europe is what primarily motivated sultan Bayezit. Not that he was above using religion or forcible conversion. One of Manuel II's criticisms. Eg, the Ottomans' elite military corps, the Janissaries, came from abducted Christian children. They were trained to be highly disciplined, tough and ruthless shock troops.

Interestingly, temporary salvation for Byzantium came not from the Christian west. Economically what remained of the Roman empire had effectively been reduced to a Venetian dependency. Strange though it may seem, it was the Mongol leader, Tamerlane, who came to the rescue. He demanded that the Ottoman sultan raise the siege and restore Manuel's

lands to him. Tamerlaine had an eye on the decrepit Byzantine empire himself. In July 1402 the armies of Tamerlaine and Bayezit fought a huge battle at Angora. The Ottomans were routed. Bayezit was captured. Tamerlaine took a cruel delight in keeping him caged like a wild animal and using him as a footstool. Bayezit's Serbian wife, Despina, was humiliatingly forced to serve at Tamerlaine's table stark naked. After eight months of such treatment, Bayezit had a stroke and mercifully died a few days later in March 1403.

Manuel II gleefully tore up the surrender agreement he had been preparing. However, within 50 years, the Ottomans had recovered their power in Anatolia and resumed the siege Bayezit had begun in 1394. Mehmet II (1432-81) finally breached the walls of Constantinople and seized the city in 1453.⁵⁴

As we shall show in the next chapter, under Mohammed the Muslim community, the umma, certainly fought a string of battles, actually little more than skirmishes, which eventually culminated in the capture of Mecca in 630. While that military-political-religious campaign saw the genocidal massacre of a couple of recalcitrant Jewish tribes, there was at the time no forcible conversion (at least of peoples of the book). During the first four caliphates, to be a Muslim was to be privileged. It was to be a conqueror. It was to share in fabulous booty. It was to participate in a generous social security system. Converts saw the light not because of a sword held at their throats: rather because of the rewards Islam offered. The *Koran* says: "No compulsion is there in religion."⁵⁵ A statement Benedict XVI contemptuously dismissed as coming from "the early period, when Mohammed was still powerless and under threat".⁵⁶

True, with Umar II (c682-720) things radically altered - he was the first caliph to encourage conversion to Islam (thereby, perhaps, reducing his empire's revenue and increasing outlays). Nevertheless, from Muslim Spain to Muslim Egypt, and from Muslim Turkey to Muslim India, there coexisted large religious minorities: Christian, Jewish and Hindu.

No such toleration can be boasted by medieval Christendom. Put aside the butchery perpetrated by the crusades - Jews were periodically expelled from Christian realms or put to the inquisition's flames unless they converted. So were Muslims and minority Christian sects. Over the course

of its long, foul, bestial history, the Catholic church has initiated or justified *internal* killings on a scale which rivals Hitler, Stalin, Mao, etc. So much for violence being against the nature of god.

Benedict XVI was more than aware of all this. Ditto the likelihood of what his uncritical Manuel II Paleologos quotations would unleash. Passages mocking Mohammed were bound to trigger angry protests. If Salman Rushdie's *Satanic verses* and 12 very mixed Danish cartoons were the cause of Muslim outrage, what would a barbed speech by the vicar of Rome do? His apologies were unconvincing. He surely knew exactly what he was doing.

Benedict XVI was out to denigrate Islam. Not on the trite basis of forcible conversion and spreading Mohammed's faith by violence. The main thrust of the pope's argument is that Christianity unites faith and reason (*logos*). By contrast Islam supposedly holds that god is transcendent and therefore beyond reason. Benedict XVI cited Ibn Hazm (994-1064) - a fundamentalist Islamic theologian, legalist and in latter life a recluse - to the effect that Allah "is not bound even by his own word", and that nothing would "oblige him to reveal the truth to us". That, if it was his will, "we would even have to practise idolatry".

Yet the undisputable fact is that Ibn Hazm is no more representative of Islam as a whole than Martin Luther is representative of Christianity as a whole. Nonetheless, using the conservative literalism of Ibn Hazm, the pope rashly claimed that in contrast Catholicism marries the best of Greek philosophy with the divine truths revealed in both testaments of the *Bible*. As proof he laughably cited the *dreams* of the apostle Paul. In the *New Testament* the founder of Christianity is called upon to travel to Macedonia. A vision interpreted by Benedict XVI as prefiguring "the intrinsic necessity of a rapprochement between biblical faith and Greek inquiry".⁵⁷

Benedict XVI's seminal intellectual heroes are Augustine (354-430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-74). Augustine held to a fideist doctrine. He insisted upon the superiority of faith over science. Scientific knowledge provides only facts about a phenomenon; faith explains fundamental causes. Aquinas, however, was an objective idealist. By adapting the writings of Aristotle - truncating and downplaying his materialism - he could maintain

that Christian faith was in *harmony* with reason. God can be logically proven.

However, Benedict XVI was out to do more than establish the superiority of godly Catholicism over ungodly Islam. He promoted Europe as playing a special role both in the past and the future. “Christianity,” he said, “despite its origins and some significant developments in the east,” finally took on its “decisive character” in Europe. The fusion of biblical faith, Greek reason and the heritage of the Roman empire “created Europe and remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe”.⁵⁸

So let us examine his speech through the prism of contemporary socio-economic trends. Benedict XVI was trying to navigate the Catholic church through a stormy world, where the decline of US power is the most visible determinate. The signs and portents appear daily in newspapers and news bulletins. In 1950 the US accounted for some 50% of the world’s GNP; half a century later it was down to around 20%. Sixty percent of the world’s manufacturing production in 1950 came from the US; only 20% today. The phenomenon of relative US decline is, of course, exacerbated by the general decline of capital as a system. The law of value is shot through, propped up by bureaucratic organisation. A negative anticipation of socialism and the law of planning.

Meanwhile, US presidents can order the destruction of any small or medium power they may care to name. The ‘war on terror’ provided George W Bush with a much needed enemy and excused successive arms spending hikes. That said, the US is incapable of exporting itself in the manner it displayed in the 1940s and 50s. Eg, the reconstruction of western Europe and Japan. The Iraq quagmire showed its shrinking abilities. While the US remains the sole superpower, that status increasingly relies on military, not economic, muscle. As the US diminishes economically, it artificially maintains itself by the turn to finance capital and *parasitically* sucking in wealth from a world that is structurally subordinated by the US empire of the dollar, trading, alliances and military bases. Finance capital is unproductive and therefore feeds off productive capital, such as the manufacturing sector. As for the US state, it runs on a black hole of debt. Financialisation produces chronic instability. So does overborrowing.

Hence the widespread feeling that judgement day is due. In biblical terms American capitalism is living in the last of days.

US decline is inevitably accompanied by a tentative repositioning by other countries and all manner of speculation about possible replacements. Transparently, Benedict XVI has a *Catholic* Europe in mind as the alternative world hegemon. The Regensburg speech contained a frontal assault on protestant doctrines that place faith over reason. In other words, the religion of George Bush. Benedict XVI lambasted the “dehellenisation” of Christianity that first emerged in connection with the “fundamental postulates of the reformation in the 16th century”.⁵⁹

Benedict XVI is haunted by Europe’s groundbreaking secular and revolutionary heritage: 1789, 1830, 1848, 1871, 1917, 1968 are the other Europe. The Europe of democracy, anti-clericalism and revolt. He is equally haunted by the mass influx of Muslims and the prospect that Turkey may one day be allowed to join the European Union. Rightwing ideologues have tried to frighten public opinion with daft predictions of an Islamic Europe by the end of the 21st century. Exactly with this ‘danger’ in mind, Benedict XVI calls upon Europe to recover its native roots “if it truly wants to survive”.⁶⁰

The pope has criticised the EU’s reluctance to acknowledge these roots because of an unwillingness to offend Islam - a presence in Europe which conspiracy theorists claim has been actively connived at by European leaders, conservative and social democratic alike, over the last four decades. What really offends Islam, according to Benedict XVI, is “the lack of reference to god, the arrogance of reason, which provokes fundamentalism”. In that spirit he castigates multiculturalism, “which is so constantly and passionately encouraged and supported”, because it “sometimes amounts to an abandonment and disavowal of what is our own”.⁶¹

He contrasts the modern-day resurgence of Islam with post-1945 Europe. Old Europe, he says, is “moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognise anything as definitive and has as its highest value one’s own ego and one’s own desires”. Islam, on the other hand, eschews relativism: “The rebirth of Islam is due in part to the new material richness

acquired by Muslim countries, but mainly to the knowledge that it is able to offer a valid spiritual foundation for the life of its people.”⁶²

To be great again, Benedict XVI says, Europe must return to the one true church of god. He therefore stridently opposes Turkey’s proposed membership: “Turkey,” he declares, “has always represented a different continent, always in contrast with Europe.” Of course, Istanbul, Turkey’s biggest city, lies in Europe and at its height the Ottoman empire incorporated the whole of south-eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Serbia, Albania, etc). Not for nothing did tsar Nicholas I call the Ottoman empire “the sick man of Europe” - it was falling under the financial control of other European powers and had been steadily losing territory.

Benedict XVI says he rejects geographical oversimplifications that supposedly underlie Turkey’s EU bid: “Europe,” he claims, “was founded not on a geography, but on a common faith.”⁶³ In fact, the concept of Europe has always been “tidal”. The main gravitational pull being Russian state power.⁶⁴ Geographically an extension of the great Eurasian land mass, Europe has constantly shifted its boundaries according to political, economic, cultural and military circumstances and calculations. Sometimes Europe has stopped short at Berlin. At other times it has extended eastwards to the Urals and southwards to the Caucasus. Religion has never been central. Europe is not an equivalent for Christendom.

After all, the Christianised Roman empire contained not only western and southern Europe. It incorporated the north African Mediterranean coastal rim and much of the Middle East. With Constantine the capital was shifted to Constantinople (Istanbul) in what is now Turkey. Europe is in origin a Greek word. Reinvented in modern times, it served as a *replacement* for Christendom.⁶⁵

Like Benedict XVI the most far-thinking Marxists place a special emphasis on Europe. Needless to say, not a Christian Europe nor an anti-Muslim Europe. But a European Union under the rule of the working class. In my view it is highly unlikely that another imperialist power or some fanciful Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa combination will replace the US as world hegemon. The decline of capitalism will surely be

dominated by the decline of the US - just as the decline of slavery was dominated by the decline of the Roman empire. But there cannot be any genuine replacement. Hence what historical circumstances cry out for is not the replacement of a bellicose US by some other, supposedly more benign, capitalist power bloc. It is socialism and the communist mode of production which stares in on us from every window.

World revolution is, however, unlikely to be a simultaneous event. A bloc of countries, perhaps even one, will take the lead. But no socialist revolution can survive in isolation for long. A year or two, perhaps a decade, surely no more. Sooner or later counterrevolution will burst in on it from without, or well up from within. So, to the highest degree manageable, socialist revolution will have to be coordinated internationally.

The tempo of class struggle and therefore class-consciousness is, and for some considerable time to come will be, markedly uneven from country to country. Some will move like the hare; others like the tortoise. That said, there are broadly common tempos and similar levels of consciousness brought about by all manner of historically determined cultural and political factors, including agreements by capitalist governments to partially pool what they loftily call their sovereignties in an attempt to enhance global standing, impact and power to rob and exploit others.

With that in mind, as well as arguing for the closest *regional* unity of working class organisations objective circumstances permit across the world - eg, the Indian subcontinent, Latin America, the Arab-speaking countries - I would lay particular stress on Europe. Given its economic weight, relative prosperity, size of population and long history of class struggles and substantive gains made by those below, an EU ruled by the working class has the potential to roll back a declining US superimperialism, not least by lending *substantative* practical aid to the spreading flame of self-liberation - first Asia, South America, Africa and finally North America itself.

As things stand, and for the foreseeable future, no single country, or even some other realistically envisageable regional grouping, could remotely hope to do that. While the US will in all probability carry the everlasting honour of completing the world revolution, surely only Europe can decisively begin it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Origins of Islam

Not so long ago the early history of Islam was widely considered pretty unproblematic. Somehow in the 7th century the parched, scorching deserts of Arabia* produced a unique monotheism and an austere final prophet. Islamic scholars, and most in the west, took for granted the accounts, recorded by Mohammed's supposed contemporaries and successors in the *hadiths*, of his life story, practices and sayings and how the *Koran* - the revelatory words of Allah spoken to the prophet - were faithfully taken to 'canonical' form after his death.

* Arabia should not be thought to be synonymous with modern Saudi Arabia or the Arabian peninsula for that matter. Certainly in the ancient world Arabia as a geographical-cultural space reached into the desert areas of today's Jordan, Syria and Iraq. As for the Arab people, originally it referred only to Bedouin camel nomads. Presumably because of their prestige the settled population adopted the name. Hence the majority of the population of Arabia came to call themselves Arab, along with their language (a form of Semitic which differed from Aramaic in certain respects).

Abu Bakr (the first caliph, reigned 632-34) and Umar (the second caliph, reigned 634-44) are said to have collected together Mohammad's words noted down on scraps of leather parchment, camels' shoulder-bones, palm leaves, pottery fragments, etc, as well as what was preserved in "the breasts of men". Then, Uthman (the third caliph, reigned 644-56), alarmed by reported divergent recitations of the revelations, charged a small group of the prophet's associates in Medina, headed by Zayd ibn Thabit, one of his secretaries, with standardising what we now know as the *Koran* (in Arabic *Qur'ān*). Once it was finally agreed, copies were dispatched to the major cities in the Islamic world.

A touchingly simple account repeated to this day and not just by Muslims. In other words, especially compared with Judaism and Christianity, the origins of Islam are thought to be definite, well documented and largely uncontroversial: Islam sprang forth, almost ready-made, in 7th century Arabia and was systematised and taken to book form

within a couple of decades after Mohammed's death. However, such assumptions have been brought into serious doubt.

Already in the early 20th century Alphonse Mingana (1881-1921), an Assyrian theologian, Christian and antiquarian, was challenging the dating associated with the standard account and showing how the *Koran* was packed full of foreign words and phrases. But the first substantial breach, at least in my opinion, was opened in the 1970s with John Wansbrough (1928-2002). As an experiment he subjected the *Koran* to the same sort of detailed linguistic and textual interrogation that the Hebrew and Christian *Bible* had long been subject to.¹ Wansbrough concluded that the *Koran* was unlikely to have been the work of a single author. He detected a series of "independent pericopes": ie, short scriptural passages designed for public worship. They were unified "by means of a limited number of rhetorical conventions".² He hears many different voices behind the strangely arranged *suras* or chapters - they are not set out according to subject or chronologically, as supposedly recited by the entranced prophet from 610 to 632, but in diminishing order of length. There is another particularly valuable insight that comes from Wansbrough's studies. He draws attention to the polemical character of much of the *Koran*. Wansbrough demonstrates that the *Koran* was focused on Jewish scripture and tradition, implying an important Jewish opposition as one of the motivations behind Islamic scripture.

Wansbrough emphasised that the *Koran* was an *evolving* book too (not denied by honest Muslim scholars). We are told that Zayd ibn Thabit deliberately destroyed all his source material, especially those passages which were, one would guess, found embarrassing, or contradicted what he decided to incorporate. Despite that he could not fix the text. There is no definite, extant, evidence of the *Koran* prior to 691 - that is, 59 years after Mohammed's death - when the Dome of the Rock mosque was built in Jerusalem. It is richly decorated with koranic verses. However, and this is regarded as pivotal, they differ in certain details compared to what we have in front of us now. Either way this is indirect evidence. And a few koranic verses do not add up to a holy book. The earliest edition of the *Koran* housed in the British Library is reckoned to date from the late 8th or early 9th century. And while some Islamic scholars claim that there are copies of

the *Koran* dating from the 7th century, including the British Library's MS Or 2165, this is widely doubted.** So, in other words, and Wansbrough stresses it, something like 150 years elapsed before Muslim scripture took 'canonical' form. If that is the case, Wansbrough goes on to reason, there exists no proof that it was put together by either Mohammed's immediate successors or even the scribes of the Umayyads.

** The British Library's oldest *Koran*, catalogued MS Or 2165, is just over 50% complete. When first purchased it was hailed as "probably the earliest *Koran* ever brought to Europe". It is written in the Hijazi script.

In support of his late *Koran*, Wansbrough points to the extraordinary paucity of *hard* evidence concerning the life of the prophet and early Muslim history. Most of what is 'known' comes from *hadiths* and subsequent Islamic commentaries. Koranic exegesis, for example, first appeared only in the late 8th and 9th centuries. Nor can early Muslim traditions be confirmed by contemporary non-Muslim textual sources. From this Wansbrough implies a pretty stunning conclusion, though he did not state it explicitly. That the "entire" Muslim tradition surrounding the "early history of the text of the *Koran* is a pious forgery, a forgery so immediately effective and so all-pervasive in its acceptance that no trace of independent contemporary evidence has survived to betray it".³

There are a number of reasons to reject this particular conclusion. Muslim scholars are themselves perfectly candid about the many variant versions of the *Koran* furnished by history. At least in part accounted by the fact that oral recitation long remained the preferred means of transmission. And, as Estelle Whelan explains, with the passage of time, there occurred the kind of cumulative slippage endemic in oral tradition. Each telling and retelling introduced minute changes, which at some point inevitably completely altered the original, intended, meaning. Moreover, because of the undeveloped nature of early Arabic script, which was then akin to shorthand, even when written down the text was open to misunderstanding, copyist's errors, and yet more change. Then there was slippage of another kind. That which came about with the emergence of "diverse and competing parties"; and, of course, that happened almost immediately following Mohammed's death.⁴ Indeed, there were three eviscerating civil wars, all within some 80 years. Versions of the *Koran* were thereby produced which projected back particular factional interests onto the characters and events

described. The result was anything but canonical. Numerous versions competed. The *hadiths* ('narratives' in Arabic) showed an even greater abundance. And they not only mushroomed in number. One story contradicted another, while others were anachronistic or obviously invented, so absurd were they.

In the early 10th century, Abu Bakr ibn Mujahid (died 936) "succeeded in reducing the number of acceptable readings" of the *Koran* to the seven that were "predominant" in the main Muslim centres of the time.⁵ Copyists/reciters tempted to deviate from these seven versions were to be subjected to harsh punishment. But threats did not deter. Additional variant versions had to be accepted: first 'the three after the seven', then 'the four after the 10'. In other words there were 14 recognised, legitimate versions. The famous Cairo edition of the *Koran*, published in 1923, is most widely used today. It is based on one of the seven versions permitted by Mujahid. Nevertheless, other versions circulate especially in parts of north Africa, Pakistan and India.

As for the Dome of the Rock, while possibly testifying to later linguistic drift, it surely indicates the likelihood of a *relatively* early *Koran*. Of course, it is a matter of judgment. The elaborately written koranic script constituted what amounts to an expensive advertising hoarding. Presumably it was aimed at boosting, reinforcing, the standing of a specific audience: ie, Muslims in the holy city of Judaism and Christianity. Mainly it asserts the correctness of Mohammed's vision and the primacy of Islam over Judaism and Christianity. However, and this is the point, when it came to executing the beautiful calligraphy, the caliph, Abd al-Malik, got himself a highly talented, and surely experienced, artist.

Hence the following account is of no small interest. During the 7th century there "may have been a specific area" in Medina where manuscripts of the *Koran* "were copied and sold".⁶ A large fragment of an early history of the city, by Abu Zayd 'Umar ibn Shabbah al-Numayri (789-875), a descendent of a prominent Medinean family, has been preserved, and he seems to refer to this work. "At present," admits Whelan, "there is no convincing evidence for the survival of any *Koran* datable earlier than the 9th century." What might be suggested though, is that the earliest

manuscripts that do survive “represent part of a long, evolving tradition” rooted in Medina in the 7th century.⁷

Unity of Hagarene and Jew

Another thought-provoking theory - inspired by Wansbrough - came from Patricia Crone and Michael Cook. Their book *Hagarism: the making of the Islamic world* is provocatively written by “infidels for infidels”.⁸ The scholarly aim, however, is to get to grips with Islam’s uncertain first century by looking at Islamic tradition from without, not from within. In the absence of reliable Arabic texts, Crone and Cook turn to little known non-Muslim, 7th century Greek, Armenian, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac and Coptic sources which reference the Arab conquests.

Here we find Mohammed’s followers described as “Hagarenes” and members of the “tribe of Ishmael”. That is, the invaders were explained through pre-existing religious-cultural viewpoints as being the descendants of Hagar, the handmaiden (concubine-slave) by whom the Hebrew patriarch, Abraham, fathered Ishmael (who supposedly in turn fathers the entire Arab nation).

Crone and Cook believe that in light of this literature Islam should not be thought of as a brand new religion which suddenly arose from the cultural backwaters of Arabia. Rather Islam began as a variant of Judaism. Adherents thought of themselves as rescuing the Jewish population of Palestine from the clutches of the Byzantine Christian emperor and bringing about the reunification of Abraham’s children and thus clearing the path for god’s kingdom on earth. History records the Jewish population greeting the Arabs as liberators when they entered Jerusalem in 638. Umar was hailed as ‘redeemer’ - a well-established religious title for the Jews.

Crone and Cook speak of Judeo-Arab “intimacy” and their mutual “hostility towards Christianity”.⁹ The Hagarenes are pictured as prodigies of Judaism who also counted themselves amongst god’s chosen people. True, as the conquests of the Hagarenes spread - and the number of Christian subjects increased substantially - there came a break with the Jews and a pacifying theological approach towards Christians. Jesus was

recognised as a prophet and instead of restoring the Jerusalem temple - as seems to have been solemnly promised - the Hagarenes proceeded with the construction of the Dome of the Rock at the centre of the old site.

Rapprochement, however, carried the inherent danger that the Hagarenes would “simply end up becoming Christians like the majority of their subjects”.¹⁰ That way the line separating exploited and exploiters would have become hopelessly compromised. Hence the project of putting together another, a noticeably different, Abrahamic religion, and presenting it as both the ancestral faith of all humanity and the completion of what went before. Mohammed is shown as the reviver of the age-old faith of Ishmael and as the final prophet. Suitably altered Jewish and Christian stories provide obvious raw material for the *Koran*, and according to Crone and Cook, the Samaritans provided another source. Their hereditary priesthood, which fused all religious and political authority, was adopted. The early caliphate was therefore “conceived along lines familiar from Shi’ite Islam”.¹¹

Subsequently, Crone and Cook revised their Hagarene hypothesis. Nevertheless, what they have not changed their minds about is rejecting the standard account of Islam’s early history. The problem as they see it is not hard to discern. The *Koran* is infused with monotheism, contains frequent references to Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Joseph and Jesus. Despite that, the official account has Mohammed starting out adult life as an illiterate, small-time merchant and then receiving his divine revelations first in Mecca and then in Medina.

These two towns were far removed from the great centres of civilisation with their sophisticated religious and philosophical modes of thought. Primitive economic foundations plus advanced modes of thought severely narrow down the available determinates, with that I would agree. Hence, I am quite prepared to go along with Patricia Crone here: “Unless one accepts the idea of the angel Gabriel,” she says, “historians must somehow explain how all these monotheistic stories and ideas found their way into the *Koran*.” According to this hypothesis there are only “two possibilities”. “Either there had to be substantial numbers of Jews and Christians in Mecca or the *Koran* had to have been composed somewhere else.”¹²

As may already have been gathered, a whole school of thought has grown up around this ‘somewhere else’ thesis: the contention being that the *Koran* was composed/written down not in Mecca and Medina. According to the most influential version of this conjecture, the Abbasid rulers of Baghdad - to begin with little more than an Islamic military camp - sponsor a ‘final history’ epic, whereby they become the bearers of a perfect monotheism, rather than the conquerors of a higher civilisation, which in turn conquers them through its superior intellectual achievements, bureaucratic efficiency and countless sensual delights.

In his book, *Origins of Islam: a critical look at the sources* (2000), the secularist scholar of Islam, Mohammed Ibn al-Rawandi, up-ends accepted history. He argues against the ‘inside Arabia’ *Koran* and the idea that Islam served as the religious/ideological justification for the conquests of Syria, Mesopotamia and Egypt. It was, al-Rawandi insists, the other way round. Conquest was the cause of the *Koran* and the whole Islamic tradition.

The story of Mohammed uniting the fractious Arab tribes - as Genghis Khan did with the Mongols - by providing the religious glue needed to cohere them into an unstoppable military force is, says al-Rawandi, not real history, but ‘sacred history’. Mohammed may, or may not, have been a real historical figure. However, so the thesis goes, he obtained his elevated position of being the last prophet long after his death, when the Arab elite were already masters of a huge empire. As evidence we are told that Mohammed’s birthplace in Mecca remained an ordinary house till al-Khayzuran, the mother of Harun al-Rashid, the first caliph of Baghdad, decreed that it be made into a sacred site - 150 years after Mohammed died. Damning evidence for al-Rawandi.

Supposedly, the Abbasid caliphs sponsored a justifying and organising religion. Having put together what was presumably a tightly-knit group of trusted intellectuals, they instructed them to invent Islam. Back-reading history in broad conformity with the Jewish and Christian models, they introduce Mohammed. His life would serve simultaneously as an example for subjects to follow in daily life and as a source of divine revelation. The *Koran* and the *Sira* (the story of Mohammed’s life) were thus spun not from reliable memories: rather thin air. Al-Rawandi concludes that the *Sira* is “baseless fiction”.¹³ Furthermore, though I think it is a giveaway, whereas

the Judaeo-Christian tradition was centred on Jerusalem, Islam was given an unmistakable Arab orientation and was therefore to be centred specifically on Mecca.

I am inclined to reject the 'somewhere else' thesis - though it is clear that sharia law and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) were fully systematised in Syria and Iraq. The first Muslim schools of law, in the strict sense, were founded during the Umayyad caliphate. But, frankly, the *Koran* is too full of contradictions, too obscure, too rambling, too strange to be a work of straightforward invention, at least as far as I am concerned. Of course, neither it nor the *Sira* is real history. However, the *Koran* shows all the messy attributes of being the *result* of real history. And, to say the least, the notion that the Abbasids sponsor a specifically Arabian *Koran/Sira* and hand the Arabs a uniquely privileged place in history by making Mecca, not Baghdad, the centre of the Muslim world remains to be proved.

The Abbasid caliphs come to power heading a revolution against the Umayyads in 750. Amongst their first acts is the transfer of the empire's capital from Damascus to Baghdad. The Abbasids based their rule on claimed descent from Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib (566–652), one of Mohammed's younger uncles. They regarded themselves as his rightful successors and deputies of god. However, and this is surely of cardinal importance, their revolution succeeded in no small measure because of the *active* support of non-Arab Muslims, the *mawali*. They were considered second-class Muslims within the Umayyad empire. Moving the capital eastwards was in part due to the need to appease the Persian *mawali*; as a quid pro quo they had been demanding *less* Arab influence over the Muslim empire. The vizier, a new post, was established to run the overall affairs of the empire. Subsequently, greater authority was granted to local emirs. Eventually, the Abbasid caliphs were reduced to mere constitutional ornaments. Heads of state, but lacking executive power. In short, a declining Arab *religious* aristocracy was being eclipsed by a rising Persian *state* bureaucracy.

A religion artificially invented under a Baghdad caliphate, even in its early phase, would hardly reach in the direction of Arabs and Arabia. It would, if the 'somewhere else' thesis is correct, surely deny those origins, or at least downplay them, in favour of an abstract universalism. That Islam

does the opposite suggests to me that we should not lightly dismiss the traditional version of Mohammed's life as "baseless fiction."

Incidentally, coinciding with the separation of the state and the mosque under the Abbasids, Sunni religious scholars fall back on tradition. They come to see themselves as the guardians of the faith and independent of both the caliphs and the state. Only a minority continue to pursue reason. The *Koran* and the *Sira* answer all matters in the universe, including law and politics. The umma is seen as a self-governing community. The state, argues Peter von Sivers, becomes an "outside entity" responsible for military affairs, but "bereft of legislative powers".¹⁴ An enduring source of instability in Muslim countries.

Copying the Christians

Its painstaking detail, outstanding scholarship and far-reaching implications demand that the work of Christoph Luxenberg (a pseudonym) be treated with the utmost seriousness. If he is right then what is now the *Koran* results not merely from linguistic slippage. Luxenberg's hypothesis is that Islam began as a form of Christianity. As an aside, in a similar vein, Robert Eisenman argues that Mohammed was inspired by a Jamesian-influenced Christianity: the *Koran* evokes James's directive to oversee communities preserved in Acts on dietary restrictions.¹⁵

Reviewing the first edition of Luxenberg's book *The Syro-Aramaic reading of the Koran* (2000), Robert Phoenix and Cornelia Horn, both of the University of St Thomas department of theology in the US, maintain that Luxenberg has revolutionised koranic studies. From its "method to its conclusions on the language and content" of the *Koran*, his study has "freed scholars from the problematic tradition" of the Islamic commentators. Whether or not he is correct "in every detail" is, of course, open to question. Nevertheless, he has "forced" all serious scholars to re-examine their old assumptions.¹⁶

Luxenberg investigated the language of the *Koran* using the tools of philology and text-criticism (in an ongoing study, results are by self-admission preliminary). He basically argues that many of the *suras* included

in the *Koran* were mistranslated or misunderstood almost from the beginning. Luxenberg maintains that the word ‘koran’ derives from the Syriac *qeryana*, a technical term from the Christian liturgy which means “lectionary”, the fixed biblical readings used throughout the year. In other words, the *Koran* has a “written source” and was “never intended to replace this written source”.

Luxenberg believes that the term *qur’ān* itself is the “key to unlocking” many of the strange and perplexing passages that have caused so much frustration and confusion both within and without the Islamic tradition. If *quryān* means “lectionary”, which supposedly clarifies an earlier text, then this earlier text “must be written in another language”. The “only candidate” is the *Old Testament* and *New Testament* in Syriac, the *Peshitta*. Hence the influence of Aramaic on the Arabic of Mohammed has an “identifiable textual origin”. Towards the end of his book Luxenberg argues that *sura* 108, called ‘Abundance’, is a “close allusion” to the *Peshitta* of 1 Peter v,8-9. Indeed this *sura*, which is only three lines long, is one of the “most difficult passages” for Arab as well as western commentators. Luxenberg shows why: it is composed of transcriptions into Arabic writing of the Syriac *New Testament* text: ie, there is almost no “Arabic” in it. These are “revealed” texts, and insofar as the *Koran* contains “quotations or paraphrases of them”, the *Koran* is also “revealed”.

During Mohammed’s time, Arabic was not a fully-fledged written language. Syriac was the “*lingua franca* of the entire Middle Eastern region” from the 2nd to the 7th centuries, after which it was gradually superseded by Arabic.¹⁷ Syriac achieved particular influence as the language of biblical translation and was soon taken up in other places, Persia included. Luxenberg notes that the earliest *hadith* literature reports Mohammed instructing his followers to know Syriac (as well as Hebrew). Luxenberg says that Syriac exerted a crucial influence on those who developed written Arabic and that these Arabs were Christianised.

Luxenberg puts the *Koran* into this historical context in order to solve the problems he sees within the text. He uses the ‘canonical’ Cairo edition, “without the vowel signs”.¹⁸ This is important because, as Luxenberg argues, the early redactors “attempted to fix the diacritical points that distinguish between possible readings of a single letter”. In many cases he

amends these points, but does so “following a clear and detailed method”. When he has a clear choice between two variant readings, “the principle of *lectio difficilior* prevails”.¹⁹ Only when the “context of an expression is manifestly unclear” - and the Arabian commentators have no “plausible explanation” - does Luxenberg “explore a solution” by looking for a Syriac root and a more plausible meaning and seeing whether or not it makes more sense. If that succeeds he believes he is justified in changing one or more of the diacritical points.

Originally there were only six consonants to distinguish the 26 sounds of spoken Arabic. As a script Arabic was therefore “defective”.²⁰ They were distinguished over time by adding points written above or below each letter. However, the Arabic alphabet used in the *Koran* began as a “mnemonic device” not intended as a “complete key” to all the sounds of the language.²¹ Luxenberg notes that Islamic tradition is unable to pinpoint exactly when the diacritical points were finally “fixed”. But it was a process that perhaps took 300 years, during which time there were many intermediate stages that went hand in hand with what might be called “flexible” readings of the *Koran*. We have already referred to the 14 permitted versions of the book. Divergence seems to have begun early because we find ibn Mas’ud reporting the following account:

I heard a man reading the *Koran*, and I heard the prophet read it another way. I came with him to the prophet and informed him. I noticed disgust on his face. He said: “Both of you are correct. Don’t disagree and verily those who were before you disagreed and so they were destroyed”.²²

Luxenberg shows that not only are the origin and language of the *Koran* different from what the commentators who wrote 200 years after its inception claim it to be, but that several key passages contain “words or idioms” borrowed from Syriac. From his analysis of the ‘Mary’ sura - “But the one that was below her called to her, ‘Nay, do not sorrow; see, thy lord has set below thee a rivulet’”²³ - Luxenberg concludes that this should be read: “He called to her immediately after her laying-down (to give birth) ‘Grieve not; thy lord has made your laying-down legitimate.’” Luxenberg discusses this passage at length and resolves the grammatical difficulties in

the Arabic in a way that “fits the context”. The messenger of god is giving Mary the courage to face her relatives with her illegitimate child.

Luxenberg also examines ‘The night journey’ *sura*, which translates as: “And startle whomsoever of them thou canst with thy voice; and rally against them thy horsemen and thy foot, share with them in their wealth and their children and promise them! But Satan promises them naught, except delusion.”²⁴ The strange combination of “rousing and besieging” indicates a “misreading”. In this case it is Arabic that is misread, Arabic that literally translates Syriac expressions. According to Luxenberg’s analysis, this verse should read: “Thus seduce with your voice whomsoever from among them you can, outsmart them with your trick and your lying and deception, and tempt them with possessions and children and make promises to them - indeed Satan promises them nothing but vain things!”

Luxenberg traces how a “misreading in one verse triggered sympathetic misreading” throughout the rest of the *Koran* simply because the scattered verses alluded to a single concept.²⁵ He illustrates this with a discussion of the so-called ‘houris’ or ‘virgins of paradise’. ‘The all-merciful’ *sura* has “maidens restraining their glances, untouched before them by any man of jinn”²⁶ and “maidens good and comely”,²⁷ “houris cloistered in cool pavilions - O which your lord’s bounties will you and you deny? untouched before them by any man or jinn”.²⁸ Similarly in *sura* xlv,54 we read: “We shall espouse them to wide-eyed houris.” Again in *sura* lii,20: “We shall espouse them to wide-eyed houris.”

Luxenberg is of the opinion that the expression *houris* really means “white (grapes or raisins), jewels (of crystal)” and not “wide-eyed” maidens. Luxenberg says that the word ‘paradise’ was derived from the Syriac word for ‘garden’ and that all the descriptions of paradise in the *Koran* describe it as a garden of flowing waters, abundant fruits and white raisins - a prized delicacy in the ancient Middle East. In this context, white raisins makes more sense than god rewarding the faithful with the sexual favours of virgins. Then perhaps, but certainly not now.

Luxenberg concludes that Uthman’s edition of the *Koran* was substantially different from the original thoughts, utterings and inclinations of Mohammed. Were these misreadings intentional or simply innocent

mistakes? Whatever the case, the mistranslations in general alter the *Koran* from a book that is “more or less harmonious” with the *New Testament* and Syriac Christian liturgy and literature to one that is distinct and divergent.

Trade and big-power politics

Social consciousness is determined by social circumstances. And as a body of thought Islam probably reflects the profound socio-economic changes that were occurring in and around the city of Mecca, in what is now Saudi Arabia, during the 6th century. The orientalist’s romantic notion that Islam originated from amongst Bedouin nomads in the shadows of their tents is a complete fallacy. Islam is indelibly marked by the town and what Marxists call the sphere of circulation. “Despite the extent and numerical importance of the nomads, it was the settled elements and more especially those living and working on the trans-Arabian trade routes who really shaped the history of Arabia,” says the scholar, Bernard Lewis (once an advocate of Marxism and now, sadly, an apologist for Zionism).²⁹

Muslim sources depict pre-Islamic Mecca as one of the world’s great conurbations. Bustling, teeming, prosperous. A pervasive account, which has become a kind of common sense, including amongst mainstream and leftwing writers. But Patricia Crone questions the elevated status granted to Mecca. And quite rightly too. Mecca could never have been on a par with Alexandria, Corinth, Petra or Damascus. To the extent that the benighted Saudi royal family permits serious archaeological investigation in their kingdom, that is proven beyond a shadow of doubt. Of course, in this case fear generates wanton vandalism. With the connivance of the “religious authorities” the house of Saud order the destruction of any site that might encourage “idolatry” - including the supposed “birthplace of the prophet Mohammed”.³⁰

The vast bulk of south-north trade in the 6th century would have gone by sea. Mecca, which lay around 45 miles inland, would have been bypassed. Speed of movement and safety from bandits decide the matter in favour of water, not land. So does cost. By sea it is relatively cheap; overland, on the backs of horses, camels and donkeys, transport is prohibitively expensive.

So from Aden the riches of the east went via the Red Sea to entrepots such as Pithom (near today's Suez) and Aila (Aqaba). Aden, at least for some considerable time, really was a thriving hub of trade in the ancient world. The surrounding Yemeni countryside feeding into Aden's abundant trade with the production of frankincense and myrrh (highly prized gum-resins).

Lacquer work, silks, porcelain and spices, could be acquired from China, India and Indonesia for a song. Aristocratic Mediterraneans, on the other hand, were prepared to pay for them through the nose. Subjective value - different ways of appreciating the properties of a particular product - allowed surpluses to be siphoned off from one society into another. Risks were high. But rewards were bigger. Between source and final sale prior to consumption, successive mark-ups could reach 2,000% - what is now a humble staple, the nutmeg, being a star example.

Despite most trade proceeding by sea, Mecca could have functioned as a minor import-export centre. Crone writes of the Meccans producing perfumes, skins, leather goods, clothing and bullion. The surrounding area was dotted with gold mining operations. Probably they helped pay for the imports needed to satisfy the expanding wants of the local elite: ie, weapons, fine cloth, clothes, slaves, oils and other "necessities and petty luxuries".³¹ In earlier times a trans-Arabian, Yemen-Syria land route had existed, which in particular transported its frankincense and myrrh. But by the time of Mohammed that had long gone. Mecca lies at the northern end of a long mountain range that runs parallel to the Red Sea coast and many scholars assume that this would have made it a natural stop-over point. In what would have been a "journey of some two months" there would have been many of them - 65, according to Crone.³² However, she also claims that Mecca was at a far remove from the route. She reckons by over 100 miles. Crone further suggests that present-day Mecca may not have been ancient Mecca (which she claims could have been located further to the north). That aside, no land route, especially in such a harsh, barren environment, should be thought of as something specific, like a railway, or a dual carriageway. Paved routes could neither have been afforded nor maintained, that is for sure. More accurate, however, at least in terms of an analogy, would be a sea lane, which is never exact, and is, of course, subject to the constant variables of wind and tide.

Clan disputes, the danger of ambush, the promise of safe escort, the vagaries of water supplies and the availability of fodder - all these and other factors meant that land routes would have been constantly altering. Wide deviations from what might now appear sensible by glancing at one of our modern relief maps would have been more than likely. Nor should we forget that trade was highly disaggregated. Especially on land, goods pass through many hands before final consumption. Therefore, a factor that might persuade a caravan train to head for Mecca would be simple - finding a market.

Another argument casting doubt on the standard picture of Mecca is the 6th century absence of contemporary reports of its trade from outside Arabia. If the Meccans “had been middlemen in a long-distance trade of the kind described in (traditional Islamic) literature, there ought to have been some mention of it in the writings of their customers”, writes Crone.³³ Original sources are a prime tool for historians. But lack of memoirs, correspondence or book entries mentioning the trade in spices is hardly a clincher. Not that negative evidence is irrelevant. However, Crone herself admits, in all cases the source materials are questionable, fragmentary and sparse. And if, once again, account is taken of the fact that long-distance trade was indirect, the absence of Mecca in classical sources hardly comes as a surprise. It should be expected. But the underlying point remains. Mecca could not have been a great city. It was an obscure market town. Important regionally, no doubt. But, apart from that, nothing.

The countryside surrounding Mecca is almost Martian in appearance - littered with rocks and boulders and without a trace of vegetation. Occupying a valley - carved out by a wadi that flows during the short rainy season - Mecca does, though, possess the famous well of Zamzam. It can quench the thirst of large numbers of camels. Besides being a market town, Mecca acted as a cult centre and therefore guaranteed the safety of pilgrims. We think we know that. So, with a due sense of proportion, it is not unreasonable to accept Rodinson's thesis that the principle - or socially determining - occupation of the elite amongst the Meccan Arabs in the 6th century consisted not of administering the state or overseeing production, but buying cheap and selling dear. Meccan merchants could conceivably

have played a role, albeit a minor one, in the high-value import and export of spices.***

*** A category which, at the time, included not just peppercorns and the like. More or less everything counted that was vegetable, expensive, easy to carry and not quick to perish: eg, barks, perfumes, roots, gums, dyes, medicines and recreational drugs.

Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks and Romans had each at their zenith sought to extend their imperial hegemony into Arabia. A mercantile city like Petra, in what is now Jordan, was a prized jewel by any standards. In 24 BC the Romans even tried to conquer the Yemen. The expedition ended in ignominious failure. But the untameable Bedouin tribes remained a constant nuisance and had to be bought off or energetically pursued. Buffer states, including Arab states, were erected to cage them in. Eg, Ghassan and Hira.

Inevitably great empires passed from expansion into decline. As they did, rivals saw their opportunity. One encroached upon another. That entailed severe disruption of established trade routes and the necessity of finding alternatives; routes that of necessity skirted round enemy territory. Hence, in the periphery, shifting big-power politics could produce wild swings of fortune. In 348 one such swing occurred. The Roman and Persian empires concluded a peace after a whole, extended period of wars, which first broke out in the 3rd century. During the long peace that lasted until 502, regional and international trade returned to 'natural' routes - through the Persian Gulf and up the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, through the Red Sea and directly to Egypt, etc. Arab towns, cities and petty kingdoms withered or simply ceased to exist. The famed irrigation system around Ma'rib in the far south of the Arabian peninsula was abandoned.

However, after their uneasy 150-year peace, the Byzantine Roman and Sassanid Persian empires once again began fighting. This time to the point of mutual exhaustion. The bureaucratic tributary state and standing army tended on each side towards the all-consuming. A wonderful opportunity for the barbarians in the wastes of Arabia ... if they could take advantage of it. Fortuitously, profound internal changes seem to have been occurring amongst the Arabs, including those in the Hijaz. Changes which allowed them to go from being agents of others or a scattered, border-raiding nuisance to being an unstoppable conquering force.

Social relations

Formally, all male Bedouins in Arabia were deemed equal. Individuals possessed that status through their tribal bloodline (real and invented). Society was horizontally segmented, not vertically stratified. While there were families who were wealthier or more respected than others, there was no hard-and-fast class differentiation. Elements of primitive communism survived amongst them. There was no private ownership of land or water. Even flocks were sometimes held collectively by the tribe or the smaller clan units. Not that people could roam anywhere they fancied. Each tribe had its traditional and often hotly disputed oases, wells and territories. Vendettas between tribes were commonplace. That necessitated chiefs who acted as military leaders. They were elected by the tribal elders, usually from amongst the leading, sheikhly family known as the Ahl al-bayt. Chiefs were rarely more than first amongst equals. They exercised authority, not coercive power, over the tribe and were advised by a council, the *majlis*.

Within the tribe, life was regulated by custom - the *sunna* or practice of the ancestors. In part their egalitarianism stemmed from the nature of nomadic life itself. As we noted with the early Hebrews, compared with urban dwellers and peasants, the nomadic and semi-nomadic population is much harder to control and therefore exploit. There always exists the option of simply taking off, along with possessions, immediate followers and dependants. Indeed, of necessity there is a degree of constant movement. And in the vastness of Arabia there were no fixed grazing grounds or definite seasonal itineraries associated with other nomads. There was unpredictability and considerable leeway for whim and hunch that “helped give a tone to the Bedouin social ways”.³⁴

The religious beliefs and practices of the nomadic Bedouin are somewhat vague, but once again bear a broad similarity to what we can glean about the ancient Hebrews. Uncontrollable forces of nature dominated people's lives and had to be assuaged. Ancestors too were elevated into minor gods. They would, if treated properly and with due respect, intervene in the spirit world on behalf of the living. Besides them, the Bedouins had numerous divinities, the highest being the triad of Manat, Uzza, Allat and, above them

all, Allah.³⁵ The most important for the Bedouins in terms of day-to-day life were specifically tribal gods though. Each tribe equipped itself with its own unique god. Weirdly shaped stones were particularly useful here and functioned as fetishes. These objects had a distinct advantage - they could be easily transported. The Bedouin tribal gods were housed in sacred red tents and were venerated because they brought rain, fertility and good luck in war. Fetish and tribe formed a single unit. If members of the tribe settled, the fetish would be placed in the sheikh's house, which would thereby gain in religious prestige.

Water and the spots of pasture and vegetation vital for the nomad's herds are as easily exhausted as they are few and far between. The Bedouin tribes have to constantly trek back and forth from one oasis to another simply to survive. However, the nomadic existence is supplemented by commerce and robbery; both greatly facilitated for the Bedouins by the domestication of the Arabian one-humped camel between three to two-and-a-half thousand years ago.³⁶ With these brilliantly evolved beasts they could traverse huge distances with a minimum of water and food and, by the standards of the day, at speed. Ideal for the movement of goods and raiding. Those who inhabited and roamed the desert wastes thought it their natural-born right to ambush caravans or impose brotherhood taxes. When they were sufficiently strong they would even exact tribute from the urban dwellers. Indeed sometimes one or another tribe would take over the town.

The ability of towns to reach out to far-off places relies on the transport system represented by the desert. Settled chiefs and well-to-do merchants maintain or cultivate close ties with the nomads. They also seek to dominate. Camel herds are purchased that still enjoy access to collective water and pasture. These herds are tended by Bedouin nomads - many of whom have sunk deep into debt with the merchants. Having no other regular source of gaining a livelihood, they are reduced to a humiliating state of dependence.

Social relations in the Hijaz, it must be emphasised, were not those of capitalism. The well known formula - M-C-M' - applies to the Arab merchant. Money and the expansion of money is the aim of the operation. The Arab merchant lays out money with the sole object of getting back more. However, the living money of the Arab merchant does not permeate

every aspect of society. While domestic production might be subordinated to the merchants, mercantile capitalism has definite limits. Labour-power itself only appears as a commodity sporadically, marginally, and is often recruited from abroad. There is certainly no generalised labour market - a necessary condition for capitalism; ie, commodity production taken to its highest form.

Most inhabitants are still engaged in the nomadic herding of sheep, goats and camels or live in oasis villages and practice an irrigated system of cultivating wheat, rice, dates, etc. So the base of society remains agricultural, but over that a ruling class develops, which enriches itself not primarily through sponsoring artisans, employing wage-labour or exacting tribute, but by organising caravan routes that join, albeit tenuously, one market town with another and one geographical region with another.

Many religions

Tribal society is reproduced in Mecca and is at the same time negated. As noted above, the town seems to have served as a pilgrimage centre and market for the surrounding Bedouin tribes ('Mecca' is linguistically derived from the word 'sanctuary'). Perhaps regular markets combine with cult festivities. Tribal wars and vendettas would be forbidden during such festivities. The regional importance of Mecca found religious expression in the gathering together of many tribal fetish stones and their incorporation into the walls of a building called the Ka'ba. To begin with "a rude, perhaps circular enclosure without a roof".³⁷ It is thought that pilgrims would pass round the Ka'ba a set number of times, during which they would kiss the sacred objects.

Initially Mecca was said to have been held by a tribe called Jurhum. Then, we are told, it fell under the domination of the Khuza'a. Towards the end of the 5th century, however, a warlord called Qusayy succeeded in fusing together the Quraysh tribe, which then managed to gain control. Mecca was administered by the *mala'*, a council of the Quraysh chiefs and notables. This can only have been a forum designed to achieve consensus. There was no means to make one clan accept the decisions of the rest other

than by way of persuasion or, that failing, a civil war of chiefs and their armed followers.

By the 7th century we find customary tribal relations in an advanced stage of decay. Classes emerge with a vengeance. The leading stratum in Mecca was known as the 'Quraysh of the inside', the chiefs and big merchants. Below them in power and status were the 'Quraysh of the outside', those who lacked the commercial, military and political muscle of the elite. There were assimilated incomers too – small-time traders, artisans and entertainers. Native peasants eked out a living on their small plots, but were becoming little more than debt labourers. The Meccan proletariat consisted of both Bedouins and foreigners. As did the strata of chattel slaves, common prostitutes and lumpenproletarians - the lowest of the low. Then, outside Mecca itself, there were the 'Arabs of Quraysh', the Bedouin tribes which roamed the Hijaz. Though formally free, they were steadily losing their independence and becoming clients of the rich merchants.

Arabia lay on the periphery of the civilised world and certainly rated as an extremely backward region. Nonetheless, in the borderlands Arabs were recruited and trained as auxiliary soldiers by both Byzantium and Persia. Arabs thereby became acquainted with the latest techniques of warfare. The same was true with religion. Neighbouring lands had various well-established monotheistic traditions available to adopt or adapt.

Under conditions where old tribal social relations are in decay and class relations are emerging, traditional tribal gods must decay too. New religious notions become attractive, especially amongst those strata and classes that are seeing their tribal privileges drain away or who have little or no purchase over the cults presided over by elites such as the Quraysh of the inside.

To the north-east Zoroastrianism gained a dominant position in Persia and trickled down the eastern coastal strip of Arabia. Christianity was widespread to the north and west and took many forms - in Mesopotamia, Nestorian and Jamesian; in Syria, Armenian and Chalcedonian. Then there was official Christianity, which divided along the lines of the Roman empire. Even at an early stage there were growing tensions between Rome and Constantinople, which later produced the Latin (Roman Catholic church) in the west and the Greek (Orthodox church) in the east. Meanwhile, Coptic Christianity flourished in Egypt and Abyssinia, while in

Yemen there were various denominations of Christianity and a strong Judaism. Indeed, it is worth noting here that in their book *The hidden origins of Islam* (2010) Karl Ohlig and Gerd Puin suggest that large parts of the *Koran* predate Mohammed by at least a hundred years, on the basis of a “cocktail” of ancient texts found in the Yemeni capital of Sana’a in 1972. Hence, in this case, a very early *Koran*.

Either way, the Hijaz, where Mecca and Medina are located, remained a “pocket of paganism”. Despite that, there were Christians “and a great many Jews”.³⁸ So one does not need to accept the idea of the angel Gabriel in order to explain how foreign monotheistic stories found their way into the *Koran*. Yes, there were “substantial numbers of Jews and Christians” in Arabia, including in Mecca. Once again, no reason to insist that the *Koran* had to have been composed “somewhere else”.

Mecca and its orphaned prophet

Abu al-Qasim Mohammed ibn Abd Allah ibn Abd al-Muttali ibn Hashim grew up under these social and intellectual conditions. According to the *Sira*, his father was named Abdallah and his mother Amina. Mohammed was the only child of the marriage. His father belonged to the prestigious clan of Banu Hashim, once the leading clan of the Quraysh tribe. Mohammed seems to have been born in Mecca between the years 567 and 573, that is, during the reign of Khusro Anosharwan, which ended in 579. The commonly accepted year is 571.

Though orphaned at an early age and a member of a clan that was now in steep decline, he married wealth in the form of Khadija, the widow of a rich merchant, who was somewhat older than him. He is said to have been 25, she 40. Marriage rescued Mohammed from poverty and opened the door to a comfortable future. From here on he could live without any immediate material worries. He became a person of some importance - no longer was he the poor relation working for others. Mohammed could well have seen in this stroke of good fortune the hand of god. An explanation hinted at in the *Koran*: “Thy lord shall give thee, and thou shall be satisfied. Did he not find

thee an orphan, and shelter thee? Did he not find thee erring, and guide thee? Did he not find thee needy and suffice [enrich] thee?”³⁹

Such statements, while not wholly incontestable, “may”, says Maxime Rodinson, “reasonably be regarded as sure”.⁴⁰ However, most of what is claimed by tradition turns out under scholarly examination to owe more to myth-making than hard fact. Because nothing much was known about Mohammed’s early life, the vacuum was easily filled with legends, which grow ever more didactic, elaborate and fantastic over time.

Rodinson makes the point that, as Islam became the religion of powerful states, “precepts were needed to regulate social life”.⁴¹ Naturally, different opinions and interests clashed and contended. Rival political parties quickly hardened - at first based around the prophet’s family and close companions. In addition, numerous followers - members of ruling elites, the religiously pious or merely the plain curious - demanded further details about Mohammed. Learned men arose whose sole profession was to act as repositories of tradition. Religious scholars, not historians.

What Mohammed was reported to have said or done - from the finer points of table manners to the laws of succession - became the norm to which the whole of humanity ought to adhere. “It was”, of course, a simple matter to “make up false traditions” to support this or that party or opinion.⁴² And, as we have already mentioned, the *hadiths* luxuriantly grew and grew. Shia and Sunni now have competing sets of volumes. Leading officials, thinkers and jurists recognised the dangers early on and tried to do some radical pruning. Nonetheless, they were left with a mass of literature - all originating from oral sources - that often annoyingly and frustratingly disagreed when it came to specific subjects or incidents. This left more than ample room for scholastic interpretation and theological stick-bending.

That does not mean Mohammed is doomed to remain an altogether mysterious figure. As with Jesus a rough outline can be established - that is, if we proceed with a due sense of discrimination and the right historical method. There are not only bitter factional divisions within Islam, but conflicting versions of the *Sira*. The first is said to have been written just a few decades after Mohammed’s death: however, it does not survive. Ibn

Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah* is a much later work and comes in two versions, which contain important discrepancies. Nonetheless, there is wide agreement when it comes to the main events of his life, the names of his wives and companions, their kinship and genealogy, as well as on a great many other things, down to details which are so trivial that it would seem unlikely that anyone would go to the bother of making them up. Moreover, while most accounts of Mohammed's childhood are doubtless pure invention, they do unintentionally cast a light on the world that he was born into and helped shape.

Perhaps the young Mohammed did have a nurse from amongst a nomadic clan who took him to live in the wilderness, where he breathed in its tribal values, along with the pure desert air. Perhaps as a child he laboured as a humble shepherd tending the flocks of Abu Talib, his guardian and uncle. Likewise, before his lucrative marriage to Khadija, perhaps he journeyed to Syria on her behalf and returned with the skilfully worked goods of Byzantine for resale in the Meccan market. But then again, perhaps not. There is no certain evidence for such stories, even of a tangential nature.

Though Muslim tradition insists that Mohammed had no dealing with the pagan cults of his native city, this seems highly improbable. There are clear indications that go to show that as a young man, like most of his contemporaries, he worshiped the gods of his fathers. Nevertheless, there were individuals and small groups of Arabs in Mecca who rejected the old paganism and embraced modified Jewish and Christian doctrines. Mohammed seems to have encountered such people, been influenced by them and finally sought to exert his leadership over their whole milieu. Hence I think it is safe to assume that Mohammed and his party knew about Jewish and Christian scriptures. So maybe they had available a Syriac lectionary that a few amongst them were capable of reading and making a stab at translating.

Mohammed - seemingly a man of great ability - began preaching at the age of 40, says the *Sira*. Why? Rodinson floats a number of reasons, including those of a psychological nature. Unlike his later marriages, the partnership with Khadija does not seem to be the result of a burning sexual passion. Mohammed exhibited respect and admiration for her. As an orphan it is possible that he was attracted to an older woman as a mother substitute. Speculation aside, Mohammed fathered a number of children with Khadija.

Four were daughters - Zaynab, Ruqayya, Fatima and Umm Kulthum - nothing to celebrate for an Arab traditionalist, neither in those days, nor these. All her sons died in infancy. Tradition tells us something of them. Al-Qasim lived till he was aged two; after his loss Mohammed incorporated his name into his own. There was an Abdallah who may have been named Abd Manaf, after the god Manaf. Mohammed adopted two boys. His adolescent cousin, Ali, was adopted after his father, Abu Talib, experienced a financial disaster of some kind. Khadija also gave Mohammed a young slave who had strong Christian affiliations, named Zayd. He was given his freedom and also adopted.

Anyway, Rodinson suggests that Mohammed might have turned preacher because Khadija gave him no sons. Just fathering girls was considered a source of shame amongst Arabs, given their patriarchal outlook and values. Such men were called *abtar* - roughly 'mutilated'. Then there was sexual frustration. Unlike the typical Meccan merchant he did not take other wives. Polygamy was widespread. So were temporary marriages and the use of foreign prostitutes. Good-looking slaves of both sexes could be purchased too. Yet Mohammed maintained a monogamous relationship. This might have been because of his deep affection and feelings of loyalty and gratitude to Khadija; then again, as a rich woman in her own right, she may have imposed such a marriage settlement on him. Certainly after her death, a highly sexed Mohammed established a harem with young and attractive wives. He gave himself special dispensation from the Islamic limit of men maintaining *only* four wives at a time. We are told Mohammed married 17 women. Eleven are enumerated and they occupied separate apartments at Medina arranged around the prophet's house. He visited them in turn. They were all widows apart from Ayesha. She was reportedly only nine years old when Mohammed consummated the relationship. Edward Gibbon waspishly applauds the "modesty" of Mohammed.⁴³ Compared with the legend of Solomon's 700 wives and 300 concubines, this was self-restraint.

Undoubtedly, Mohammed reflected his time, yet he was simultaneously ahead of his time. As a man who had experienced the emotional turmoil and material insecurity of an orphan, he could readily empathise with those who lived outside his own privileged class position. That coincided with an intense desire to bring about extraordinary, not to say universal, change. He

must have yearned to sweep aside the complacency, selfishness and frustratingly unambitious moral, political and religious norms of the day.

Usually calm and considered, he is shown to have experienced blackouts and moments of trance-like revelation. Then the angels transported his body and god instructed him. Mohammed's fellow countrymen would not have considered this abnormal. Arabia teemed with seers, diviners, magicians and other holy men. But, whereas they were rooted in local shamanistic practices, Mohammed drew on wider and more abstract notions of the divine that were fast gaining a foothold in Arabia.

With the renewal of the titanic conflict between Sasanian Persia and Byzantine - war broke out in 572 - there came the growing conviction that humanity was facing the end of times. God would soon judge both the living and the dead. Warfare between the two great powers unleashed all manner of lesser class conflicts and national uprisings. Eg, Jews sought to revenge themselves upon their Greek Christian oppressors. Meanwhile, such was their alienation from official Christianity that the heretical sects often preferred to stay neutral or actually side with the Persians. But everywhere there was decay, dislocation and collapse.

These events resonated in Arabia and made a great impression. Among Jewish and Christian sects, millenarian propaganda was rife. We appear to read in the *Koran* that Mohammed was accused of listening to men whose speech was "barbarous"⁴⁴ - but despite these menacing criticisms Mohammed is drawn to the "creed of Abraham", who was a man of "pure faith and no idolater".⁴⁵ Mohammed gradually began to piece together his own theological outlook about this world and the next.

Judeo-Christian stories are undoubtedly given an Arabic twist. Given the strength of foreign, often deeply resented, influences in Arabia, some authors equate his doctrine with nativism. Eg, the Amerindian ghost dancers of the western USA who desperately resisted European expansion. And yet Mohammed denounced local gods and idols, at least with the exception of Allah. But, though this was the name of the top god of the old Arabian pantheon, in the hands of Mohammed he became the one god, the same god worshiped by both Jews and Christians. It was Allah who had created heaven and earth and was responsible for the fate of all nations and peoples. Just as the Jews made their main tribal god, Yahweh, a universal

god, so did Mohammed.**** And, just as Yahweh had a special connection with the Jews, Allah had a special connection with the Arabs. His shrine was the Ka'ba in Mecca. Hence, while some elements of Arab tradition were discarded, others were retained, albeit in modified form. The black stone built into the wall of the Ka'ba - in all likelihood a meteorite - continued to be regarded with veneration and Mohammed purportedly decreed that every Muslim had to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. Doubtless pilgrimage was, we presume, the source of considerable additional income for the town well before his time (and therefore supported a whole service class of innkeepers, souvenir sellers, cooks, prostitutes, etc).

****As with the Hebrew canon, there are remnants of the ancient tradition which survive, most notably in the so-called 'Satanic verses': "Have you considered El-Lat and El-'Uzza and Manet the third, the other? What, have you males, and he females? That was indeed an unjust division. They are naught but names yourselves have named, and your fathers; god has sent down no authority touching them. They follow only surmise, and what the souls desire; and yet guidance has come to them from their lord. Or shall man have whatever he fancies? And to god belongs the first and the last." In other words, the Meccans were being told that they could still honour the three leading goddesses in the old pantheon. Allat, or El-Lat, was the wife or daughter of Allah. Her main shrine was at Taif, located near Mecca. A shamed Mohammed later claimed that Satan put these offending words into his mouth in an unguarded moment.

Mohammed modified other Arab traditions too and elevated them from the tribal to the universal. Feuding and vendetta were outlawed amongst believers. One Muslim had to lend aid to another. No Muslim could make a separate peace with unbelievers. Where before there had been alliances of tribes, there was now to be a sense of community based on religion. Blood ties were replaced by confessional solidarity. In the same manner the mutual aid of the tribes and the obligatory generosity expected towards those in need were transferred to the religious community itself. From a very early stage Mohammed's Muslim party began to build political structures and social services which could substitute for those of the decaying tribes.

Mohammed's first followers came from a similar class background to himself. They were the younger sons and cousins of rich merchants who lacked an easy path to social success and those from the Quraysh of the outside - middling and smaller merchants who were struggling to survive in business. The *Koran* reflects their world outlook. It is threaded with commercial expressions and concepts. Relations between man and god are like a commercial contract. Believers are expected to sell their souls to

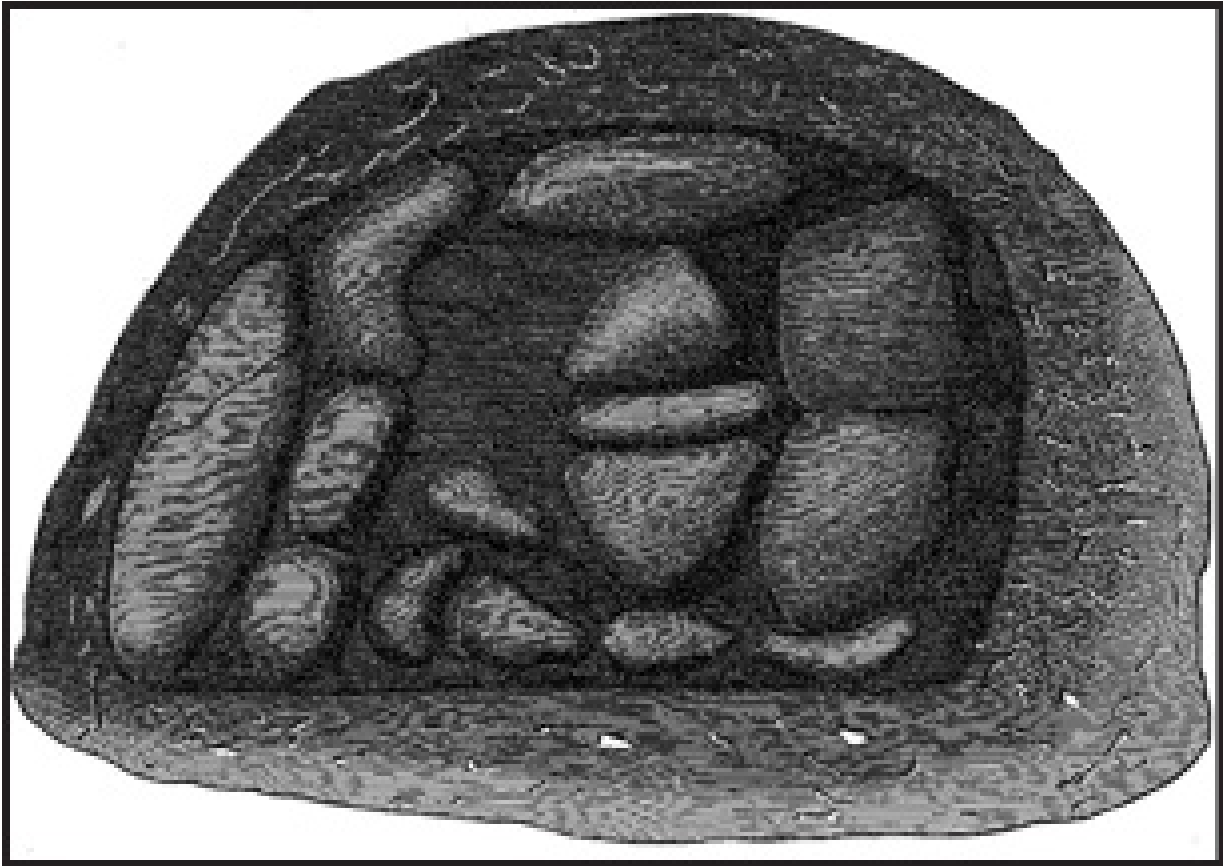
Allah and credit is accumulated for good deeds in the expectation of eventual reward. Allah is the ideal merchant. In contrast to flesh and blood merchants, Allah is honest and never cheats. Life is a balance sheet of profit and loss. Wrong-doing believers can be forgiven, but transgressions are always accounted for. The unbeliever is a bankrupt and will be condemned to hell on the day of final reckoning. Believers reap their profits once in heaven.

Heaven is depicted as a bountiful garden with cool pavilions, springs, exotic fruit and orchards of shady trees. The ultimate Meccan gentleman's club. Hell - Gehenna or the blaze - is given an equally Arabian treatment. The damned are cast into an endless desert. They quench their thirst only by drinking "boiling water and pus". The *Koran* threatens the rich with such a fate. Not because they are rich, but because of their greed. They do not urge the "feeding of the needy". They devour the inheritance of women, children and the weak. All that matters to them is earthly wealth: as a punishment they must pass through the gates of Gehenna "to dwell therein forever".⁴⁶

In effect then, Mohammed's infant party represented the urban middle classes against the Meccan oligarchy. The proletariat and Bedouins were encouraged, later corralled, into becoming allies in this sacred cause. Unsurprisingly, Mohammed's party was condemned by those above - he endangered the status of Mecca as a centre of pilgrimage and idol worship; moreover, he was dismissed as a low-class upstart. A religiously-cloaked period of reaction followed.

A sketch of the black stone (actually it is more a burnt umber colour).

Though a central object of Muslim veneration and built into the south-eastern wall of the Ka'ba, the fetish was worshipped well before the time of Mohammed. Each god had their own fetish. Deliberately smashed in 930 by members of the Qarmatian sect, the pieces were later returned and put together using a combination of pitch and silver wire.



The extent of this counter-offensive may well be exaggerated in later accounts, but it proved sufficient to persuade a group of Mohammed's converts to leave for Ethiopia. As for Mohammed himself, failure to make rapid progress against the 'party of hypocrites' in Mecca caused him to look elsewhere. He accepted an invitation from Medina to transfer his party of Muslims to that *rival* city. Clearly circumstances here were ripe for his revolution. Not being a pilgrimage centre, Medina had no vested interest in the old religion, and furthermore appears to have wanted an authoritative figure to serve as a mediator. The Meccan oligarchy raised no objection and allowed first his followers and then Mohammed himself to leave in peace and at their own pace. He did so in 622. Here begins the Islamic era.



An old photo. The black stone measures about 10 inches in diameter and is in all probably a meteorite. No scientific investigations have been allowed by the Saudi authorities.

The Medinan revolution

The oasis of Medina was inhabited by many Jews - both Arab converts and those whose ancestors might have conceivably originated in Palestine. There were three Jewish tribes - the Banu Qurayza, the Banu Nadir and the Banu Qaynuqua: by custom the first two engaged in agriculture, while the latter were smiths and armourers. Two Arab tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, settled in the town after them - first as clients, then as the dominant element. By inviting in Mohammed, the *ansar*, the helpers,

unleashed a social revolution - first in one city, then across the whole of Arabia. There were winners and losers.

To begin with, Mohammed faced some stiff opposition in Medina. That included the Jewish tribes. Mohammed had presumably hoped to win support from amongst them. His new religion was overtly coloured by Judaism. Eg, Muslims were ordered to fast for Yom Kippur and pray in the direction of Jerusalem. Yet the Jews themselves apparently remained stubbornly unconvinced. Being internally divided, they were, however, unable to hold off Mohammed and his party.

Mohammed quickly extended his political power. He went from being in effect Medina's chief magistrate, whose main task was mediation, to being its theocratic ruler. He decreed that "the children of Israel" and their religious practices would be tolerated. True believers were organised into a distinct, albeit wider, community, the umma. The umma had simultaneously a religious and a political significance. It was a community of believers, a super-tribe. In effect what he was establishing in Mecca was a proto-state in the midst of tribal decay and anarchy. Membership of the religiously defined super-tribe carried definite rights and obligations. Given the prevailing social circumstances, this proved attractive to both the middle class merchants and the urban poor. Suffice to say, within the umma the patriarchal authority of Mohammed ruled supreme.

Secure in their Medina base, Mohammed and his followers turned to robbing Meccan caravan routes. Endemic antagonism between the two cities provided an easy excuse. This tactic had a dual purpose. Firstly, it helped to weaken Mecca and bring forward the day of its conversion. Secondly, it enriched the umma in Medina. The raid of March 624 by 300 Muslims under the direct command of Mohammed is celebrated in the *Koran*. Success in the so-called battle of Badr - "god surely helped you" - emboldened Mohammed.⁴⁷ Internally he turned against the Jews and Christians in Medina. They were now accused of falsifying their scriptures so as to conceal his prophetic mission. He first expelled the Banu Qaynuqa from Medina and then, from a position of strength, ordered the total destruction of the Banu Qurayza: "All adult males were to be slain, the women and children sold into slavery".⁴⁸ To ensure continuing warfare with Mecca he adopted it as the holy Muslim city. His followers were told

to stop praying in the direction of Jerusalem. Now they had to turn towards Mecca. Prayer symbolised and focused secular ambition.

Perhaps such anti-Jewish stories were introduced much later. We have already referred to the Crone-Crook thesis of a strategic Muslim alliance with the Jews in order to break the hold of Byzantine and found god's kingdom in Palestine. Architectural evidence has been fielded supporting this notion. The Dome of the Rock mosque is not designed directionally. There is no original southern pointer for mass prayer, no *qibla*, as is now standard. Instead of the focus being in the direction of Mecca, the whole building appears to be arranged according to another, altogether different, plan. It is a "tall cylinder" surrounded by an "octagonal ring".⁴⁹ Therefore, perhaps, it was a circulatory. Worshipers were expected to go round the building, at least to begin with, in the manner seen to this day with the Ka'ba. So maybe Jerusalem was Islam's first and foremost holy centre for longer than the 17 months credited by tradition.

The ground plans of the other mosques of the early Muslim empire are cited as further evidence. The point of prayer, the *qibla*, is not orientated towards Mecca. That is certain. Jerusalem was conceivably the point of prayer. But the evidence here is frankly unconvincing. Hence the argument that the orientation is towards the winter sunset and sunrise or even the four winds. However, possibly, the confusion arises because, to begin with at least, Muslims often simply took over and converted Christian churches. Decorative features were easily modified or altered. Christians did the same with the Roman empire's pagan temples. And it was not only early Islam. Istanbul's huge and world-renowned Aya Sofia church, built under the Byzantine emperor, Justinian, in the 6th century, was transformed into a mosque after the seizure of the city by sultan Mehmed II in 1453. As a grand gesture, Aya Sofia was turned into a museum in 1935 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secularising regime.

The Muslim empire and its Arabisation

Because Mohammed preached a universalistic ideology, through which he could successfully unite middle class merchants and lower class Arabs of

all tribes, his prestige and following grew in leaps and bounds. That translated into military effectiveness. In January 630 the chance murder of a Muslim furnished the excuse needed for the final assault on Mecca. Following Mohammed's victory, increasing numbers of distant Arabic tribes recognised the hegemony of Medina ... and, so the story goes, Mohammed's mission as the last and greatest prophet.

Anyway, according to the *Sira*, Mohammed died on June 8 632 after a short illness. On balance, the subsequent Arab takeovers of Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Iraq surely owed less to his appropriation of biblical ideas: more to the extreme weakness of the Byzantine empire and its Sasanid rival-imitator. The first military actions took the form of bandit raids and only turned into wars of conquest - once border tribes and their military commanders had proven the vulnerability of both Byzantium and Sasanid Persia. Given the vice-like taxation imposed by Byzantium, the Christian populations of Egypt and Syria had no interest in resisting the Muslim invaders. Having played a vanguard role, the borderland Bedouin tribal chiefs had to call upon the Muslim leaders in the heartlands, represented by Medina, if they wanted to overcome more serious resistance. That is, full-scale Byzantine and Persian armies. While not being the driving force for the Arab conquests, religion did provide the vital organising intelligence and the source of wider solidarity.

Where the prophet established his theocracy to cover most of the sparsely inhabited Arabian peninsula, his successors ruled a huge, diverse and exceedingly rich empire with many millions of subjects. Wealth flowed into their coffers in a fabulous flood. The first two of the four Rashidun caliphs appear to have separated their personal finances from the state's treasury. Acting like salaried functionaries, they carefully administered the incoming tribute and distributed it to the umma under the supervision of other Muslim notables and often in close consultation with them.

The main call on the treasury was what is now euphemistically described as the defence budget. But there was an ever growing Muslim welfare state too. Conversion in the Islamic empire was therefore actively discouraged. Not surprisingly. Each and every new Muslim *subtracted* from the tribute coming from the special tax, the *jizya*, imposed on non-Muslims, and *added* to the outgoings from the umma's treasury. Conversion provided the pin number needed to access the generous benefits system.

Eg, Umar, the second caliph, decreed that every Muslim child was to be given the monetary equivalent of 600 grams of silver on the day of their birth. Widows and dependants of those who had served with the military drew on the *diwan*, a huge pension scheme, as did retired soldiers themselves. A big percentage of the overall Muslim population. And anyone who had family or close personal connections with Mohammed received more than generous handouts and leapt straight into the ranks of the rich.

Umar forbade the religious aristocracy from migrating to the newly acquired territories. A form of elite control. As a religious devout, his excuse was guarding souls from the moral corruption of the fleshpots in Syria and Iraq. Simultaneously, and more to the point, he was doubtless acutely aware that Mohammed's close companions and relatives were likely to pursue their own political ambitions.

Tight control was exercised over the tribal armies too. Initially, culture and religion manifestly distinguished conquerors from conquered. They were barbarians, mainly Bedouins from the desert wilderness, spoke Arabic and worshiped Allah. Separateness had to be artificially maintained though, if the agents of tribute extraction were to remain reliably opposed to the source of that tribute. Hence the caste of Islamic warriors were housed in Spartan garrison towns built at various strategic locations within the new and expanding empire. Damascus being the only established city that served as a Muslim centre. Each garrison town had its mosque, a square for common Friday prayers and religious schools. If they were generously paid and kept culturally separate, the army could that way be kept from going native.

Umar prohibited the allocation of land to Arab governors, generals and soldiers. Instead he ordered that land should be state-owned and an annual tax imposed on those who worked it. Compared with the Byzantines and the Sasanids, the burden of exploitation appears to have been lighter. Nevertheless, the Rashidun caliphs constructed an elaborate tribute-warfare state whose day-to-day administration was left largely in the hands of the old Greek and Persian-speaking bureaucracy inherited from pre-conquest times. The caliphs trusted neither the religious elite nor the tribal armies. Hence the Arabs ruled their newly acquired empire in an indirect fashion.

Ideologically and structurally, the Rashidun caliphate bears comparison with the Arian (Ostrogoth, Visigoth, Vandal, Burgundian and Lombard) kingdoms, which in the 5th century replaced the western Roman empire. Christianity's first great schism happened over the Arian 'heresy'. An Alexandria-based theologian, Arius (c250-336), taught that Jesus was a perfect being, but in no way was he, the son, on the same level as god. The creation god of Genesis had to be first. Arius found himself condemned, proscribed and then, finally, persecuted. The church establishment was digging itself deeper and deeper into a trinitarian bunker: ie, god the father, god the holy ghost and god the son were of the same timeless substance.

Thanks to the intervention of Constantine at the first council of Nicea in 325, the trinitarian Nicene faction triumphed. Shortly after that, however, during the 340s, Ulfilas (c311-80), a Goth and an Arian Christian, embarked on his blessed mission to convert the barbarians across the Danube. A century later, Arian Germanic warrior bands had overrun the decayed western Roman empire and made themselves its rulers.

In general there was Christian toleration. Arians and Nicenes each maintained entirely separate church buildings, hierarchies and congregations. Like the Arab Muslims after them, religion allowed the Germanic military tribute-takers to separate themselves off in terms of ethnic identity from the surrounding sea of tribute givers. The elite were Arian; the common people Nicene.

Such socially narrow regimes typically depend on forward momentum and therefore a clear balance of success when it comes to military encounters. Two benign consequences follow from constant forward momentum. Firstly, successive rushes of booty flowing into the body politic of the conquerors. Secondly, however, especially if expansion proceeds with a wide degree of popular collaboration, at least the possibility of an amelioration of the position of the immediate producers in the conquered territories.

Arian Germanics enjoyed an almost miraculously swift westward expansion. Visigoths famously killed the Roman emperor, Valens, and destroyed his army at the battle of Adrianopolis (Edirne) in 378. In 401-03 they invaded and looted the length of Italy and withdrew only after extracting the promise of enormous payments and an agreement giving them free access to southern Gaul. They lived there as *hospitalitas* - a

Roman legal device whereby the rural population were obliged to provision billeted troops. Their settlements formed the nucleus of the future Visigothic kingdom that would eventually expand across the Pyrenees into Spain. In 475 the western Roman emperor was forced to recognise their full independence.

Other Germanic confederations followed a similar pattern. In 406 tens of thousands of Asding and Siling Vandal warriors, along with allies and camp followers, swarmed over a frozen Rhine at Mainz. They pillaged their way into Gaul, sacking Trier and occupying Boulogne. Three years later the Vandals pushed their way into the Iberian peninsula. The western Roman emperor granted them land in Gallaecia as *foederati*. On balance local landlords thought it best to cooperate. Under king Geiseric, the Vandals abandoned Spain for the Roman province of Mauritania. Purportedly 80,000, including 30,000 armed men, made the crossing in 429 over the Straits of Gibraltar. A decade later Vandal forces captured Carthage and won diplomatic recognition for their African kingdom. Their elite extracted surplus product by the simple device of taking hold of the largely intact Roman administration and the latifundia-villa system of agricultural production. Leading men lived off the old Roman system and constituted themselves a caste of heavy cavalry whose main business was war.

The Ostrogoth king, Theodoric, took the whole of Italy in the late 5th century - his successors ruled well into the 6th century. Initially, at least, some greeted the Ostrogoths as liberators. Ideologically, Theodoric presented his men as protectors of peaceful Romans. Ostrogoths as a population lived in garrison towns, held to a different Christianity, spoke a foreign tongue and operated according to their own, distinct, legal system. In fact the Ostrogoth elite - like the Visigoths and Vandals - interwove Germanic military forms with existing Roman forms of administration, law and production, and thereby created a feudal mode of production.

Yet like a loop-back electronic mechanism, once expansion halts, incoherence and breakdown follows. Denied the booty that comes with forward-moving military success, the Arian kingdoms proved extremely fragile. An already narrow social base further shrinks and their kingdoms become easy prey for expansionist neighbours. Vandal north Africa fell in 533-34 before a temporarily resurgent Byzantium. The Ostrogoths suffered the same fate in Italy after they were routed in 552. The Franks expelled the

Visigoths from France in 501 and in 534 they finally overcame the Burgundians. And where Arian kingdoms were not conquered, they decided to convert and assimilate. Hence what had been the western Roman empire stayed Latin and Nicene.

In the Middle East and the Maghreb a similar, but opposite, process occurred – tribute-givers steadily, inexorably, opted for the religion of tribute-takers. They Arabised in language too. Nevertheless, before that, the Arab Muslim conquistadors showed many of the same salient features as the Germanic Arians. Not only did they deny Jesus as god; the Arabs kept themselves ethnically-religiously separate from the mass of the common people. A kind of Muslim apartheid.

Arab disunity

Hijaz merchants fanned out throughout the empire, built palatial homes for themselves and amassed considerable fortunes. No longer tolerated foreigners, now they were members of the master race. Long-distance trade had been given a significant boost too. The iron curtain separating what is now Syria and Iraq was torn down: rolling back Byzantine and the total collapse of the Sasanids saw to that. A vast free trade area was created.

And at their height Muslim realms spread from the Atlantic in the west to the Indian Ocean in the east (see figure 6). The whole economic space being joined together by ports, caravan trains and an archipelago of opulent mercantile cities. Before, the Arab conquest trade had been indirect, taking the form of a relay system. As we have already explained, merchants, especially on land, traded in their own locale and moved

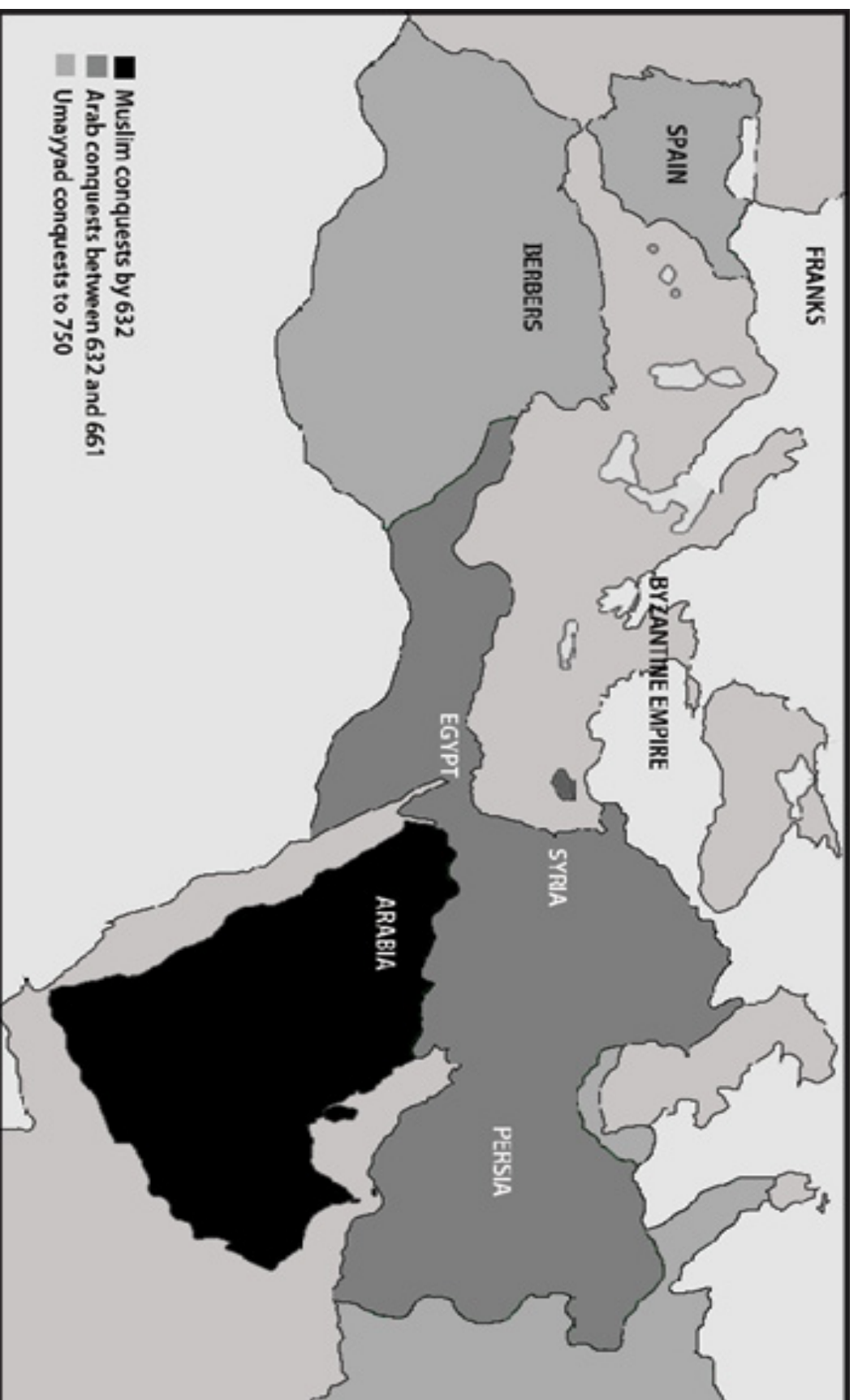


Figure 6. Growth of the Muslim empire

goods to the next. No group organised the entire journey. However, with the spreading Muslim conquests, things changed. Arab merchants, or their trusted agents, would traverse the greater length of the commodity journey, dispensing with the previous system of intermediaries and thereby eliminating the localised profit rake-offs in the process.

There are definite limits on the life expectations of the Baghdad silversmith, the Mesopotamian grain farmer or the nomadic Hijaz camel-herder. They all rely on their own ability to labour. But there are only 24 hours in the day. By contrast the only limit that exists on the new Arab merchant is the ability to lay out money. Borrowing from others in order to buy on an extended scale is always a gamble. With sale, however, there is the chance of substantial returns. Especially if one learns to calculate from the biggest figures to the tiniest fractions through the mastery of mathematics. As trade booms, alongside the development of the credit system, as the gap separating buying and selling grows in time and space, the more complex calculations must be - hence the Arab invention of double-entry book-keeping, percentages and the adoption of the Indian zero, etc.

However, despite such huge advances, it must be understood, the main source of income into the caliphate's treasury derived not from taxes imposed on the new Arab merchants. As in most pre-capitalist social formations, that honour fell squarely on agriculture. In terms of tax yields one source gives the ratio of 20 to one for land compared to "all indirect taxes".⁵⁰

So it would be mistaken to categorise the Arab empire as a mercantile social formation, a direct continuation or generalisation of Mecca. It was booty and land tax which paid for the welfare system. There is, however, a quick end to Mohammed's middle class revolution. The third caliph, Uthman, was Mohammed's son-in-law. Yet within the Rashidun caliphate he marks a definite break. The Margaret Thatcher of Islam, Uthman was extremely rich in his own right. He belonged to the great Umayyad mercantile family, hence a member of the Quraysh of the inside. By seizing the caliphate through the elevation of Uthman, this class once again puts itself firmly back at the top. Except now it has a world empire at its

disposal. To strengthen his religious-military-political control - and doubtless to further enrich himself and his extended family- provincial military commanders and governors appointed under Umar are systematically levered aside by Uthman. His relatives are shooed in.

Uthman also doles out treasury money to chosen favourites and relaxes restrictions on the private accumulation of landed wealth. Provincial military commanders and governors - many now being Umayyads, of course - make themselves great landowners. Hence the prime source of *personal* wealth for the Arab elite outside Arabia becomes land as well as state office.

Rich Arab merchants either merged with the state bureaucracy and thereby elevated themselves or they formed a dependent or subaltern class. Like the Arian Germanics, the Rashidun caliphate obviously experienced leap-frogging military advances. To the north and the west, Syria, Palestine and Egypt fell at lightning speed. The destruction of the Sasanid army at Qadisiyyad (637) to the north-east handed them Iraq and Persia. Stunning, surely god-given, victories. Uthman's forces added Cyprus and Tripoli and reached Afghanistan. Hardly glittering prizes, though. For the umma, the costs in men and material needed to win them proved heavy and the booty that flowed back was, in comparative terms, paltry.

Contradictions begin to mount. Between declining booty and rising welfare outgoings, something has to give. The Shi'ite schism has its origins in this scissors crisis. Enraged by Uthman's naked nepotism, the party of Medina puritans, the party of tradition, led by Ali, the prophet's cousin, raises the flag of protest ... and doubtless busily plots. In 656, a group of disaffected Arab soldiers, returning to Medina, storm Uthman's house. They kill him and proclaim Ali the new caliph.

A fitful, indecisive, civil war, the *fitna*, follows, during which Ali constantly vacillates and seeks a compromise. Rich, one of the religious aristocracy, he has no interest in unleashing a full-blown class war from below. Ali even turns against the extreme left. The Muslim equivalent of England's Levellers and Diggers. Like Cromwell he brutally crushes them. Though defeated, the Kharajites manage to survive and indeed grow into a successful underground movement. It is one of its partisans who, in an act of revenge, assassinates Ali. Peace is restored to the Muslim world only

when Ali's son, Hasan, agrees to an Umayyad buy-out. He retires to a quiet, luxurious life in Medina. Some say he is later poisoned.

The Umayyad's new caliph, Muawiyah (602-80), was a member of the Meccan Quraysh clan and governor of Syria. Not surprisingly then, he had the support of the army in Syria and many of the biggest Arab merchants. Especially those who still liked to parade themselves as members of the Quraysh of the inside. Against the half-heartedness and vacillation of Ali - and Hasan - he was bound to win. And one of the first things Muawiyah did was transfer the capital from Medina to Damascus.

The Arabian peninsula once again becomes marginal to world history (though Medina does manage to constitute itself one of the four schools of Islamic law - *maliki*). This shift of Islam's political centre of gravity is a recognition of the Umayyad's new power and wealth base. But the family are also proclaiming themselves to be as much dynastic rulers of an Arab imperium as the religious successors of Mohammed.

With the Umayyad caliphate, the doctrinal unity of Islam shatters forever. Shia Islam talks of the Umayyads in the same way that British-Irish protestants refer to the Roman papacy. By contrast Ali and Hasan are venerated as sacred martyrs - commemorated to this day with displays of self-flagellation and shedding of much blood. The Umayyads were in many respects Arab nationalists. They go on to replace Greek and Persian as the language of government. Simultaneously, the Umayyads attempt to continue the apartheid-like separation of Arabs and non-Arabs - eg, the garrison towns - and the ban on common soldiers being granted land. A losing battle. There is intermarriage, and increasing numbers of non-Arabs become Arabs and/or converts to Islam.

Assimilation was relatively easy. Not surprisingly, it was the "urban merchants and notables" who first began to Arabise. They adopt Arabic names in parallel with Christian or Jewish names (such as bishop Johannes of Cordova, who is also known as Asbag ibn Abdullah) and to imitate the appearance and styles of dress of the victors. For example, Mozarabic (Arabised Iberian Christian) women "began to wear the veil outside the home".⁵¹ While there were instances of Arab resentment and cold-shouldering, the conquering people were culturally pre-programmed to accept outsiders into their ranks. Arab tribes customarily absorbed client

peoples. With the sole proviso of scale, that proved to be the case with whole places such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, north Africa, etc. Gradually the majority of their people become Arab and Muslim. In turn, newcomers to the umma provide the recruits for armies of next conquest. Syrians and Egyptians drive into the Maghreb. Berbers - who mainly continued speak Tamazight - take Spain and Sicily. Persians -who keep their own language too - invade north India. Thus Islam expanded in wider and wider concentric circles.

Here, doubtless, is the source of the commonly held misconception that Islam is a religion that is theologically committed to conquest and forceful conversion. Actually, in their rapid imperial expansionism, the Arab Muslims were merely following in the prior footsteps of Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Medes, Persians, Macedonians and Romans. As to conversion, the fact of the matter is that some Christian populations did not convert despite the material incentive Muslims enjoyed of living virtually tax-free. That is why Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine have to this day sizeable Christian minorities. Islam recognised the right of Jews and Christians to worship freely and to engage in economic activity. Jews most definitely flourished under Islam as money-lenders, bankers and merchant traders. In return for toleration, this people-religion, fellow children of Abraham, paid the *jizya*. It was in order to escape this always annoying, and sometimes onerous, tax burden, that many, eventually the overwhelming majority, saw the light and adopted the one true faith.

However, as noted above, that had the effect of reducing the tax base and adding to the outgoings of the umma treasury. A contradiction further compounded when military victory inevitably gives way to defeat. The umma treasury has three main sources: taxes on land, taxes on non-Muslim subjects and, last and by no means least, booty.

Muslim forces were soundly beaten by Charles Martel's Franks at Tours in 732. The Ulayyads are then driven out of France. In 739 they suffer a ghastly defeat at Akroinon. Leo III re-establishes full Byzantine control over Asia Minor. In the same year the Umayyads face a major revolt by the Berbers in north Africa, subdued only with much difficulty. Nor can they stabilise their hold over Bactria and Transoxiana.

So external booty tends to evaporate along with those who internally pay the *jizya*. The umma's expanding welfare state morphs into a contracting

welfare state. The last 10 years of the Umayyad caliphate are characterised by increased stresses and strains. A rash of coup attempts finish with a full blown revolution.

Publicly, there were some significant achievements under the Umayyad regime. The Dome of the Rock mosque was completed in 692. Even today it dominates the Jerusalem skyline. The style is clearly Byzantine, but it is undeniably a magnificent Muslim building. The mosque cost the annual tribute from Egypt. Other hugely expensive projects were sponsored, including the Grand Mosque in Damascus. Built over a controversially demolished Christian church, it is still one of the largest and most impressive mosques in the world. Two hundred imported Byzantine artisans were employed in its construction. Another loud, brash and self-confident statement of Umayyad wealth and Arab colonial power. Think of the Gothic railway stations, Romanesque town halls and Anglican cathedrals built under the Raj in Delhi, Calcutta and Bombay.

Otherwise, though, the cultural output of the Umayyad regime is rather poor. They are credited with overseeing the transition from oral storytellers to the written *hadiths* and from custom to early legal literature. On closer examination, however, this appears to be the work of parties *oppositional to* the regime. Nevertheless, outward monumental splendour and an impoverished inner world shows that the Umayyad colonial-military regime was yet to be fully conquered by the higher civilisations it has conquered.

The Abbasid caliphate (750-935) based its legitimacy much more overtly on Islam as distinct from Arabness. That is what enabled it to gain support from the *mawali*, non-Arab (Persian) Muslim converts, and the Shia schism (though when they got in to power they betrayed the Shia). The role of the Shia and *mawali* in the Abbasid revolution also reflects the growing centrifugal forces at work within the Muslim world. Shortly after the Abbasid revolution, provinces such as Egypt and north Africa (but also the Spanish Umayyad emirate) achieve *de facto* autonomy. As a result, economic forms become increasingly varied.

As already mentioned, the Islamic claims of the Abbasid regime went hand in hand with a steady separation of secular and religious power. The Abbasid caliphs lose out badly. First masters, then subordinates, finally victims. Though they were the Muslim equivalent of monarch and pope, effective political power passes to Persian emirs and Turkic generals.

Fracturing and stultifying the umma still further, oppositional and semi-oppositional figures arise out of *hadith* dogmatism and the *ulema* (the Islamic intelligentsia), who serve as judges, preachers, lawyers, teachers, advisers, military commanders and even theocrats. The *ulema* becomes the main source of religious authority and, given the divorce from the state, there is an added disintegrative tendency that drives society towards each individual mosque.

The Abbasids were unable to bend the *ulema* caste to their will, in no small part because of its popular base. Take the case of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855) and the Mutazilite inquisition, the *mihna*. All members of the *ulema* had to affirm that the *Koran* was created by Allah speaking through Mohammed. In other words they had to affirm the current religious doctrine of the Abbasids. Hanbal refused. He believed that the *Koran* was uncreated and eternal. Clapped in jail and publicly flogged, he had to be released due to the mounting anger of the Baghdad street.

Three main factors kept the Muslim world from total disintegration. Firstly, there was what Patricia Crone calls 'slaves on horseback': ie, a reliance by the state on military force drawn from outside the umma. Secondly, a series of experiments with hybrid state regimes. Thirdly, a ratcheting intensification of agricultural exploitation. But each partial solution carries its own set of compounding contradictions. Let me elaborate.

The Abbasid caliphate removes Arabs from army lists. They are regarded as untrustworthy. Many tens of thousands of Turkic and Kurdish substitutes are imported. War captives, or bought from slave traders. The Mamluks *were* forcibly converted to Islam and then formed into special army units. The advantage of such troops was thought to be in their complete trustworthiness. Loyalty was supposed to be undivided. Neither family, clan nor religious sect linked them to an alternative centre of power or authority within the Muslim world. They would kill for the caliph and the caliph alone. Yet over time the Mamluks become a self-interested power in their own right. A military caste. On more than one occasion these slaves took dynastic power: for example, Egypt in 1250. In turn the Ottoman Turks were driven to adopt exactly the same solution. Christian outsiders, the so-called 'tribute children', were forcibly converted and raised to be professional soldiers, the Janissaries. Serving as members of the palace

guard, they were closely involved in the interminable royal succession struggles to the point of making the throne their slave.

What of hybrid regimes? The Fatimid caliphate is the best example. It ruled over varying stretches of north Africa, Egypt and Syria between the 10th and 12th centuries. The Fatimid family were members of the Ismaili branch of Shi'ism. Also - and here is where the hybrid nature of their regime comes in - they claimed to be a link in the long chain of caliphs. The founder of the dynasty, Abdullah al-Mahdi Billah, traced his antecedents from Mohammed himself via his daughter, Fatima, and her husband Ali, the first Shia imam, hence the name 'Fatimid'. Fatimids were therefore able to partially bridge the divide between the Shia imamate and the Sunni caliphate. Legitimacy was therefore considerably widened.

Yet, despite this, and the fact that the Fatimids displayed a degree of tolerance towards the non-Ismaili sects of Islam - as well as Jews and Copts - over the 11th-12th centuries they are hit by a series of body-blow rebellions. First the governors of north Africa break away, then Syria. They announce themselves Sunni converts. The crusades further diminish Fatimid territories. Finally, in 1169, the Sunni ruler of Syria, Nor ad-Din, and his famed general, Saladin, take Egypt.

Now let us discuss agricultural exploitation. A determining determinate. The Abbasid caliphs and their provincial governors plough considerable resources into land reclamation, irrigation and other such projects. A necessary turn from absolute expansion to intensifying exploitation. Agriculture had suffered serious decay. But the restoration of productivity levels did not mean general wealth. The surplus product extracted from the peasants was hiked. Under the Abbasids, a more efficient and ruthless collection of tribute is instituted. There is individual and village taxation. In southern Iraq there is also the introduction of large-scale foreign, black African, slave labour imported from entrepots such as Zanzibar. Constituting something like half the region's population, they were put to work transforming saline lands in order to make them fit for irrigation and hence the cultivation of highly profitable sugar-cane. These slaves were organised into gangs along the same murderous lines as in the classical Roman period.

As a consequence of the much heavier burden carried by the peasantry (and the slave labour system), the Abbasid period sees a widespread flight

to the cities, a rash of local uprisings and the general growth of revolutionary movements. The Kharajites grow and even experience brief moments of power, such as in the Maghreb. Over 868-883 southern Iraq is rocked by the Zanj slave revolt. There are in total 12 full-scale insurrections in Egypt between 780 and 844. Though informed by various Muslim doctrines, fuelling them all is desperate opposition to the increased tribute being screwed from agriculture.

Paradoxically, the break with Umayyad Arabism and the greater tax revenue extracted from agriculture allows an intellectual reappropriation of Mesopotamian, Persian and Greek achievements. This is equally true of the Umayyad emirate and later caliphate in Spain, since whatever the original intentions, this state *could not* any longer claim to be a ‘state of the Arabs’. There is a sustained burst of technical and intellectual creativity. From the Romans and Greeks the leading scholars of the Muslim world took science and philosophy, from Persia systems of administration and from India medicine and mathematics. Places like Baghdad, Cairo, Cordoba, Palermo and Aleppo surely contained the seeds of a Muslim enlightenment.

A few members of the intellectual avant garde such as al-Razi (854-925) press to the frontiers of atheism. Physician, philosopher and alchemist, he was known to the Latins as Rhazes, and embraced rationalism as outlook and method. Al-Razi dismissed scripture as just “unsubstantiated allegation”. He also expressed “grave doubts about the demonstrability of immortality” and upheld the “dialectically persuasive position” that, if death is the ultimate end of our existence, it is “nothing to be feared but only a surcease of our pains and troubles”.⁵² Several works produced by al-Razi skilfully defended atomism. An intellectual pinnacle.

The Arab-Muslim enlightenment never happens. Endemic dynastic disputes, constant religious schism, Christian crusades, then Mongol and Turkic invasions lead, inevitably, to the ever growing militarisation of Islamic society. All available surplus is channelled into the army. Perceptions of decline are masked somewhat by the incorporation of Mongolians and Turks and therefore renewed military prowess. Christendom is certainly haunted by the Muslim ghoul till early modern times. But Muscovy begins its eastward, tidal, expansion, and Portuguese,

Dutch, French and then, finally, British cannons break forever Islam's monopoly of east-west trade.

The Ottoman empire becomes the sick man of Europe. With the total militarisation of Islamic society, intellectual life undergoes marked regression. A counterreformation before there was a reformation. Toleration can no longer be tolerated. Dangerous thoughts are suppressed. Reaction triumphs in every sphere of life. Innovation and science flicker out.

Many of the propagandists of 19th century western imperialism invented their own self-justifying 'clash of civilisations' thesis. They insisted that Islam is naturally intolerant and benighted. Obviously, nothing could be further from the truth. Cause must be separated from effect. What flowered in the 9th century was a culture based on a rediscovered past. The subsequent decadence of the 12th and 13th centuries cannot be blamed on Islam as a religion. Rather its cause is to be found in the structural limits inherent in any military-tribute system.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Bolshevik lessons

How to respond to religion and religious people is a particularly contentious issue, especially when it comes to Islam and Muslims. I would suggest that some of the most valuable *practical* lessons we have available to us are to be found in the history of Bolshevism, Soviet Russia and the writings of Lenin.

Lenin - taking his cue from Karl Marx and Frederick Engels - argued that philosophically the world outlook of communists had to be materialist and therefore atheist. Each and every religious institution in modern-day society, even the many and various experiments in new age and alternative religions, divert the struggle against exploitation and oppression. Millenarian visions of peace, prosperity and perfect harmony, spiritual remedies, holy uppers and downers, cult identities act as alternatives to Marxism.

Lenin certainly had no wish to emulate the 18th century deists - or 19th century thinkers such as Ludwig Feuerbach - and 'improve' upon religion. An issue over which he famously clashed with Anatoly Lunarcharsky, Maxim Gorky and Alexander Bogdanov. They were ridiculed as 'god-builders' because of their elitist attempt to fashion a new, suitably popular, anti-capitalist religion. Their version of Marxism was to be mixed with theosophy and a dollop of folksy religion. The end result was to be a human collective capable of performing the same miracles that were once assigned to the gods themselves.*

* Gorky believed in thought transference, extrasensory perception and other such nonsense. Lenin insisted, by contrast, that there must be no blurring of the distinction that separates religion and historical materialism. No concession to idealism and religious superstition.

Everyone must be free to practise their religion, along with its various codes and requirements, or to practice no religion, insisted Lenin. Discrimination between citizens "on account of their religious convictions is wholly intolerable", he writes. Even mention of a person's religion in

official documents should be eliminated. So religion should be declared a private matter. That is the usual formulation Lenin upheld.

However, this needs elaborating upon in order to avoid any misunderstanding. The idea that religion should simply be covered under the heading “freedom of conscience”, can be found in the 1875 Gotha programme of the German Social Democratic Party. Yet Marx complained that this was not enough. The workers’ party “ought” to “have expressed its awareness of the fact that bourgeois ‘freedom of conscience’ is nothing but the toleration of all possible kinds of religious unfreedom of conscience”. Marx declared that the party should make clear that it was out to “liberate the conscience from the witchery of religion”.¹

The motive of the SDP leadership was clearly opportunist: ie, reassure the churches that they had nothing to fear from socialism, that they could continue unmolested in the enjoyment of their privileged place in society; furthermore, the Gotha formulation was intended to make socialism ‘palatable’ to the petty bourgeoisie, the peasantry and backward sections of the working class.

With the pending redraft of the programme due at the Erfurt congress in 1891, Engels did what he could to ensure the return to the position taken by the Eisenachers - the grouping founded by Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel - back in 1869: namely, strict separation of church and state, and church and school. Engels recommended a new formulation: “Complete separation of the church from the state. All religious communities without exception are to be treated by the state as private associations. They are to be deprived of any support from public funds and of all influence on public education.”² Unfortunately, his advice was not taken. Point six of the Erfurt programme reads: “Ecclesiastical and religious bodies are to be considered as private associations.” In other words essentially the same opportunist fudge enshrined in the Gotha programme.

It has to be said that Lenin refused to fudge the issue. The proletariat, he writes, demands the “complete separation of the church and the state” and that all persecution based on belief, or non-belief, be immediately ended.³ Hence tax breaks and state grants doled out to religious institutions should be abolished. Instead they must be self-financing. Lenin also insisted that, while religion should be a private matter as far as the *state* is concerned,

that *does not* apply to the Marxist party. In this context Lenin emphasises that “religion is not a private matter”. As the party is founded to struggle against “every religious bamboozling”, the ideological struggle against religion cannot be “a private affair” for its members, but is the concern of “the whole party, the whole of the proletariat”.⁴

Lenin favoured the party publishing all manner of articles, pamphlets and engaging in specific agitation which would help loosen the grip of religion. Naturally, though, he warns against the danger of elevating religion into the key question, as is often the case with celebrity atheists, secular good Samaritans and fire-eating leftists. Lenin argued time and again that religion had to be dealt with primarily as a problem of practice. Take his article, ‘The attitude of the workers’ party to religion’, written for the journal *Proletary* in May 1909: “Marxism ... [is] a materialism which is absolutely atheistic and positively hostile to all religion.” But does this mean that communists should “introduce into the programme of the workers’ party an explicit proclamation of atheism, in the sense of declaring a war on religion”? Certainly not. Referring to Engels’s 1874 polemic against the Blanquist Communards, he points out that “Engels blamed the Blanquists for being unable to understand that only the class struggle of the working masses could, by comprehensively drawing the widest strata of the proletariat into conscious and revolutionary social practice, really free the oppressed masses from the yoke of religion”.⁵

Yes, we must combat religion, agreed Lenin - that is ABC for all materialists. But Marxism is not a materialism that stops at ABC. Marxism goes further. Combating religion ... “must be linked up with the concrete practice of the class movement, which aims at eliminating the social roots of religion”.⁶ Religion is sustained by class society and overcoming religion can only be effectively done through the mass revolutionary struggle against class society. Put another way, unitedly fighting for paradise on earth is more important than the unity of working class opinion on paradise in heaven. That helps explain why the Bolsheviks did not include in their programme the demand that all members immediately rid themselves of religious superstition.

For those who lack a serious attitude towards Marxism, the willingness to include believers in the ranks of the party appears inconsistent. Either it is

viewed as rank hypocrisy or inexcusable softness towards religion. But anyone who treats Marxism seriously, treats it as a guide to action rather than a sectarian badge of honour, understands that advancing the class struggle for socialism is always the first consideration.

Purely theoretical propaganda is therefore inadequate. For example, in our day, the bourgeois rationalist, Richard Dawkins, treats religious belief as a mental blind spot which results from a lack of education. While his bestseller, *The god delusion* (2006), represents a timely updating of the atheist arguments of the 18th century materialists, is constantly entertaining and elegantly written, it frivolously treats Northern Ireland, Israel-Palestine, Yugoslavia, the persecution of Jews, the public beheadings carried out by the Taliban as being the result of little more than ignorance. If only the benighted multitude abandoned their ludicrous religious prejudices, presumably by reading Dawkins and his colleagues, then many senseless wars, the spread of Aids and a great deal more suffering besides would be ended at a stroke. Disseminating atheism thereby becomes the main task.

Lenin rejected the approach of such worthy ‘uplifters’ as superficial and misdirected because they fail to root religion primarily in “the socially downtrodden condition of the working masses and their apparently complete helplessness in the face of the blind forces of capitalism”. Hence Lenin’s conclusion that: “No educational book can eradicate religion from the minds of the masses ... until those masses themselves learn to fight this root of religion.”⁷

For Lenin, the experience of taking part in the class struggle educates the mass of people in a way that is impossible with books, pamphlets and learned articles alone. What Marxists have historically called propaganda, ie, theory, typically reaches and teaches the advanced section of the working class, not the backward sections. Marxists must therefore avoid falling into either sectarian aloofness or a popularity-chasing opportunism, which does everything not to repel, not to frighten, not to upset and adopts the liberal motto of ‘Live and let live’.

Opportunism versus principle

An obvious example of popularity-chasing opportunism is the Socialist Workers Party. Throughout the first decade of the 21st century it unrequitedly courted Islam as a strategic ally. Writing about Iran, the SWP disgracefully glossed over the sexual apartheid imposed by the theocracy. When it came to Afghanistan, *Socialist Worker* journalists used the possibility of mass rape to excuse the imposition of the burqa by the Taliban regime. The SWP even refused to condemn the murderous September 11 2001 attacks on New York and Washington carried out by al Qa'eda. Meanwhile, at home, in Britain, the Muslim Association of Britain was wooed - an organisation the SWP wanted to come into Respect as co-promoter. In point of fact, Respect was formed as a party with the promise of making an electoral breakthrough on the initial premise of uniting "secular socialists" and "Muslim activists".⁸

In pursuit of that popular-frontist aim, at the SWP's Marxism event in July 2003, Lindsey German notoriously announced that women's and gay rights should not be viewed as "shibboleths" ... and in Respect the SWP duly sacrificed one principle after another on the altar of unprincipled unity. Of course, it was not only Lindsey German, John Rees, Chris Nineham and Chris Bambery (the SWP's gang of four). Its entire central committee and surrounding circle of loyalists promoted, went along with or excused Respect.

Necessarily that meant distorting, skewing, even blatantly lying about the Bolshevik tradition. A sad example of this is Dave Crouch's article, 'Bolsheviks and Islam: religious rights', which was introduced with the strapline, "Socialists can learn from how the Bolsheviks approached the Muslims of the Russian empire".⁹ Under the first subhead - 'Atheism' - the author slyly tells us that "atheism was never included in the Bolsheviks' programme". A pedantic, evasive, not to say thoroughly dishonest formulation. The fact of the matter is that the 1919 Bolshevik programme features a specific section on religion and anti-religious propaganda:

The Russian Communist Party is guided by the conviction that nothing but the fulfilment of purposiveness and full awareness in all the social and economic activities of the masses can lead to the complete disappearance of religious prejudice. The party endeavours to secure the

complete break-up of the union between the exploiting classes and the organisations for religious propaganda, thus cooperating in the actual deliverance of the working masses from religious practices, and organising the most extensive propaganda of scientific enlightenment and anti-religious conception.¹⁰

This *explicitly* atheist passage goes completely unmentioned. The silence is doubly significant. The very idea of adopting a written programme is cowardly rejected by an aloof, self-perpetuating and wildly zigzagging SWP central committee, which dreads being held to account by its rank-and-file membership.

Naturally, given the opportunist needs of the SWP leadership, Crouch steered well clear of the Bolsheviks' call for "extensive propaganda" aimed at overcoming the "religious practices" of the masses. Nor does he mention the Bolshevik Party's attitude towards its own members and their beliefs. Hardly a trivial oversight, when one considers the great lengths to which the SWP went in pandering to Islam.

Of course, atheist propaganda must be subordinated to the basic tasks of developing the mass struggle against the exploiters and the state. Doubtless that is why the Bolshevik programme says the party "must carefully avoid doing anything that can wound the feelings of believers, for such a method can only lead to the strengthening of religious fanaticism".¹¹ For example, faced by a strike organised by a pious Christian trade union official, communists would surely not go along to the picket line to denounce religion. That would be to play the role of a fifth column. No, the main task under such circumstances would be generating solidarity and ensuring the strike's success.

Anyway, let us get back to Bolshevism qua Bolshevism. Lenin discusses the attitude of the Bolsheviks towards religious people by posing it in extremis. He asks whether or not "a priest can be a member of the Social Democratic Party". Lenin concedes, in conditions pertaining in Russia at the time - where the Orthodox church was a bulwark of the tsarist autocracy - such a possibility would be "altogether improbable". Nevertheless, he writes: "If a priest comes to us to take part in our common political work

and conscientiously performs party duties, without opposing the programme of the party, he may be allowed to join the ranks of the social democrats.”¹²

It was not up to Lenin to square the circle: “The contradiction between the spirit and the principles of our programme and the religious convictions of the priest would ... be something that concerned him alone, his own private contradiction; and a political organisation cannot put its members through an examination to see if there is no contradiction between their views and the party programme.” Obviously though, “If a priest joined the ... party and made it his chief and almost sole purpose to propagate religious views ... we would unquestionably have to expel him”.¹³

The hypothetical possibility of recruiting clerics into the Bolshevik Party doubtless stems in part from Lenin’s experience during the 1905 revolution and the role of father Gapon, the Orthodox priest, who in January of that year led the half-humble, half-threatening demonstration to the Winter Palace. Indignantly he cursed the tsar for allowing his troops to shoot down the assembled people. Gapon was, however, later exposed as a police agent.

Either way, for Lenin, there remained the necessity of having the correct attitude towards working class religious people:

We must not only admit workers who preserve their belief in god ... but must deliberately set out to recruit them; we are absolutely opposed to giving the slightest offence to their religious convictions, but we recruit them in order to educate them in the spirit of our programme, and not in order to permit an active struggle against it. We allow freedom of opinion within the party, but to certain limits ... we are not obliged to go hand in hand with active preachers of views that are repudiated by the majority of the party.¹⁴

Old Believers

At the 2nd Congress of the RSDLP in 1902-03 Lenin urged support be given to all religious groups struggling against the state for their rights. A specific resolution draws attention to the “necessity of working amongst”

members of religious sects, such as the Old Believers, in order to bring them “under social democratic influence”.¹⁵

It is worth dwelling on the Old Believers and who they were. In the second half of the 17th century, a schism occurred within Russian Orthodoxy. The Old Believers were expelled. Forming perhaps “one-sixth of the entire Orthodox population of the Russian empire”, they faced severe repression.¹⁶ Their early leader, Avvakum, “was burnt alive on the order of tsar Feodor in 1682”.¹⁷

The Old Believers clung tenaciously to their mystic traditions and became natural allies of the nascent political underground. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries such groups proliferated, along with religiously motivated collective migrations to remote areas and the outermost fringes of tsarist authority. These communities often militantly rejected priests, the state, private property and even the *Bible*. Their guide was the holy spirit. Old Believers held to a primitive communism. Known under a variety of names - Common Hope, United Brotherhood, Love of Brotherhood, Righthanded Brotherhood, White Doves, Believers in Christ, Friends of God, Wanderers - there were frequent reports of armed uprisings, and, when they failed, mass suicides.

Revolutionary work had been conducted amongst the religious sectarians before the RSDLP's 2nd Congress. Alexander Herzen (1812-70), seen by many as the father of Russian socialism, produced a special supplement of his journal *Kolokol* (Bell) for the Old Believers. Nicholai Chernyshevsky (1828-89), another prominent Russian socialist thinker, wrote in praise of the “fools for Christ's sake” and defended them against the tsarist state. Lenin himself contributed to *Zhizn* (Life), a magazine edited by the writer-physician, Vladimir Posse. Amongst the aims of *Zhizn* was to draw Russia's religious sectarians into the organised *nationwide* struggle. *Zhizn* began as a pro-narodnik



‘The monk Theophan’ (*Ulk* 1909). “Once again one hears the wingbeat of new times.” Theophan, born Vasily Bystrov (c1870-c1940), was a famous Russian Orthodox theologian and a favourite in court circles. He helped the ‘mad monk’ Rasputin gain power over the tsar and tsarina during 1908-09.

Theophan broke with Rasputin and in later life sought out aesthetic seclusion, first in Bulgaria, then Paris.

publication and under Posse eclectically moved in the direction of Marxism.

Reportedly, to Posse, Lenin appeared like some kind of mystic saint. Lenin, for his part, was not overly concerned about the religious language that sometimes peppered *Zhizn*'s articles and editorial line. Plekhanov, however, took an entirely different - sectarian - approach. He would have nothing to do with the publication and openly expressed his bitter hostility to the journal's "religious bent". Seething, he wrote to Lenin: "on almost every page", *Zhizn* "talks about Christ and religion. In public I shall call it an organ of Christian socialism".¹⁸

Zhizn closed down in 1902 and its resources effectively passed into Lenin's hands. A short time later, this led to the first specifically Bolshevik publishing house run under the names of N Lenin and Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich (1873-1955). The latter came to Marxism via Tolstoyism and in 1904 Bonch-Bruevich, with Lenin's support, began publishing *Rassvet* (Dawn) in an attempt to renew the dialogue between Marxists and the religious sectarians.

His first editorial hammered tsarism over the persecution of the Old Believers and other minority religious groups. Bonch-Bruevich saw the goal of *Rassvet* as being to report events "in various corners of our vast motherland, and among the ranks of sectarians and schismatics".¹⁹ *Rassvet* was to serve as a platform for Marxist agitation, but Bonch-Bruevich was determined to use terms both familiar and accessible to Old Believers. Hence he damned tsarism for being a "Satan" regime and in that spirit he declared "all men are brothers" in the eyes of god. Justifying this kind of language to his Marxist peers, Bonch-Bruevich gave this answer:

If the proletariat-sectarian in his speech requires the word 'devil', then identify this old concept of an evil principle with capitalism, and identify the word 'Christ', as a concept of eternal good, happiness, and freedom, with socialism.²⁰

The chequered record

After the October revolution the Bolsheviks proceeded to implement their programme. True, some bourgeois states claim adherence to secularism. However, as I shall detail later, none of them have fully broken the link with religion. For example, in France, Catholic schools receive generous state handouts, while in the United States, courts, state schools and other such public institutions begin their daily proceedings with a patriotic pledge that includes god. Lenin and his comrades wanted nothing to do with such backsliding concessions. The Soviet Republic's first constitution, drafted under the supervision of Yakov Sverdlov (1885-1919), the party's general secretary, enshrined the basic principle of the separation of "church and state and school from church".²¹

The Russian Orthodox church had formed, suffice to say, an integral part of the tsarist system and served, while that system remained intact, to ideologically reconcile those below to their oppression. In consequence, and, of course, as a reward, it grew ever more rich and ever more fat. Before 1917 the religious caste numbered nearly 200,000 and total income of the Orthodox church is estimated to have amounted to some 150 million roubles annually. There were also some 30,000 church schools teaching a million pupils. Enormous landed wealth was accumulated too, vast tracts in the countryside, alongside many houses, shops, hotels, etc, in the cities.

Come the Bolshevik revolution, of course, all church schools and real estate were confiscated and passed into the hands of the revolutionary state.²² Henceforth, the Orthodox church was to be treated like any other voluntary body: it could receive contributions from individual supporters, but not own landed property. Church buildings were nationalised, but could, as promised, be used by congregations free of charge. Not that the clergy were to be exempt from the universal obligation to perform military service. They could, however, appeal to Soviet courts and offer to do useful civic duties instead. Needless to say, because the Orthodox church was organically bound up with tsarism, it instinctively transformed itself into one of the main focal points of counterrevolution. Patriarch Tikhon (canonised in 1981) issued an "anathema" against the Bolshevik usurpers.²³ Trotsky, hitting back, denounced the church as the "principal moral arm of the bourgeoisie".²⁴

The Soviet government announced an end to the religious persecution of minority faiths: eg, Old Believers, Catholics, Lutherans, Muslims, Jews. The decree on religion contains the following formulation:

Every citizen may adhere to any religion or none. Any limitation before the law related to adherence to any kind of faith or non-adherence to any faith is abolished ... Free practice of religious customs is safeguarded in so far as it does not disturb the public peace and does not infringe upon the rights of citizens of the Soviet republic.²⁵

In the same spirit the 1918 decree on 'freedom of conscience and religious societies' stripped the Orthodox church of the 50-million-rouble annual subsidy granted to it by the tsarist state - a handout continued by Kerensky's provisional government - and all other privileges, such as tax breaks. On the other hand, those persecuted under tsarism were not only given freedom to practise their faith, but sympathetic treatment. Old Believers were granted land on which they could try and put into practice their egalitarian values and communistic dreams. And in November 1919, at the height of the civil war, Trotsky issued an order allowing evangelical protestants to be excused from military service on the basis of conscientious objection. There was unsurprisingly a sudden surge of converts.

There was a constant tension between the party's programme on the one side and on the other Russia's impoverished reality and the political manoeuvres and compromises dictated by the need to survive. Hence, in 1922, the Soviet state launched a concerted campaign against the Orthodox church, which instead of "carefully" avoiding "doing anything" that might "wound the feelings of believers", served to do the exact opposite.

During the terrible famine, the Soviet government decreed, in February 1922, that the Orthodox church had to hand over some of its ill-gotten treasures so that they could be sold on the international art market in order to purchase grain. I think we can safely say that this measure had little to do with really feeding the population. Even with the best prices, money raised in Paris, London, Berlin and New York would have been essentially trivial compared with what was needed. No, in hugely testing circumstances, the Bolshevik government appears to have been trying to shift blame for the mass starvation onto the still powerful Orthodox church. In fact, the main

blame for the downward economic spiral in Russia actually lay squarely with the Anglo-French attempt to “strangle the Bolshevik baby in its cradle” (Winston Churchill, letter to David Lloyd George).²⁶

Predictably the Orthodox church refused to part with its valuables. Tikhon ordered the faithful to resist. When party cadre entered the churches with orders to remove paintings, bejewelled crosses, silver cups and gold plates there were riots. Many injuries occurred and, as a result, clerical instigators were arrested, eventually including Tikhon. A number were sentenced to death and a few were actually executed. Of course, such exceptional cases are endlessly harped on about by rightwingers in order to give credence to their bogus claim that Leninism is akin to Stalinism or directly, inevitably, led to it. They also use these cases to alibi the foul role of the Orthodox church under tsarism and during the civil war.

As part and parcel of the attempt to undermine the Orthodox church, tacit approval was given to the reformists who opposed Tikhon and his refusal to participate in the state-led campaign to feed the starving. Headed by Orthodox priests, who were “talented in many ways”, according to Jane Ellis - a pro-church academic - they gave “unstinting support to the socialist cause”.²⁷ Holding their own synod, which met in Moscow in May 1922, the dissidents created a rival ‘renovationist’ (*obnovlenskaya*) church, or the “Living Church”. They voted to replace Tikhon by a “supreme church administration”.²⁸

Simultaneously a government decree was issued which required that all religious associations register with the authorities - those that failed to do so would be closed down. This is what the Living Church was waiting to hear. Tikhon’s adherents were forced out of one after another parish church and replaced by Living Church nominees. Much recrimination and bitterness ensued. The Living Church denounced Tikhon as an agent of counterrevolution; the Tikhonites dismissed the Living Church as a mere tool of the Soviet regime.

Trotsky dubbed this approach “an ecclesiastical NEP”. While in the long run the Soviet state should have no truck with religion, quasi-rationalist ‘bourgeois’ elements should be favoured at this difficult juncture. The revolution was undergoing an ordered retreat. Obviously the “ecclesiastical NEP” represented a divergence, or straying, from the party’s programme,

dictated by a combination of harsh circumstances and desperate political calculation. Leaders of the Living Church were equated with kulaks and nepmen - temporary and unstable, but necessary allies. Yet, while the Living Church was given more than a helping hand by the state, the renovationists proceeded to fragment into rival groups - in August 1922 the League of Regeneration of the Church, in October 1922 the League of the Congregations of the Ancient Apostolic Church and some time later the Russian People's Church and the Free Labouring Church.²⁹ Virtually the only thing that united them was hostility to the Tikhonites and reliance on the Soviet government.

The fact of the matter was that despite its tsarist roots being severed, the Orthodox church continued to hold a grip over minds. In the countryside people would listen to either the local priest or the secretary of the soviet, depending on perceived material benefits and the issues involved. Even in the cities the church was treated as something of an insurance policy: children were baptised and people facing death asked for a priest's blessing. Numbers who regularly trooped to Sunday services visibly declined compared with before the revolution; but judging private belief beyond the church gates "is far more problematic".³⁰ The Orthodox church adopted underground methods and individuals often defensively hid their beliefs.

In June 1923 there came a change of tack. A rapprochement was sought with Tikhon. He signed a grovelling confession, expressed solemn repentance and declared that he had "completely and decisively" ended all connections with the monarchists and whites and would no longer act as an enemy of Soviet power.³¹ With this deal done, he was released from prison and henceforth an uneasy truce was pursued on both sides. Tikhon adopted a policy of qualified acceptance of the state. As for members of the Living Church, they either returned to the "saving bosom of the ecumenical church" or limped on as the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. In formal terms the Soviet government adopted "a neutral position" towards both.³²

Not that the Soviet state returned to a policy of "carefully" avoiding "doing anything" that might "wound the feelings of believers". In the mid-1920s the Communist Party and the Komsomol youth league began to stage

campaigns which could only but upset, offend and even outrage religious people. There was a Komsomol Christmas in 1922-23 and a Komsomol Easter in 1923. These secular celebrations featured “blasphemous acts, mockery, and inversions of church rituals”. There were “face-to-face confrontations” between believers and non-believers which the former could only but regard as state-sponsored persecution.³³ Another example of anti-religious campaignism involved opening the reliquies of Orthodox



Yemelyan Yaroslavsky: League of the Godless. A helping hand for Stalin's counterrevolution within the revolution.

saints. Bishops and other members of the clergy were obliged to attend by order of the ministry of justice. Instead of unearthing the miraculously preserved remains of saints - as guaranteed by church doctrine - there was, funnily enough, only dust and bones. Subsequently, various members of the church hierarchy were charged with having perpetrated criminal deception upon their innocent congregations.

In 1925 the League of the Militant Godless was formed under the leadership of Yemelyan Yaroslavsky. Nominally independent of the state machine, members of the party, Komsomol, Red Army and trade unions were corralled in. By 1932 the league "claimed 5.5 million members, 2 million more than the Communist Party itself".³⁴ Coinciding with the launch of the first five-year plan in 1929, the ballooning organisation set itself the quixotic goal of totally eradicating religion. National holidays were retimed so as *not* to coincide with religious festivals and orders issued designed to ostracise priests. Eg, they were barred from entering private homes. There were reports in the Soviet press of agitators from the League of the Militant Godless being lynched by villagers. In the following decade thousands of churches and monasteries were closed, converted or demolished. The preferential treatment of the sects over the Orthodox church mentioned above was abandoned in favour of wild slogans equating the struggle against religion with the struggle for socialism - an unmistakable conversion to a Blanquist-type outlook.

Muslims

Within the tsarist empire Muslims constituted something like 10% of the population. They were oppressed as a religion and as a people - it is important to recognise that to be a Muslim was as much about ethnic identity as it was faith. Because these people were concentrated in the east, in central Asia and the Caucasus, what the Bolsheviks were dealing with was not only a 'minority' religious question, but a national and colonial question.

After the February revolution the Bolsheviks bullishly promoted the slogan of national self-determination. Suffice to say, once they took power and established their government in Petrograd, that slogan increasingly went hand in hand with class war and the goal of social transformation in the east. As a result there was an influx of Muslims into the Communist Party. It is estimated that in Turkestan and other such areas those party members adhering to Islam numbered around 15% (although some give much higher figures).

Existing, often self-proclaimed, national leaders recoiled. Many sought salvation with the well-funded and growing forces of counterrevolution. Not that white generals exhibited the slightest sympathy for them or their wishes. This, and the fortunes of war, produced a highly unstable situation. Nationalists were alternately hammer and anvil and took one side after the other in the civil war. They bounced from the reds to the whites and vice versa.

Discontent manifested itself amongst Muslims even before the February revolution. Fermented by a thin stratum of intellectuals, there were incipient national movements against tsarism which went hand in hand with the takeover of traditional grazing land by incoming Russian settler-colonists. The collapse of tsarism propelled the Muslim peoples onto the stage of history. In May 1917 the first all-Russian congress of Muslims was held in Petrograd. It demanded not independence, but autonomy. The main bone of contention was between those who wanted it on a national-territorial basis and those who would have settled for cultural autonomy within a unitary Russian state. A second congress of Muslims followed in July 1917. It took place in Kazan and was mainly controlled by Tartars, who “played with pan-Tartian aspirations”.³⁵ A Bashkir congress took place at the same time. It issued a programme demanding that Russia become “a democratic, federal republic”, with Kazakhstan as an autonomous national unit.

Throughout the summer of 1917 there were other such gatherings and similar demands. EH Carr stresses that none of them should be regarded as “revolutionary in the social sense”.³⁶ Delegates at the Bashkir congress were, for example, mainly composed of mullahs, elders and kulaks. An entry fee of 50 roubles was charged. So it would be mistaken, at this stage,

to present the Muslim movement as a break with traditional social and power structures.

After the October revolution the Soviet government carefully and attentively addressed the national movement. A special appeal was issued: 'To all Muslim toilers of Russia and the east'. It declared that "henceforth" your beliefs and usages, national and cultural customs are "free and inviolable". They should organise their national life in "complete freedom". Moreover, the Soviet government promised to protect those rights. In return it called for Muslims to lend their support "to this revolution and to its government".³⁷ Other Muslims, beyond the borders of the old tsarist empire, were also promised aid.

Another decree established a commissariat for internal Muslim affairs. It was headed by a Tartar and a Bashkir. Also in 1918, a congress of Muslim communists was held in Moscow. It set up a central bureau of Muslim communist organisations which issued propaganda in many languages, including a daily paper in Turkish. Its second congress, in November 1919, was addressed by both Lenin and Stalin. Incidentally, and not unrelatedly, during the civil war tens of thousands of Muslims fought with the Red Army, sometimes in special Muslim regiments and units.

Strategy and tactical shifts

Not that the Soviet leadership was stuck on an unbending, one-gauge line. There was an agreed strategy, but necessarily that entailed constant shifts in tactical emphasis and changes of direction. Inevitably, sometimes those shifts were right, sometimes they were wrong. In early 1918 there was a wrong, badly mistimed shift in regard to nationalists, Islam included. As commissar of nationalities - hence, one supposes, at the time acting as a disciplined Leninist - Stalin determined to destroy the influence of the mullahs who had till then been the backbone of the 'bourgeois nationalist movement' in the east. Apparently there was strong opposition to his change of emphasis from other leading communists in the field. They wanted to maintain the successful 'softly, softly' approach. But Stalin got his way. As things turned out, however, those who thought they could

downplay or simply bypass national sentiments and aspirations with what were essentially hollow class appeals proved woefully mistaken. Stalin's attempt to win the masses in the east away from nationalism and Islam resulted in a "fiasco".³⁸ Whites, nationalists and pan-Islamists crushed those pockets of Soviet power that existed in the east.

By the end of 1919 the party's top personalities appear to have concluded that there had to be an urgent reorientation. The military situation was awful and they had dangerously underestimated the durability of Islam, the fact that mullahs and imams, etc, were deeply embedded socially, acting as they did as judges, law-givers, teachers and intellectuals, as well as political leaders. Mutually beneficial arrangements were therefore sought with the more open-minded members of the Islamic clergy. There were those - albeit a minority, the so-called 'red mullahs' - who were prepared to tolerate secular schools and women being given legal equality. Anticipating the helping hand given to the 'bourgeois' Living Church against the 'feudal' Tikhon church, the Soviet government would favour the 'red mullahs' over the overt reactionaries. Instead of direct, head-to-head confrontation, that way the power of Islam could, perhaps, be harnessed. Moreover, by extending this domestic course to the international level, a blow could be struck at the soft underbelly of imperialism by assisting national struggles in the east - crucially against the British empire. In a word, the strategy of the anti-imperialist united front.

Addressing the 2nd all-Russian Congress of Communist Organisations of the Peoples of the East, in November 1919, Lenin spelt out the reasoning behind his strategy: "the socialist revolution will not be solely, or chiefly, a struggle of the revolutionary proletarians in each country against its bourgeoisie - no, it will be a struggle of all imperialist-oppressed countries, of all dependent countries, against international imperialism".³⁹ Undoubtedly such a formulation could be used, albeit with the best intentions, to play down the importance of revolution in the capitalistically advanced countries in order to give prime place to national or peasant struggles in the so-called 'third world' - Maoism does that with a vengeance. Yet, as shown by history - and predicted by Marxist theory - whatever their socialistic and communistic pretensions, national liberation movements are strictly limited in what they can achieve in and of

themselves, and often end in cruel anticlimax and sometimes even in horrendous social regression.

The fact of the matter is that the imperialist centres - today the US, the EU, Japan, etc - constitute the commanding heights of the world economy and this, the world economy, is where the communist mode of production begins. It would, of course, be pure stupidity to in any way detract from the *vanguard* role of revolutions in those countries where the vast bulk of the human race actually live - China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Korea, Turkey, Nigeria, Mexico, Brazil, etc. These countries smoulder with discontent, can burst into flame at any moment and now have large, often very militant working class movements. Yet there can be no denying that without revolution in the core capitalist countries - which doubtless could be, surely will be, triggered by revolutions in backward and medium-developed countries - we shall continue to see the mere exchange of direct for indirect imperialist domination, the ousting of old corrupt elites by new corrupt elites; that or ectopic social formations and insane parodies of socialism.

Hence the real significance of the national liberation slogan - ie, the demand for self-determination - lies not only in opening up a second front against imperialism on the international chessboard, but with the working class, crucially in the core capitalist countries. By taking up the slogan against their own bourgeoisie, as a basic democratic demand, the working class readies itself to become a ruling class. Demanding the right of self-determination for countries oppressed by the ruling class is essential in establishing working class political independence. Inevitably, in the "imperialist-oppressed countries" themselves, by raising the exact same slogan against the external oppressor, there comes an opposite possibility - instead of working class political independence, subservience to petty bourgeois or bourgeois nationalism.

The 2nd Congress of the Communist International correctly highlighted the importance of the national liberation movements for the post-World War I period and rightly stressed the necessity of working class political independence. However, Lenin's draft, and the final resolutions themselves, are not without their pitfalls for the unwary. Properly understanding Lenin's real, intended meaning - that and a keen sense of history - are vital. After all, Lenin's 'Theses on the national and colonial question', drafted in July

1920, is now often treated as gospel by Maoists, Stalinites and SWPers alike.

On this subject of the national struggle in the colonies, Comintern had another set of theses before it. Besides Lenin's, the other was drafted by the Indian communist, Manabendra Nath Roy (1887-1954). Both were sent to a drafting commission whose members, let alone the original authors, could hardly have imagined in their worst nightmares how the future would misuse their work. Anyway, while between the two sets of theses there was much in common, there were three areas of disagreement - two "minor"; the other, according to Carr, "major".⁴⁰

Roy described the economic conditions in the east as "pre-capitalist". The commission preferred "dominated by capitalist imperialism" - this amendment was readily accepted. Roy also maintained that, while the colonial empires lasted and the metropolitan countries could bribe their workers with the spoils of imperialism, revolution would be impossible. The commission seems to have thought, rightly, that this gave too much prominence to the colonies. Once again there was an agreed amendment to bring Roy into line with Lenin. The third area of disagreement was certainly harder to bridge.

Lenin's starting point was the need for an "alliance of the proletarians and the toiling masses of all nations and countries in a simultaneous revolutionary struggle against the landowners and the bourgeoisie". In Lenin's calculation that would result in the overthrow of capitalism in the advanced countries and feudalism in the backward ones. A grand strategy given a new, third, element by the October 1917 revolution. The colonial peoples were urged to closely align themselves to the growing power of the Soviet republic.

Communists in the colonial and oppressed countries must assist the "bourgeois-democratic national liberation movements". But what Lenin had in mind was not a bourgeois-led revolution - that class fearfully shunned all revolutionary methods. Rather Lenin defined objective limits: ie, the revolution could not immediately transcend capitalism. Lenin's "bourgeois-democratic" revolution relied on unleashing a peasant Niagara against landlordism, colonialism and all manifestations or relics of so-called feudalism. To all intents and purposes, a concrete application, or

development, of the Bolshevik strategy of the revolutionary dictatorship (rule) of the proletariat and peasantry, under conditions where soviet (Bolshevik) power was already established in the Russian redoubt. Hence, depending on the balance of class forces - *and* presumably a successful revolution in Europe - there could be the dominant rule of the working class in such countries, *if* there was a strong, well established alliance with the peasantry. An idea mapped out by Lenin in his masterful 1905 pamphlet *Two tactics of social democracy in the democratic revolution*.

Naturally, for Lenin, any organisational or ideological subservience to either the peasants or the 'revolutionary' bourgeoisie was to be fought against: "The Communist International must march in temporary alliance with the bourgeois democracy of the colonies and backward countries, but must not merge with it and must preserve absolutely the independence of the communist movement even in its most embryonic form." Equally, there should be a "determined struggle" against attempts to give bourgeois-democratic liberation movements "a communist colouring". Lenin's draft theses also insisted on the need to combat the "reactionary and medieval elements", along with "pan-Islamism and similar trends", which strive to combine the liberation movement against imperialism with the "attempt to strengthen the position of the khans, landowners, mullahs, etc".⁴¹

Roy had another, slightly different perspective. He distinguished between bourgeois-democratic movements in the colonies - by which he appears to mean bourgeois-led movements - and the "struggle of landless peasants against every form of exploitation", which required "the creation of communist organisations of workers and peasants". Comintern, he said, must resist the temptation of subordinating the second movement to the first. Nevertheless, the revolutions in the colonial countries will not initially be "a communist revolution".⁴² Hence Comintern policy should be based on land redistribution to the peasants. Essentially the agrarian programme of the old Socialist Revolutionary Party taken up by the Bolsheviks in 1917.

Roy's theses were agreed as a supplement by Comintern, but were destined to gather dust and all but be forgotten. Nevertheless, the germ of his theses would later be cancerously developed by Stalin and Bukharin and turned into the rigid, two-stage, anti-imperialist revolution in which the revolution against colonialism and the socialist revolution are separated by

a whole historic epoch and embody entirely different and opposed social contents. Essentially a repeat of the programme of the Mensheviks.

To all intents and purposes the same fate lay in store for Lenin's theses. They emerged from the commission with a number of amendments, not least the problematic formulation of the "bourgeois-democratic revolution" being replaced by "national revolutionary movement". For the untrained eye this alteration made Lenin's theses appear harder. Nonetheless, they could be read selectively and with opportunist intent. It was possible to equate the duty to make common cause with the "national revolutionary" peasant movement against imperialism and their native landlord and bourgeois allies with pushing, or making way for, the "bourgeois-democratic" revolution. In other words banking on the patriotic, or national, bourgeoisie taking single-minded revolutionary action against imperialism's agents or the colonial authorities. This labour of Sisyphus was, of course, exactly what Stalin imposed upon Comintern in the 1920s, not least in China. The results were bloody and historically calamitous.

There was also the looming problem of a clash of interests between the Soviet state and those of local communist parties. What happened when the "bourgeois-democratic" or "national revolutionary movement", or even government, violently turned against the communists? What happened when the nationalists simultaneously fought on two fronts - against imperialism, against the working class and the communists? Was the Soviet state and the international communist movement still obliged to offer unstinting aid? Should the Soviet state pursue its own immediate needs - ie, win allies against imperialism by offering military-diplomatic assistance - when that support strengthened the hand of those bludgeoning the local communists? Such knotty problems were to all intents and purposes left unexplored. That despite the counterrevolutionary anti-imperialism of Enver Pasha and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey (many others were to follow).

It would, of course, be grossly unfair - that or simply dumb - to blame either Lenin or Roy for what followed. Locating some kind of original sin that supposedly exists with the term "national revolutionary", as opposed to "bourgeois democratic", and to directly ascribe to one or the other phrase "disastrous effects on contemporary politics" is to betray, or more likely to

misunderstand, the Leninist programme.⁴³ Those inclined towards such unwarranted conclusions reveal a fundamental inability, or unwillingness, to learn the subtleties of communist politics. As Carr comments, “The decisions of the 2nd Congress of Comintern in [sic] the national question, like most of its decisions, were taken in the unquestioning faith in the immanence of a proletarian revolution which would sweep the world.” Perceptively the same historian says: “Once this faith was disappointed, the decisions themselves, applied in conditions utterly different from those for which they had been designed, not only falsified the intentions of their authors, but were used to justify a series of compromises and retreats which, in the hour of faith and enthusiasm, would have been brushed aside as inconceivable.”⁴⁴

Eg, the left nationalism that views national sovereignty or national independence as a goal to be proclaimed alongside, and as virtually synonymous with, socialism. Such a travesty was completely alien for both Lenin and Comintern. The principle they advocated was not national independence: rather self-determination - a vital distinction that only hardened nationalists or the woefully uneducated could possibly confuse. Lenin favoured the *voluntary* union of peoples into big states, the biggest feasible, not the further Balkanisation of the world. Nevertheless, many ‘Marxists’ - for example, the leadership of the Scottish Socialist Party - insist upon independence as a prerequisite for socialism and thereby completely subordinate the programme of the international working class to the politics of petty bourgeois nationalism. At best, of course, the SSP merely pays lip service to Marxism. It cannot be properly regarded as a socialist organisation.

Lenin highlighted, by way of what Carr calls an “exception”, the possibility of the east undergoing a permanent or uninterrupted revolution.⁴⁵ Lenin actually writes of overcoming “tremendous difficulties” and bypassing the “capitalist stage” of development.⁴⁶ A strategy first sketched out by Marx, not Trotsky, as the latter’s epigones crassly maintain. With the aid of the victorious revolutionary proletariat, these countries could make the transition to the soviet order, and hence through “defined stages of development” to communism, avoiding capitalism altogether.

The same theoretically and historically informed approach is needed when discussing the first (and only) congress of peoples of the east, held in Baku in September 1920. Zinoviev's opening speech is much criticised, both by left social democrats at the time and by latter-day left dogmatists. He was supposedly going soft on religion, giving it, specifically Islam, socialist features it does not possess. In reality Zinoviev did no such thing. Like Brouck-Bruевич, he simply adapted and gave a new content to traditional language.⁴⁷

Comrades! Brothers! The time has come when you can start on the organisation of a true and holy people's war against the robbers and oppressors. The Communist International turns today to the peoples of the east and says to them: 'Brothers, we summon you to a holy war, in the first place against English imperialism!' (*Tumultuous applause, prolonged 'Hurrah'. Members of the congress rise from their seats and brandish their weapons. The speaker is unable to continue for some time All the delegates stand up and applaud. Shouts of 'We swear it'.*)⁴⁸

Zinoviev was quite definite: the peoples of the east must pursue not only the national liberation struggle against imperialism, but the class war too. His sights were on a string of soviet republics in the east federated with Russia. He therefore began his speech by asking a fitting rhetorical question: "Are you a man who lives by his labour? Do you belong to the working masses? Do you want to put a stop to the strife between peoples? Do you want to organise a struggle against the oppressors?"⁴⁹ If the answer was 'yes', without forgetting or papering over differences, then an alliance between revolutionary nationalists and communists could be cemented. Indeed, given the historical moment, it was necessary, pressing and on balance immediately beneficial for both sides.

Muslim socialism

During the course of the civil war the attitude of the common Muslim people certainly underwent something of a transformation. They had suffered occupation by white armies (physically backed by various foreign

powers, including Britain, the US and Japan). White generals exhibited nothing but contempt for them. These blood-splattered murderers were committed to the old, colonial, system of land ownership and control. Under these circumstances the Soviet government enjoyed a new, albeit precarious prestige and sympathy. While the whites fought for a restoration of Great Russian power, the reds in Moscow were busily proclaiming their commitment to national self-determination.

Quite a number of Muslim nationalists came to see their future in the Communist Party. Some occupied prominent posts. Inevitably, not a few adopted an outlook which owed more to national socialism than Marxism. The strange case of Mir-Said (Mirza) Sultan Galiev (1880-1939) is instructive. He sought to add to what he believed were the progressive features of Islam by borrowing from Marxism. Taking up the tradition of Muslim intellectuals, such as Hanafi Muzzafar, a Volga Tartar, and the secularising reform movement within Islam, the 'jadid', he wanted in effect to marry Islam with communism, not least because like communism "Islam rejects narrow nationalism". Joining the party in 1917, Sultan Galiev soon became a protégé of Stalin's in the Commissariat of Nationalities (Narkomnats). According to Sultan Galiev, "all" Muslims colonised by imperialism and the tsarist state should be considered "proletarian peoples". Therefore the national movement in Muslim areas must, he said, by definition, have the "character of a socialist revolution".⁵⁰

As with other universal religions, Islam formally proclaims the unity of all races and peoples - effectively, though, that begins with conversion. Instead of the fundamental division in history being that of class - ie, at root an *objective* situation which entails the daily and ongoing conflictive clash of exploiters and exploited - Muslim socialists approach things from a completely different angle. Islamic universalism rests on the *subjective* - eg, praying five times daily in the direction of Mecca, observing dietary taboos, reciting the *Koran* and doing good works. Hence, the solidarity, or community, of Muslims, the umma, unites all classes *against* non-believers.⁵¹ So it would be foolish to take Muslim socialism on trust. There can, of course, be Muslim socialists, especially if we use the term 'Muslim' in its national-ethnic sense. However, as a concept it is not only a nonsense,

an oxymoron (not that one cannot hold views that are completely contradictory - countless people do). Muslim socialism constitutes a danger.

Marxism, needless to say, does not rely on universal conversion (an aim destined to constant disappointment, especially when it comes to a religion of the book, not least because of scholastic interpretation and schism). The programme of Marxism is eminently practical and can be summed up as a recognition of the need to form the working class into a party and the historical necessity of abolishing bourgeois property and along with that all classes and class divisions. That must and does involve uniting the working class of every nation, every ethnic group and every religion. Marxism, first and always, therefore looks to the *real* movement of the many millions, the billions, as they are and constantly make and remake themselves. The subjective element is not ignored - indeed the role of the subjective is vital in forming the working class into a party. Nevertheless the subjective grows from objective realities and the objective fact of class exploitation. Accumulated experience, crystallised in theory, guides and enhances the struggles of today; and that is why, of course, Marxists stress the necessity of mapping out existing realities and tasks through the lens of theory.

What of all colonised Muslims being considered proletarians? (Similar ideas were propounded by Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler: Italy and Germany were supposedly both ‘proletarian’ nations due to the terms of the Versailles treaty.[**](#)) Almost without exception, every Arab and Muslim country had been made into a European colony or semi-colony by the end of World War I and with it the collapse of the Ottoman empire. But did this bestow some innate virtue upon Islam or the so-called Muslim community? In previous historic periods, as we have seen in the last chapter, Islam served as an ideological cover for conquest, oppression and exploitation. Muslim warriors invaded neighbours in every direction and in each case cultural norms and values were exported: including the culture of further conquest under the banner of Islam. From the early 20th century onwards all the various Muslim peoples were undoubtedly oppressed by imperialism and this undoubtedly impacted upon Islam. But Islam remains a religion skewed towards the interests of the traditional exploiters and the bureaucratic elite. Take today: it would be absurd to suggest that the Saudi oilocracy, Jordan’s Hashamite monarchy or the Iranian theocracy should be included under the heading “proletarian peoples”.

[**](#) Alan McCombes and the SSP have effectively added their own twist to this national socialist argument. According to his book *Imagine* - jointly authored with the now defected Tommy Sheridan - Scotland is a progressive, proletarian nation; by contrast Britain is the oppressor, ruling class, reactionary nation. Feudal lords, merchants and modern capitalists who look to self-interested unity with their English counterparts are denounced not so much in class, but national, terms. They are traitors. Scotland is thereby liberated at a stroke from any imperialist guilt and independence miraculously becomes the gateway to socialism.

Muslim socialism defined all Muslims as oppressed proletarians, but what happens when rich Muslims do what comes naturally to them and act according to their class interests and instincts? What happens when they establish, or strive to continue, a class oppression of other Muslims bound up with capitalist imperialism? Which side do we take? Do we decide according to the criteria of the Muslim community or class solidarity? Sultan Galiev wrongly believed he could reconcile irreconcilables.

Sultan Galiev did good service in a number of responsible positions, including heading the Muslim Military College. Apparently as an incentive he received promises from Moscow - despite opposition from local leaders - to the effect that, once the civil war was successfully concluded, he and his comrades would be allowed to oversee the setting up of a specifically Muslim state. However, as commissar of nationalities in a *victorious* Soviet Russia, Stalin reneged on the alleged promise. Sultan Galiev was ordered to merge his Musulman Communist Party with the established communist organisations of central Asia. When his protests were rejected, he concluded that the proletariat (Russians) were not interested in liberating the eastern peasants (Muslims), but rather in exploiting them. The authorities in Moscow were accused of continuing the imperialism of the tsars. In turn Sultan Galiev was charged with forming an illegal nationalist organisation and was duly expelled from the party in 1923.

One sided

While specifically Muslim states were ruled out, the Soviet government sought, nevertheless, to come to a *modus vivendi*. The NEP concessions to the forces of small capitalism - kulaks, nepmen and the Living Church - saw their parallel in the east. It is important to emphasise that there was little choice in the matter - it was either that or continued economic collapse, famine and perhaps peasant counterrevolution. None of that would

have been in the interests of the working class - either in Russia or internationally. Stalin's speech on the largely Muslim republic of Dagestan in November 1920 gives the flavour. Stalin insisted that autonomy "cannot mean secession from Soviet Russia" because only by preserving that bond can Dagestan "preserve its freedom". On the other hand, Dagestan "should be governed in accordance with its specific features, its manner of life and customs". Religious practices and customs would be left undisturbed. He also pledged that sharia law would be considered fully valid as "common law".⁵²

Friday became the official day of rest throughout central Asia. In education a parallel system was to be permitted and funding was given to Muslim schools. Obviously the calculation was that, as the economy slowly recovered, and crucially the world revolution renewed its forward march, the balance would gradually tilt in favour of state schools. Resources would be ploughed in to the point where Muslim schools simply wither and eventually die out. In civil cases people were also to be given the choice between Soviet and sharia courts. Judgements that contravened Soviet law - such as amputation as a punishment - were forbidden and decisions of the sharia courts could be appealed in Soviet courts. Special measures were taken to ensure that women in particular did not suffer from undue discrimination by the sharia courts. Needless to say, given the cultural norms, many opted for the sharia courts, and there was an ongoing rivalry between the two sets of institutions.

To facilitate work amongst women in the Muslim regions Zhendotel (the Department of Working Women and Peasant Women) was established. Its mission was to disseminate information about education, medical treatment, childcare, training courses, and in general encourage women to enter the workforce and participate in political life. And it met with considerable success: literacy rates soared and women began to accept political posts. Zhendotel was noteworthy, in its early years, for how it approached its tasks in a sensitive and patient manner. There was a thin line to tread between, on the one hand, empowering women and slowly undermining sharia-enforced male domination and, on the other, provoking full-scale armed rebellion. Desperate not to inflame male anger, the cadre of Zhendotel donned the *paranja* (a form of Islamic veiling covering the head and face) before

engaging in discussions and meetings with Muslim women. There were many dangers. Husbands, fathers and brothers would mete out savage beatings and even arrange 'honour' killings. They also murdered Zhendotel activists. Such was the toll amongst them that the Soviet government decided to reinstitute the death penalty for this *political* crime. It was deemed a counterrevolutionary act. Meanwhile 'honour' killings were subject to a standard five to 10-year sentence.

There were other big problems in the east. Soviets and the Communist Party often had the appearance, and the reality, of being little more than a continuation of tsarism. To begin with they were almost exclusively Russian in composition. For example, in Tashkent the revolution was at the outset confined to the Russian colony. One of the first resolutions of the Tashkent soviet in December 1917 was to exclude Muslims from governmental posts. The Tashkent soviet then went on to suppress a revolt in the native quarters of the city. As for the local Communist Party, it was a peculiar organisation. Till June 1918 Bolsheviks and Mensheviks sat in the same joint committees. Moreover, when the Bolsheviks finally separated themselves off, they were operating as an official, quasi-governmental body. Membership reflected that salient fact. The Russian colony consisted of two types of people: merchants and officials; and railway workers. Both groups joined the party. The result was a Soviet Ulster.

Hence there was the communist priest, the communist police officer and the communist kulak employing hired workers and owning a herd of hundreds of cattle. These communists thought like colonists and lorded it over the natives. The communist Muslim minority in turn embraced nationalism or at least nationalist sentiments.

The central committee in Moscow sought to rectify this dreadful situation. It considered it vital to draw into government the broad masses of the people on a proportional basis. Mistrust and all traces of Great Russian chauvinism had to be overcome. There were many resolutions, much exhortation and a policy of appointing native people to top posts. The idea was to root the party and the Soviet regime. Towards that end the Russian language was replaced in official documents and other such material by indigenous languages. Cyrillic was also dropped and the Latin alphabet adopted throughout central Asia.

The rise of Stalinism in the 1920s and its triumph with the first five-year plan as a counterrevolution in the revolution marked a dramatic end to these innovations and, to all intents and purposes, a return to Great Russian chauvinism. Stalin declared a full-blown war on religion in the east too.

Beginning in the mid-1920s, Stalin abandoned the idea that women's liberation relied on empowerment and instead adopted a policy that amounted to 'liberation from above': ie, a legal-military offensive against the traditional mores and practices of Islam. Women were pushed by Zhendotel into initiating divorce proceedings against abusive or unwanted husbands. Soon divorce "assumed epidemic proportions".⁵³ Although local party branches raised objections, the pace of the offensive was remorselessly upped. What tenuous infrastructure that had existed to support divorced women collapsed, such was the weight of numbers. In 1927 Stalin's offensive shifted to focus upon the single issue of the veil. The "first step" was party meetings, where husbands unveiled their wives. Then on March 8 1927, International Women's Day, mass rallies were staged in which "thousands of frenzied participants, chanting 'Down with the paranja!' tore off their veils, which were drenched in paraffin and burned". Zhendotel cadre led demonstrations of unveiled women and enforced the desegregation of all public spaces, including religious sites. "Protected by soldiers, bands of poor women roamed the streets, tearing veils off wealthier women" and pointing out those who still clung to "traditional practices", which were now virtually deemed as crimes.⁵⁴

That was March 8 1927. On March 9 1927, whipped up by the clergy, the reaction began. Unveiled women were spat upon, insulted and even gang-raped or killed. Most decided to put the veil back on again. Secret counterrevolutionary organisations, pledged to restore traditional values, mushroomed. Women filing for divorce were targeted too. The ranks of Zhendotel were decimated. The authorities were forced to mobilise the militia, then the Komsomol and finally the general party membership and the Red Army to protect women. But Stalin refused to alter course. The "debacle" of International Women's Day 1927 was repeated in 1928 and 1929 "with the same disastrous consequences".⁵⁵

Stalin was pursuing an element of the programme, true. But it was blown out of all proportion, torn out of context, and therefore lacked any

appreciation of, or concern for, the negative human consequences. His campaignism did not liberate women. But it did - be it as a result of cold calculation or because of dizzy voluntarism - further empower an increasingly free-floating state, a state that was soon to cut its last remaining, flimsy ties with the working class and peasantry.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Muslim brothers

Al-Qaeda's spectacular September 11 2001 suicide attacks on New York and Washington DC were a world-historic moment.¹ Lying politicians, diehard militarists, calculating oil company executives, toxic media commentators, rightwing shock jocks, liberal interventionists and two-faced social imperialists alike found exactly what they were looking for. An opportunity to resurrect, popularise and violently unleash Samuel P Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' thesis.² A grim *Weltanschauung*, which draws on a range of thinkers such as Bernard Lewis, Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee.

In what Edward Said (1935-2003) dubbed a "clash of ignorance", Muslims are demonised as fanatics, hate-mongers and bloodthirsty irrationalists.³ Islam becomes Hegel's 'night of the world'.⁴ Correspondingly, western powers are equated with modernity, civic rights and an obligation to export so-called democracy. Though there was not a shred of evidence linking Saddam Hussein to 9/11, the countdown for Operation Iraqi Freedom began. The charred, dismembered and smouldering bodies of Iraqi conscripts that littered the road to Baghdad in April 2003 showed that the US is just the flipside of al-Qaeda - only infinitely more dangerous. Military and civilian deaths resulting from the whole Iraq farrago total well over 100,000.⁵

Such a horribly misjudged modern crusade admirably suited George W Bush and the neocons in America. Ditto the European far right. There was also a grotesque leftwing chorus: Nick Cohen, Christopher Hitchens, Alan Johnson, Norman Geras, David Aaronovitch, the Euston Manifesto, Harry's Place and the Alliance for Workers' Liberty.

Meanwhile, in the name of combating war and Islamophobia - and breaking out from the sectarian ghetto - various leftwingers sought to align

themselves with, even partner, mainstream Islam. As a result, naive conspiracy theorists have uncovered a “global” leftist-Marxist-Islamic alliance designed to bring about the fall of “democratic capitalism.”⁶

The courtship, at least in Britain, began in 2002, when the Muslim Association of Britain was invited to become one of the principal sponsors of the anti-war movement by John Rees (then the leading figure in the Socialist Workers Party and vice-chair of Stop the War Coalition). After some initial hesitation MAB decided that taking part in protests led by atheist leftwingers was not *haram* (religiously harmful). The huge February 15 2003 march was jointly sponsored by MAB, STWC and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. With every justification it is said to be Britain’s biggest ever demonstration. Estimates vary from 750,000 to two million.

MAB agreed an even closer political relationship through Respect - also known as the unity coalition.* True, MAB almost instantly recoiled and took distance. Nonetheless, its former president, Anas Altikriti, defiantly headed Respect’s Yorkshire and Humber slate for the European elections in June 2004. Respect secured a magnificent 1.9% of the vote: finishing in seventh place. Well behind the British National Party and the Greens, but just ahead of the English Democrats.

* Respect was not in fact a coalition, but an officially registered political party with individual membership, a directly elected executive, an annual conference, a detailed constitution and what passed for a programme. The original hope had been to harness the post-September 11 2001 anti-war movement and make a dramatic breakthrough. It was not to be. No national trade unions were won, nor any Labour Party wards or constituencies. Indeed Respect was a disaster waiting to happen. An eclectic range of freelance personalities decorated its leadership: eg, George Galloway, Yvonne Ridley, Salma Yaqoob, Ken Loach and Linda Smith. However, from Respect’s formation in January 2004 till the November 2007 split, the SWP constituted its steerage. Eg, SWP members did most of the donkey work and provided most of the conference votes. While committed Muslims were few and far between in Respect’s rank and file, the SWP’s Alex Callinicos described it as uniting “secular socialists and Muslim activists”.⁵⁷ This *wish* provided the SWP with the excuse it needed in Respect to vote down standard leftwing positions one after another. Following the departure of the SWP Respect quickly evolved into the George Galloway party. His personal traits and views pretty give Respect its identity.

An international

So what is MAB? According to its website the organisation was established in November 1997 with the aim of serving society “through promoting

Islam in its spiritual teachings, ideological and civilising concepts, and moral and human values”. Hence MAB pledges to tackle “the complex and intractable issues affecting our society”: eg, violence, drug addiction, rising crime, educational failures, the spread of racism and Islamophobia.

MAB is not counted amongst the larger Muslim organisations. In comparative terms it is quite small. A clear majority of British Muslims have family origins in the Indian subcontinent - predominantly Pakistan and Bangladesh. MAB members come mainly from the Middle East. Of course, because it wants to relate to, and draw strength from, other Muslims, MAB works “hand in hand with sister ... organisations, civic institutions, and political bodies”. Eg, it is affiliated to the Muslim Council of Britain, which groups together over 500 national and local organisations under its umbrella.

MAB boasts of supporting “just causes and demands” world wide. Hence, it champions a Palestine “free from the river to the sea”. Naturally this is given an Islamic slant. Not that MAB considers itself anti-Jewish. Great show is made of attempts at “dialogue and cooperation” with Jewish individuals and organisations.⁷

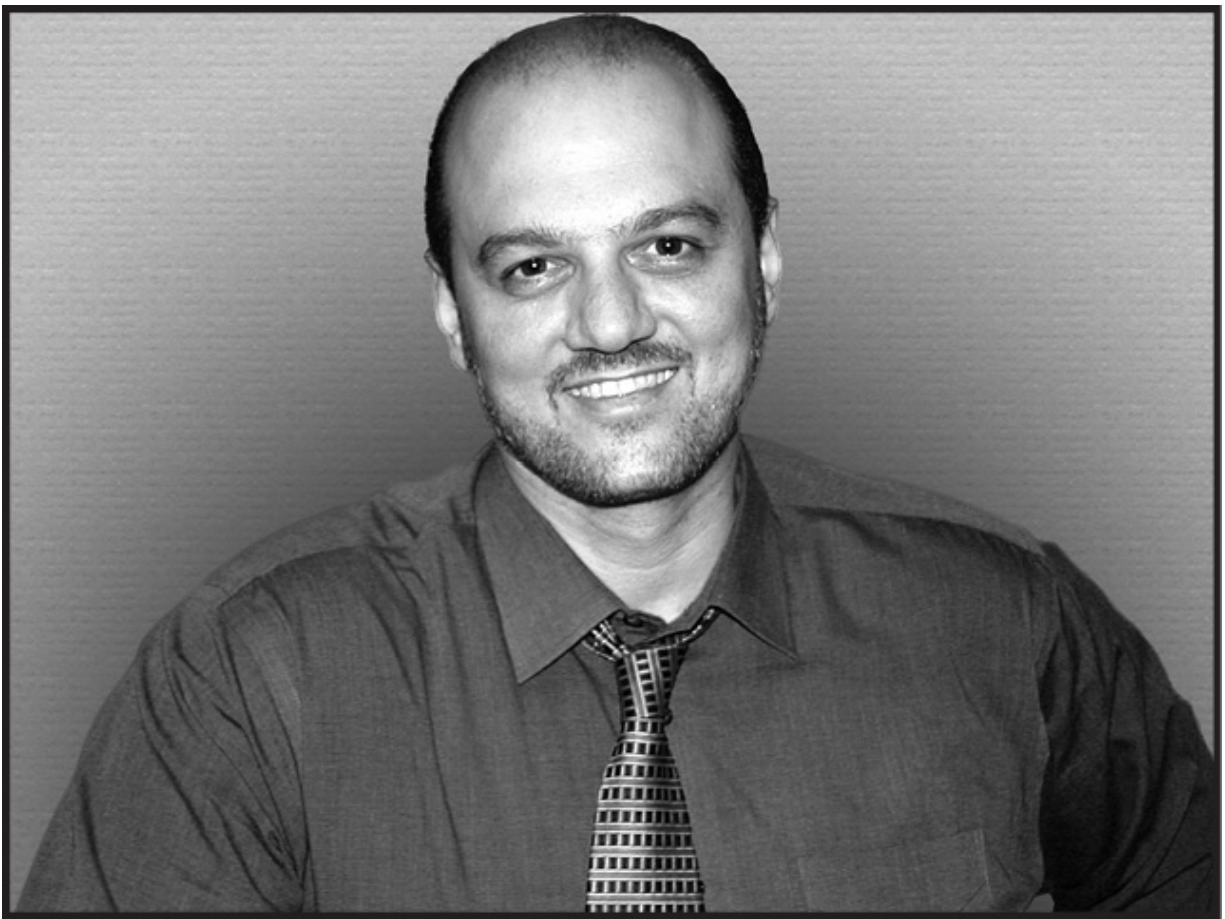
MAB is perfectly candid. Its particular brand of Islam is heavily indebted to and continues to be influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood: which the most *conservative* estimates credit with a global membership running into several millions. MB branches are ubiquitous in Sunni Arab countries and under this or that name there are around 80 national sections - some being particularly powerful. Eg, not only the Egyptian “mother movement”, but in Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Sudan.

After the Arab awakening there can be no doubt about the popular support enjoyed by MB in Egypt. And, of course, the Brotherhood played a not inconsiderable role in the Tahrir Square protests which triggered the downfall of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. The “vast majority of volunteers” - those who manned the informal checkpoints, demanded ID cards, searched bags and warned off *agents provocateurs* - were provided by MB.⁸

MAB expresses admiration for figures such as Hassan al-Banna, MB’s founder; Sayyid Qutb, its most renowned thinker, whom the jaundiced consider to be the ideological mentor of the Taliban and al-Qaeda; and

Ahmed Yassin, Hamas's spiritual leader, who till his assassination in March 2004 headed what is in effect the Palestinian MB.⁹

There is a loose international Brotherhood headed by Muhammad Badei, the 'general guide' of the Egyptian MB.¹⁰ But for reasons I can only guess at MB spokespeople often prove rather touchy on the subject. Nonetheless, regional groupings are freely reported in Europe, North America and the Middle East. And MAB is, it almost goes without saying, the British section of the Muslim Brotherhood. So although no mass organisation, MAB commands considerable influence due to its global connections.



Anas Altikriti: Muslim brother

Foundations

While it constantly references the *Koran* and draws inspiration from Mohammed and the first caliphs, MB is a thoroughly modern phenomenon. So there are medieval foundations, but many ruptures have occurred since then and therefore new foundations and new orientations. In fact, MB is best seen as originating as a strand of the Egyptian national independence movement. Religion being infused with and driven by national feelings, the two forming an ambiguous and contradictory unity.

Though dominated by the Mamaluk class of slave-warriors till the early 19th century, Egypt constituted an integral part of the Ottoman empire. However, Albanian mercenary troops rebelled and put their leader, Muhammad Ali, into power. He ruled as *khedive* (viceroy) of Egypt and Sudan from 1805-49. British forces occupied the country in 1882 - putting down Egypt's nationalist army and popular democratic movement in the process. The British considered it politic to maintain the Muhammad Ali dynasty and Egypt's place within the disintegrating Ottoman empire. Only in 1914 did Egypt officially become a British protectorate.

Prior to the outbreak of World War I anti-British agitation was confined to elite circles and had little impact. However, with the British administration conscripting one and a half million Egyptians into labour gangs and requisitioning crops, buildings and animals, discontent steadily rose ... till boiling point was finally reached. In March 1919, after demands for independence had been flatly rejected, strikes and mass demonstrations erupted throughout Egypt. It amounted to a national uprising. British military installations were attacked and at least 3,000 Egyptians were killed, as order was painfully restored.

Yet, given the balance of forces, the British had to make concessions. Independence was granted in February 1922. However, this status was purely formal. The extravagant, incompetent, debauched, pro-fascist king had to be flattered, bribed and occasionally threatened, but British rule continued. With the bureaucracy and the big capitalist and landlord classes safely in harness, a form of neocolonialism could be imposed. Mired in debt, the Egyptian state remained hopelessly dependent on the City of London. Egypt continued to be both a "market for British manufactured goods and a cotton plantation to service the Lancashire mills".¹¹ In other words, economic development was skewed and capital accumulation

proceeded mainly in the interests of Britain. To underwrite that exploitative relationship, British naval bases in Alexandria and Port Said were maintained by binding treaty, along with an army garrison on the Suez canal. In the event of war, British forces were to be free to move anywhere across Egypt.

The Society of Muslim Brothers (*al-Ikhwan al-Moslemoon*) was founded under these conditions of bitter disappointment in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna (1906-47). A primary school teacher and son of a small landowner, who also served as the local imam, al-Banna inserted Egyptian national humiliation into a wider narrative. Islam was portrayed as having been corrupted over the course of many centuries. That is what led to the occupation of Egypt by British infidels. That is what led to the carving up of the Ottoman empire in the aftermath of World War I. The nadir was the abolition of the caliphate by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1924.¹² A catastrophe for the religiously pious.

It is clear that the ‘puritan’ Wahabite sect - the dominant form of Islam in Saudi Arabia - served as something of a theological-political blueprint. Following its example, al-Banna taught that Islam is “creed and state, book and sword, and a way of life”. Al-Banna urged political activism and insisted that Islam went beyond the four walls of the mosque: “There is no meaning to faith unless it be accompanied by works, and no profit in a doctrine which does not impel its possessor to bring it to fruition and to sacrifice himself for its sake.”¹³ Put another way, Muslims were urged to find their way back to taking state power.

Al-Banna looked to the pristine certainties of the *Koran*, the *Sunna* and the revitalising spirit of Mohammed. His Islamic renaissance would deliver Egypt from “decadence, corruption, weakness, poverty, and humiliation”.¹⁴ He wanted Egypt to be genuinely independent, freed from economic dependence and put on a par with the leading countries of the day. Simultaneously a rebellion against imperialism and a bid to join imperialism.

Holy curses rained down upon the head of king Fuad, his parasitic family, his grasping ministers and his British masters. MB called for land redistribution, the nationalisation of Egypt’s natural resources, the nationalisation of financial institutions, including the Egyptian-owned Misr

bank, the abolition of usury and the introduction of a *zakat*-based system of social security. However, proletarian socialism and democracy were emphatically rejected as un-Islamic. MB was therefore in rebellion against the future too.

Al-Banna imagined destiny's hand had selected him for greatness and so got himself appointed *murshid al-amm* ('general guide'). MB was run according to the *Führerprinzip* ('leader principle') and Al-Banna openly expressed admiration for Adolph Hitler and the Nazis. MB willingly distributed *Mein Kampf* and pro-German propaganda. Of course, rightwing nationalists did much the same in India, Ireland and South Africa. The Third Reich being seen as a potential liberator from British chains. Al-Banna wrote glowingly to Hitler on many occasions. He too hated Jews, he too wanted to see the overthrow of the British empire. During the initial stages of World War II MB was considered a material asset by Germany. MB had its military wing, *al-nizam*, *al-khass* ('special organisation') and its fighters were meant to rise up on cue. Rommel's Africa corps would cakewalk into Egypt. Exposure of secret contacts with Germany did MB little harm. Such was the popular loathing of Britain.

The Brotherhood began by setting up supplementary, or parallel, educational institutions which would give its male adherents *jihad* training. Winning hearts and minds has always been seen as a necessary precondition for re-establishing the caliphate: first in Egypt and other Muslim countries, eventually over the whole globe.

While Egypt is expected to play a key role, narrow nationalism is eschewed. The Brotherhood is pan-Islamic. Included amongst key aims is building "*khilafa*" (basically unity between Islamic states) and "mastering the world" with Islam. Each MB national branch being obliged to draw up programmes for "Islamising" government after what are called "realistic studies".¹⁵ For those who see MB as hell-bent on world conquest, the findings of the Carnegie think tank should provide a calming corrective: MB poses no "security threat" to the US and ought to be "welcomed as a legitimate party".¹⁶

The Brotherhood calculates that it would be too risky to rule over a population which has not internalised Islamic law. Incidentally, with this in mind, psychologists have long claimed that pleasure can be gained from

submitting to and/or enforcing authority: “the first defining trait of a sadomasochistic dynamic” being the “existence of a hierarchical situation”.¹⁷ The merits of such arguments aside, the fact of the matter is that in pursuit of its goals, MB has constructed a steeply graded hierarchy of power and dependence. Indeed via the media, parliament, mosques, charity work and specifically Islamic trade unions, professional associations, health centres, student societies, women’s groups, etc, MB has built a hugely powerful organisation that amounts to a state within the state.

However, there is also currying favour from established state powers. MB looks benignly upon those who preside over what are called “true” Islamic governments. They deserve “support and help”.¹⁸ While that never included upstarts such as Mubarak, Assad or Gaddafi, the Saud, Hashem, Sabah, Nahyan and other such ‘authentic’ Arab dynasties are another matter. Time legitimises. Time consecrates. “What is grey with age becomes religion/ Be in possession, and thou hast the right/ And sacred will the many guard it for thee!”¹⁹ Benefits flow in return for “support and help”. Hence the description of MB as an “ideological protectorate of Saudi Arabia”.²⁰ An exaggeration, no doubt. Nonetheless, there is abundant evidence showing the closeness of the MB-Saudi relationship. Eg, the Islamic University of Medina has been generously financed by the Saudi monarchy. From its beginning, in 1961, the institution has been considered a centre of Brotherhood teaching (approximately 70% of its 22,000 students are non-Saudi).²¹

Politics

Let us apply the typology of Helmut Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962) to the Islamic movement.²² MB is an Islam of the *transformation of culture*. A revivalism or conversionism which seeks to redeem humanity through returning it to an imaginary ideal. Needless to say, all such attempts necessitate *radically* refashioning social realities in the here and now. By definition something which requires a well-tuned political antenna and an ability to rapidly manoeuvre in force. Not a purist withdrawal from society

and separatism (*Islam against culture*) nor accommodation and loyalty to the existing state (*Islam of culture*).

Some include MB under the heading of ‘political Islam’. Political Islam being contrasted with religious or ethical Islam. Political Islam is sometimes dated from 1979 and the coming to power of ayatollah Khomeini: this “turned political Islam from a dream into a reality”.²³ Of course, MB has rather older antecedents. But leave aside this quibble. ‘Political Islam’ is a highly problematic term and those who use it certainly need to acknowledge that there is nothing new about the fusion of Islam and politics. Mohammed established and ruled over an Islamic state in Medina and his immediate successors built an extensive Islamic empire. Obviously running a state is a *political* act by definition, which is why I prefer nomenclature which conveys both continuity and commitment to change. Not that we should get hung up on terminology.

Suffice to say, from the first, MB combined faith in its largely mythical 7th century ideal with the patient, solid, practical work needed to secure a mass base. From beginnings as one of many squabbling Islamic grouplets, membership was to soar and soar again: from 800 in 1936 to 200,000 in 1938. MB voiced its politics through a number of fronts, but also the explicitly named Party of the Muslim Brotherhood. By 1948 the organisation had an estimated half a million members and an equal number of close sympathies - the biggest political organisation in the Arab world.²⁴

MB fashioned this human material into a social battering ram - ultimately in the heavily disguised interests of those classes and strata which both opposed British imperialism *and* feared proletarian socialism. From the start students and ex-students were the vital mediation between the MB’s leadership and the masses. Students lived in the vast shanty towns and often came from the countryside.

MB continues to represent dissident clerics, bazaar merchants, better-off peasant farmers, shopkeepers, the urban middle classes, small capitalists, etc. And especially since the fall of Mubarak, MB has grown a bloated body of full-time functionaries: professional politicians, advisers, teachers, trade union officials, security guards, publishers, journalists, hospital managers, technicians, accountants, business operatives, etc. Inevitably they have developed their own caste identity, concerns and aims.

Nevertheless, MB leaders strive hard to give the impression of putting aside their own particular interests. Instead the sufferings, fears and dreams of the masses are highlighted and given an Islamic coloration. In terms of religious doctrine, nothing could be easier. After all, oppression, greed and exploitation are forthrightly condemned in the *Koran*. Rich Muslims are told that they have binding obligations towards the downtrodden, the poor and the unfortunate.

MB was used by the British against the Jewish national movement in Palestine following World War II. Members of the Brotherhood were provided with military training.²⁵ With the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948, king Farouk's government was accused of displaying criminal passivity in face of the Zionist foe; the Brotherhood mobilised some 10,000 volunteers to fight alongside the beleaguered Palestinians. MB's special organisation began terrorist attacks in Egypt itself, which led to a swift ban. A Brotherhood assassin gunned down the prime minister, Mahmud Fahmi Nokrashi, on December 28 1948. Tit for tat, al-Banna himself was killed by government agents.

Throughout its existence, MB has faced stiff competition from various liberal, nationalist, pan-Arabic, 'official communist', leftist and youth movement radicals. At times this competition has seen uneasy alliances; at other times bloody confrontations. Nevertheless, when it comes to winning mass support, the Brotherhood has often proved more successful. Rivals are typically technocratic and envisage social change brought about from above: ie, through the state. By contrast, in the here and now, MB provides practical relief and speaks in easily understood terms and phrases.

The Brotherhood supported the officers' revolution in 1952 - government posts were accepted. Within a matter of weeks, however, relations soured. After general Mohammed Naguib was elbowed aside, Gamal Abdel Nasser was widely credited as being the moving spirit behind the declaration of Egypt as a republic and the promise to nationalise the Suez canal. Needless to say, as a pan-Arab socialist, Nasser refused to generalise sharia courts: indeed in 1956 he summarily abolished them. His mantra was modernisation: eg, nationalisation, industrialisation, secular education, land redistribution, the advancement of women and a strong military. A hugely

popular package, which implicitly threatened classes and strata reliant on neo-colonial, pre-capitalist and religious forms of exploitation.

Unable to navigate these *forward-moving* currents, MB began to lose coherence. Hope was on the march. Increasingly its doctrines appeared anachronistic. The popular tide surrounding it ebbed away. Exposed, confused, fearing social extinction, MB's core constituency opted for either cringing accommodation with Nasser or violent confrontation. Ruinous internal battles and debilitating rifts followed. The national HQ in Cairo was physically fought over. Embracing the cult of death, various breakaway factions transformed terrorism into their *raison d'être*. MB members co-organised the botched attempt on Nasser's life in 1954. Immediately thereafter the Brotherhood as a whole was subjected to a wave of repression. Four thousand members were arrested and many more fled to Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Lebanon. What had been a mass organisation all but disintegrated. MB would only recover under president Sadat, Nasser's successor, who gradually released its activists from jail and allowed exiles to return home.

MB socialism

Because of Nasser's mass round-up of MB activists, Sayyid Qutb (1900-66) found himself imprisoned. He is, let us note, still considered one of the "most influential and controversial Muslim and Arab thinkers".²⁶ With the luxury of time, provided courtesy of Nasser, Qutb carefully plotted revenge. First and foremost by studying, moulding and applying the seminal ideas of Syed Abul A'ala Maududi (in 1941 he established the revivalist party, Jammaat-e-Islami, in British India). But Qutb developed his own unique programme and strategy. Freed from prison in 1964, he was almost immediately rearrested ... then tried and, presumably on Nasser's direct orders, executed.

Qutb's most important work is *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* or *Signposts on the road*²⁷ - first published in 1964. The basic thesis being that humanity faces a crisis of leadership: "All nationalistic and chauvinistic ideologies which have appeared in modern times, and all the movements and theories derived

from them, have ... lost their vitality” - Nazism, fascism, Peronism, Nasserism, etc.²⁸ Marxism, he declared, had failed too. Not a “single nation in the world is truly Marxist”, because “the whole of this theory conflicts with man’s nature and its needs”. Marxism only prospers in a “degenerate society or in a society which has become cowed as a result of some form of prolonged dictatorship”. As proof of his contention that Marxism had floundered, Qutb pointed to the increasingly dysfunctional Soviet economy and how the USSR was “suffering from shortages of food”.

What of the west? It is, he said, “now in decline”. Not because its culture has “become poor materially or because its economic and military power has become weak”.²⁹ Rather Qutb believed that the west had become morally decadent: it is “deprived of those life-giving values which enabled it to be the leader of mankind”. He visited the US on behalf of the Egyptian government over 1948-50. A lifelong bachelor, and one presumes sexually repressed, he recoiled from the supposed libidinal wantonness and promiscuity of America’s women. As an aside, Qutb claimed a link between what he saw as sexual riot and the unnatural chastity of monastic Christianity. One excess provoking the other. Qutb argued that Christianity had still to fully free itself from paganism.

Not that the Muslim world was let off the hook. Using a combination of hard facts and dehistorised koranic quotes, *Signposts* castigated all existing Muslim countries. None were Islamic. “If Islam is again to play the role of the leader of mankind”, Qutb insisted, “it is necessary that the Muslim community be restored to its original form.” The first step had to be washing away the “debris of the man-made traditions” and “false laws and customs”, which are not “even remotely related to the Islamic teachings”. Qutb said Muslims were living in the midst of a new “*jahiliyyah*” - effectively everything they disliked. The *jahiliyyah* being the period of ignorance corresponding to life in Arabia before the prophet; the new *jahiliyyah* was a “rebellion against god’s sovereignty on earth”.³⁰ He and other MB leaders were equated with Mohammed and his close companions. They must form a “vanguard” amongst the youth and single-mindedly fight to destroy the *jahiliyyah*. Not for nothing has *Signposts* been described as the *What is to be done?* of revivalist Islam.³¹

Qutb reckoned his programme might take many years - perhaps hundreds of years - to complete. His followers were urged to approach their mammoth task of winning global leadership through a series of strategic stages: hence the *Signposts* or *Mileposts* title of his book.

Once in power, in their first national outpost, they would not simply return to the conditions of the 7th century, but creatively adapt a purified Islam to fit in with the demands of modern technology - industrial production, air travel, telephones, etc. In other words, monopoly capitalism would be embraced. Despite that, in the meantime, Muslim socialism serves to hoodwink: part mythologised past, part protest against existing conditions, but always hostile to working class interests. Social aid is combined with MB moral-purity campaigns directed against women, minorities and militant workers. Such campaigns have a material base in the patriarchal economy. Shopkeepers, peasants and artisans exploit not only themselves. They traditionally rely on the labour of family members - mainly wives and children, who work endless hours for no pay. Moral-purity campaigns serve to keep them in their place - under the thumb of the head of the family. Their exploited position being sanctioned by the *Koran*. To rebel against the patriarch is therefore to rebel against Allah.

What of militant workers? The Brotherhood acts to weaken and divide. In the words of the *Communist manifesto*, what the Brotherhood lambastes capitalism for is not “so much that it creates a proletariat”, but that it creates a “*revolutionary* proletariat”.³² Muslim trade unions are established and pitted against secular trade unions and *united* with Muslim employers. Workers and employers are told that they have mutual rights and obligations - in return for “punctually” paid wages, workers are expected to work “fully and faithfully”.³³ Strikes against Muslim employers are in effect outlawed as running counter to Islamic law: eg, the right to strike is recognised, but only as long as it “does not disturb work”.³⁴ Working class unity is thereby broken in practice, while leaving religious and state structures intact. The Brotherhood has insisted from the beginning that Islam “does not tolerate divided loyalty, since its very nature is that of total unity”.³⁵

Qutb's ideas proved inspirational, and not only for fellow Sunnis. The Islamic movement in Iran - which climbed to power in 1979-81 - drew many of its theological innovations from Qutb. Khomeini himself translated Qutb's book *In the shade of the Koran* (1952) into Farsi.

Khomeini, in essence a Bonaparte figure, successfully mobilised a broad section of the urban poor, first against the shah, then against the left. Those who had fled from an impoverished countryside and scratched a living in the sprawling shanty towns of Tehran flocked to his banner. The left was hopelessly outmanoeuvred, not least because of an elementary failure to grasp the politics of the Khomeinists. Anti-Americanism was confused with anti-capitalism. With this hopelessly false notion clouding minds, most left groups willingly backed Khomeini. Disgracefully, in defence of the so-called 'imam's line', that included some justifying the execution of fellow leftwingers, the crushing of the women's movement and the banning of strikes and workers' councils.

Yet the simple fact of the matter is that the Khomeinists accepted capitalism. Indeed, the top clergy quickly merged with finance capital to form a single social amalgam. As for the rest of Iranian society, it was restructured along the vertical lines of religion. Independent working class, minority nationalist and secular forces were driven underground and a suffocating theocratic dictatorship imposed. The only tolerated institutions were Islamic institutions.³⁶

Back to the main thread. Like the prophet and his close companions, Qutb said MB needed to know when to withdraw from, and when to engage with, existing society. The Islamic vanguard "should keep itself somewhat aloof" from the "all-encompassing *jahiliyyah*"; it should "also keep some ties with it".³⁷ His twin track approach was modelled on Mohammed's withdrawal from Mecca in 622 and then his engagement with the Medinan city-state.

Subsequently, in Egypt, one group of Qutb's acolytes developed an ever more rarefied purism, rejecting all objective natural laws. Militant irrationalism being closely related to nihilist self-destruction. Those around Shukri Mustafa designated as infidel the whole of Egyptian society. They alone were authentic Muslims. A refusal to pray in 'infidel' mosques followed (government-appointed imams were not recognised). Mustafa's sect also refused to serve in the armed forces. In effect it formed a semi-

autonomous counterculture. The Egyptian press dubbed the lot of them the *Takfir wa Hijra* (literally ‘excommunication of holy emigration’). Shukri was executed in 1977 after the kidnapping of a religious functionary.

Another group, led by Abd al-Salam Faraj, adopted a variation of this *Islam above culture*. Four members of Islamic Jihad were responsible for the assassination of Anwar Sadat in September 1981. He became widely unpopular when he signed the Camp David peace deal with Israel in 1979. The *jihadists* were, however, completely quixotic in their expectations. Led by lieutenant Khaled Islambouli, they infiltrated a commemorative victory parade with the intention of wiping out the entire Egyptian government. They thought the population would spontaneously rise up to back their organisation’s bid for power. The town of Asyut was briefly seized. But apart from that essentially minor incident there was a smooth transition from Anwar Sadat to Hosni Mubarak. A not dissimilar attempted putsch occurred in Syria - members of the Brotherhood seized Hama in 1982. Around 10,000 died as the Ba’athists re-established control.

Not that the *jihadi* groups should be thought of as mere isolated fanatics. After Mubarak’s forced departure many of them helped form the Nour party - an unstable combination of religious traditionalists, populists and hate-mongers. And, at least in terms of my initial expectations, they did shockingly well in the post-Mubarak elections. However, other *jihadi* groups continue to target the Copts (the mainly poor, 10-20% Christian section of Egypt’s population). Churches torched, congregations attacked, etc. On new year’s day 2011, for example, an Islamic suicide bomber killed 23 worshipers at the church of St Mark and Pope Peter in the Sidi Bishr district of Alexandria. Many more such horrors followed.

Nonetheless, to the disgust of the puritanical Salafists, MB appears to be making a precarious transition from noisily heralding paradise to urging cautious reform. Martyrs thereby give way to mundane realists. Preachers to politicians. That has to involve a certain degree of historical forgetting. Nowadays, therefore, MB seeks merger with established power structures. The caliphate will arrive not through heroic insurrection, but peaceful, unglamorous, constitutional, or semi-constitutional means. Surely a reflection of the growing influence of big capital and its personifications.

During the period of persecution under Nasser a number of leading MB figures, such as Omar al-Talmassani and Said Ramadan, took refuge in

Saudi Arabia. Thanks to the self-interested help from the royal house of Saud - terrified by Nasser's pan-Arabism - they became very rich. When Sadat turned his back on Nasserite socialism and the Soviet Union, and opted instead for US patronage and the so-called free market, he found it expedient to allow these exiles to come back into Egypt. Sadat counted on them to help negate the influence of his leftist, Nasserite and pro-Soviet opponents. As a by-product the returnees could only but transform the MB. They might have been few in number, but they had millions of dollars available in the bank to ensure social leverage. Eg, thanks to their wealth and Saudi patronage, MB can provide a non-state, alternative system of healthcare, social security, religious education and source of credit in Egypt.

Despite the embourgeoisification, MB agitators continue to condemn Israel, call for sharia law, albeit in the future, target isolated apostates and encourage volunteers to join the holy war to 'liberate' Muslim lands such as Chechnya and Kashmir. This, of course, is how bin Laden and al-Qaeda were made. In the early 1970s the MB in Saudi Arabia recruited the prodigal son of one of the kingdom's aristocratic families. Bin Laden had till then been pursuing the dissolute life of the typical Saudi princeling - drinking Black Label whisky, snorting the best Peruvian, wrecking an endless supply of expensive cars, clubbing in Europe, sex with high-class prostitutes, in fact, indulging every 'how to spend it' whim.³⁸ Then he was introduced to the Brotherhood's austere tenets - in particular, the philosophy of Qutb. In the early 1980s, with the generous help of the CIA, bin Laden set off to fight the communists in Afghanistan - he proved to be a Frankenstein's monster. Despite a \$50 million bounty he was only tracked down and killed by his American creators in May 2011 - having spent years living in a high walled mansion located around a mile away from Pakistan's elite Military Academy.

Migrants

Beginning in the late 1950s and early 60s, the Egyptian Brotherhood provided material and other aid needed to seed the organisation among the growing migrant populations of Muslims in western Europe and north

America. This was done in the main through community organisations, Islamic schools, special cultural and women's organisations and national associations. One of them, as mentioned above, being MAB founded in November 1997 with Kamal el-Helbawy as its first president. He was, at the time, the London-based European spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood.

MAB lists branches in London, Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool and Scotland.³⁹ At the top there are still those with close links with the Arab world. Eg, Kamal el-Helbawy is an Egyptian citizen and returned to his native land in 2011 after 23 years of "voluntary exile". Anas Altikriti is Iraqi-born, as is Ahmed al-Rawi, another MAB former president. Politics, business and family ensure continuing ties with the Middle East.

Not that there are no disagreements. Many thought MAB was going badly wrong with overt support for STWC, Respect and Unite Against Fascism. A majority coalesced around those who wanted to downgrade cooperation with the left and instead cultivate friendly relations with the British government. Under the banner of concentrating on religious and cultural issues, there seems to have been a bitter power struggle. That surely explains the missive issued by the then MAB president, Ahmed Sheikh Mohammed, dated August 2 2005. He bluntly spelt out that, "in accordance with its constitution, the official spokesperson of MAB is the president" and that "the statements of any other individual are to be seen always as personal".⁴⁰ Almost certainly an attempt to put Anas Altikriti in his place. That year Altikriti founded the Cordoba Foundation, "an independent research and public relations organisation", which promotes "co-existence and social dialogue". A little while later, in 2007, the British Muslim Initiative came into being. Taking over sponsorship of anti-war demonstrations from MAB, it is clearly a turf rival. Altikriti justifies his decision to set up BMI with exquisite diplomacy:

It became apparent that politics (home and foreign) and media could not be dealt with on a part-time basis as was the case with MAB which as a voluntary grassroots organisation has more than eight bureaus, including youth, women, education, etc, with which politics and media had to

share attention and resources; something which was found inappropriate in the light of rising challenges of the time.⁴¹

In that sense, he says BMI is “neither a split or even an offshoot in the strict meaning of the word”. On the other hand he does not find the description of BMI as a “parallel” organisation “would work” either.⁴² With that in mind, BMI should perhaps best be characterised as an external faction of MAB.

Through its changing presidential spokespersons, MAB has emphatically disassociated itself from Islamic terrorism. Eg, al-Qaeda’s September 11 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. Ironically, in the name of its version of anti-imperialism, the SWP steadfastly refused to use the ‘condemn’ word even when confronted by atrocities such as 9/11, Bali, Madrid and the 7/7 London bombs. The only significant al-Qaeda action MAB has not denounced is the 2003 bombing of Jewish Israeli holidaymakers in Mombassa - an attitude that is, sadly, shared by many secular Palestinians. Israeli Jews are drafted into the armed forces from the age of 18 and remain on the reserve lists for many years. Islamists and Palestinian nationalists alike therefore consider *all* adult Israeli Jews legitimate targets.

Whose class interests does MAB serve? There are British-Arab student, middle class and petty bourgeois members of MAB: often asylum-seekers or the sons and daughters of asylum-seekers. But, from what I can gather, those who form MAB’s leadership are well rewarded, globetrotting academics, traditional intellectuals, members of the caring professions and merchant capitalists. Like other organisations based on a specific group of migrants, MAB must be seen to be useful to its claimed community. Typically they put on various educational conferences, take responsibility for staging traditional celebrations and give a helping hand to individuals confronting the labyrinthine local or national bureaucracy. Many of MAB’s activities fall into this category.

MAB’s ‘aims and objectives’ give us another pointer. They include affirming “the principles of Muslim citizenship and the firm and undeniable roots of Islam and Muslims within British society and to establish a relationship of cooperation and coordination with the other institutions and organisations in any activity which does not contradict with the aims and

objectives of MAB”. A notable feature of MAB is that it rejects isolation and consciously pursues engagement. Anas Altikriti used to talk of MAB’s “brilliant friends” in the Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, the trade unions and the Conservatives.⁴³ Migrant organisations often have a strong material incentive to oppose integration. Especially under New Labour, national and local government hand-outs went to those who displayed their separateness, their distinctiveness from others. One of the consequences of multiculturalism was to engender a splintering range of rival supplicants, each waving a kow-towing grant application form before the beneficent state.

MAB wants to integrate Muslims into a changed British society that preserves them not as Arabic, Pakistani, Turkish or Nigerian Muslims, but simply as Muslims. Underlined by other similar formulations: eg, to “broaden the scope of dialogue between the different cultures and faiths in order to serve society and humanity”; to “improve the relationship between the Muslim community and the British institutions on the one hand, and the Muslim world on the other, so that their social, economic and political relationships shall be revived on a sound basis”.⁴⁴

With MAB we have an organisation which articulates the contradictory viewpoint of a bourgeois and middle class migrant elite; it both lends support to co-thinkers in the Arab world, fantasises about establishing an Islamic world state, has real influence over other British Muslims, but is also concerned with gaining the ear of and shaping the host society. Note: despite adhering to a mainstream version of Islam and wanting friendly relations with the British state, MAB fell foul of David Cameron’s insistence that only “moderates” who “reflect mainstream British values” would receive government endorsement. In other words, MAB was branded an extremist organisation under the “updated” provisions of the Prevent strategy.⁴⁵

Others too see MAB in sinister terms. Despite the once close relationship with the SWP and Respect, and the more recent advice given to Muslims to vote Liberal Democrat or Green, MAB is charged with being “sophisticated, soft-soap fundamentalists”. Behind its carefully constructed facade there lies a tightly knit group of fanatical Islamists who seek to impose clerical fascism. Confirmation being found in expressions of

sympathy for Palestinian suicide bombers, phrases about “dismantling” the Zionist state, support for the hijab, website links to the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat e-Islami, the use made of the writings of al-Banna and Qutb, invitations to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Muslim Brotherhood’s mufti, who spoke at MAB’s pro-hijab conference in July 2004, hosted by the Greater London Authority, etc. The most influential advocates of this MAB equals “genocidal bigotry” line being rightwing columnists such as Melanie Phillips, Andrew Gilligan and Peter Hitchens ... with the AWL providing a distant ‘leftwing’ echo.⁴⁶

There are passable similarities here to the stories one used to hear about Eurocommunism being a dastardly plot hatched in the Kremlin. Hence in 1977 we read Jacques Chirac warning that Eurocommunism was a “danger against which we must act”.⁴⁷ Henry Kissinger was of much the same opinion: he refused to believe that “communists ... through some magic ... have become democratic”.⁴⁸ We all know that the Eurocommunists proved to be more or less as they appeared - a bourgeois-socialist trend. In Britain they provided the ideological foundations for Neil Kinnock’s Labour Party and thus Blairism (mainly through the journal *Marxism Today*). Their pulverised remnants can be found in and around Compass, *Soundings* and Blue Labour.⁴⁹

Anyway, we can for the moment let MAB answer for itself. MAB does not in the least deny that amongst its members “are those who, back in their original countries, were members of the Muslim Brotherhood”. MAB also says that it “enjoys good relation[s] with every mainstream Islamic organisation in the UK and abroad; among them is Muslim Brotherhood”. According to MAB, the Brotherhood is “well respected” not only by the Arab street, but also by “politicians, intellectuals and opinion-makers in most Arab countries”. Again, according to MAB, the Brotherhood urges “dialogue” with others, rejects “terrorism” and respects “those who differ in views or opinions”. Moreover, MAB stresses that, while it is “proud of the humane notions and principles” of the Brotherhood, it also reserves the right “to disagree with or divert from the opinion and line of the Muslim Brotherhood, or any other organisation, Muslim or otherwise, on any issue at hand”.⁵⁰

What of the hijab? Naturally, MAB favours it. While the hijab is not considered a “pillar” of Islam, it is viewed as a duty required of every adult Muslim female. Women should be free to wear a mini-skirt or a sleeveless dress, says MAB, yet as a concomitant there should also be the freedom to wear the veil. In short, MAB says that its struggle here in Britain today is not to “impose Islam”, but to have the “freedom to live according to its teachings without infringing on the rights of others”.⁵¹ Let us take them at their word. Muslim women should be free to wear what they like ... and, of course, most leftwingers would urge Muslim women to reject and discard those dress codes which symbolise their age-old oppression and patriarchal domination by fathers and brothers.

Nevertheless, while MAB is studiously liberal in Britain, the same cannot be said of the Muslim world. Azzam Tamimi, a Hebron-born academic, who has often spoken on behalf of MAB, claims that attempts to “impose” liberal democracy on Muslim countries - by which he means parliamentary sovereignty, a multi-party system, secularism and the rule of law - are bound to fail. Leave aside the loaded word “impose”. He concedes that what he calls “procedural democracy” can be incorporated into Islam and thereby produce an “Islamic democracy”. In a paper presented to Kyoto University, Japan, on July 17 1999, he concluded with these seemingly innocuous words:

At least within mainstream political Islam, issues related to Islam and democracy have adequately been addressed and dealt with. The most serious challenge facing the Islamic movement ... is having to live up to the value of democracy, which entails tolerance, free choice, transparency and accountability. As Islamic movements struggle for a share in power, and as they pledge to accept the rules of the democratic game, they must respect and observe democratic procedure, not only at the national level, but more importantly within their own organisations.

However, what this “Islamic democracy” turns out to be on closer examination is the kind of ‘democracy’ practised in Iran. The logic is impeccable. The majority should decide. But as the majority in Muslim countries are Muslims, therefore there should be an Islamic state. As Mike Macnair cuttingly remarks, “The majority get to decide once and once

only.”⁵² After the majority has voted in a referendum to create an Islamic state - like the 90% vote which gave Hitler absolute power in 1934 - the law becomes the exclusive preserve of the theocrats. The power of parliament is severely limited. Though there might still be regular elections, it is the clerics who have the ultimate say. Eg, they choose who can stand as candidates. Voting therefore becomes solely about legitimising the religious elite. So, while in Egypt MB proclaims its support for a “democratic, parliamentary system”,⁵³ this is merely one of “many steps” towards sharia law and a re-established caliphate. Popular sovereignty is rejected in reality.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Tamimi is discreetly cutting a certain distance from Qutb’s *overt* dismissal of democracy. Within the Brotherhood internationally this is alternately regarded as a clever pose, a thoughtful correction or a scandalous heresy.

For its part, MAB wants it known that, no matter how highly it regards Qutb as a thinker, he is not beyond criticism. He is not accorded the status of a prophet. Indeed amongst those disagreeing with Qutb is Yusuf al Qaradawi, who has taken issue with him over the Arab-Israeli conflict. Whereas Qutb regarded it as essentially religious in nature, Qaradawi sees things in terms of “oppressor against oppressed”, with little or nothing to do with either side’s faith. In other words, though al Qaradawi wants to dismantle the “Zionist entity” - ie, Israel - this is no different, in the abstract, to the one-state ‘solution’ advocated by most of the left in Britain. Wrong, but not necessarily anti-Jewish.

As mentioned above, MAB is at pains to distinguish between Jews and Zionism. It claims to respect the Jewish faith - adherents being a fellow people of the book. MAB says it desires good relations with the Jewish community. Tamimi himself has shared platforms with Jewish intellectuals and figureheads. They are urged to disassociate themselves from Israel. However, he also forthrightly condemns as “racist, inhumane and, therefore, un-Islamic” those Muslims who insultingly describe Jews as “descendants of pigs and apes” - a common phrase in Arab countries. In that spirit Tamimi again and again insists that the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are a crude “fabrication” - though widely circulated and believed in the Arab world.⁵⁴ Hamas’s charter, by way of contrast, is definitely anti-Jewish. The organisation has cited the *Protocols* on its website in terms of self-

justification. Tamimi calls for a rethink. What this and other such statements point to, therefore, is a *real* difference of opinion and outlook.

On the face of it, MAB hardly displays the features that one might expect from a clerical-fascist organisation. Plans for a global caliphate there undoubtedly are, but its leaders are perfectly aware that at the moment, and for the foreseeable future, that hardly amounts to realistic politics. Rather, what we have with MAB is surely something much more mundane - a pressure group which speaks in favour of Islamic universalism and seeks to advance specific ethnic-class interests within British society.

Basically that is all MAB can do, and all it can really ever expect to do. The project of building a Muslim Brotherhood in Britain which can seriously contend for power is quite simply a non-starter. In that sense, MAB's promotion of al-Banna and Qutb in their educational and historical material should be treated as akin to the sale of works by Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung by Stalinists in the Indian Workers Association. In each case, the social and economic conditions simply do not exist in Britain for anything like the *full* implementation of the ghastly political programmes that these figures advocated in their own particular countries. None of these programmes can *seriously* hope to win through and become a social reality in Britain. They have no practical significance when it comes to *conquering* state power because there is no practical possibility of such organisations contending for power.

Should MAB's ideas be described as progressive or treated as harmless or irrelevant? When we read in MAB's paper *Inspire*, in an article on 'Islam and human rights', that apostasy from Islam is "a religious offence punishable by death", it is definitely right to treat such backward-looking statements calmly and with a large pinch of salt. Not least given the growth of Islamophobia, it would be grossly irresponsible to in any way suggest that *in Britain* MAB assassins are just about to be given orders to hunt down and eliminate secular Muslims. Does that mean the established ideology of MAB has no practical effect? Like the IWA, it certainly does - albeit very limited - for good or ill.

MAB, as should be clear, is a highly contradictory political formation. On the one hand, MAB demonstrates with the left and calls for mutual toleration. On the other hand, MAB defends religious hatred laws and stands alongside Christian fundamentalists in opposing abortion and

blasphemy. A censorious MAB welcomed the forced closure of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti* by Birmingham Repertory in 2004. Likewise it demanded that BBC2 should cancel transmission of *Jerry Springer - the opera*. Not without foundation, it has been said that "between conservative Catholics, the expanding Muslim community and growing numbers of evangelical protestants, an alliance is being forged".⁵⁵ Here we have the *practical* effect of the doctrines of al-Banna and Qutb in Britain.

Put another way, MAB has two souls: one besieged, conservative and overtly bigoted; the other liberal, flexible and ostensibly democratic. Yet together these opposing souls inhabit a single body and have visibly exerted a palpable *rightist* pull on a cluster of leftwing and revolutionary organisations in Britain. Unity with MAB obliged, encouraged or excused fudging and outright betrayal of professed principles when it came to issues such as secularism, blasphemy laws and defending women and gays. Certainly, desperation to keep MAB on board saw *Socialist Worker* say nothing about the protests against *Behzti* and *Jerry Springer*.⁵⁶ Silence being a form of complicity.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jews and Zionism

The Jews are one of those people-religions - others being the Sikhs, Parsees and the Nestorian Christians. Throughout their fractured history, or more accurately histories, there were conversions to and from Judaism. For instance, discrimination saw innumerable Jews opting to become Christian or Muslim. However, many individuals, and for that matter whole kingdoms, joined the chosen people: eg, the Khazars in the 8th or 9th century.* There were also children with non-Jewish partners. Clearly then, there has never been anything fixed about the Jewish people-religion. Genetic research confirms what the better historians have long argued. Jews do not constitute “a single group distinct from all others”.¹ Rather the various Jewish population groups exhibit a diversity of genetic profiles, some pointing to distant Semitic/Mediterranean ancestry, but all showing intermixing. Eg, DNA studies of the Ashkenazim (central and eastern European origin Jews, who even today make up approximately 80% of the world’s Jewish population) reveal a large European and central Asian input. And, of course, what science proves the eye has always known. German Jews look German.

* The Khazars were a semi-nomadic, Turkic-speaking people, whose rulers established a large and powerful feudalistic state in the Eurasian steppe north of the Caucasus mountains in the 7th century. Fighting off the Abbasid caliphate, aligned to the Byzantine empire, the Khazar elite abandoned Tengri paganism and converted to Judaism. The speculation is that this gave them equal status compared with their Abrahamic neighbours. The conversion date is uncertain - some put it as early as 740 - but the general range lies between the late 8th century and early 9th century. Where the elite led, the common folk are supposed to have followed - though this is disputed by a number of scholars. The Khazar kingdom disappeared from history mainly due to rivalry and conquest from the north, first and foremost by Kievan Rus. There exists a well established theory that the Ashkenazi Jews in eastern Europe descended not from ancient Palestinian Jews, but the Khazars. This idea originated with Ernest Renan and a famous lecture entitled *Judaism as a race and religion* (1883), but was popularised many years later by the novelist, Arthur Koestler, in *The thirteenth tribe* (1975). Though sympathetic to Zionism, Koestler was furiously attacked by Zionist critics; they were determined to uphold the myth that all Jews descended from those exiled by the Romans following the sack of Jerusalem in 70 and then the suppression of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 136. Shlomo Sand’s

The invention of the Jewish people (2009) successfully shows that Jews have multiple backgrounds and that a “silent lapse” occurred in Israeli Jewish memory when it comes to the Khazars. Incidentally, Sand notes that serious historical research into the Khazars was anathematised under Stalin - they had to be painted in purely negative terms.

Yet, while most Jewish populations have trace ancestries in the Levant there are those whose genetic profiles show nothing of the kind. The Falashas are almost exclusively Ethiopian. The same goes for the Bene Israel Jews and Cochin Jews of India. Studies of mitochondrial DNA reveal Indian ancestors.

Priestly and rabbinical attempts to impose exclusiveness were chimerical. They could agree bans, prohibitions, warnings, rules and laws against Jews having sex with non-Jews. But Eros is always transgressive. There is also absorption by the surrounding culture. Jews adapted to both oppression and opportunities. So it should come as no surprise that in western Europe, as capitalism approached its high point during the first half of the 19th century, Jews were becoming unmistakably assimilated. While some still observed the Sabbath and hung on to dietary taboos, most dressed, spoke and acted like their fellow countrymen and countrywomen. Marriages uniting Jew and gentile were increasingly frequent too.

First the Cromwellian revolution in England and then the great French revolution - which in its Napoleonic form marched across the whole European continent - paved the way for this development by proclaiming the rights of man regardless of religion. Laws that had hitherto discriminated against Jews were progressively abolished. What kept the flame of Judaism alive was a steady flow of Jewish migrants fleeing from eastern Europe; that and the revival of anti-Semitism in the late 19th century.

Under feudalism Jews constituted a half-privileged, half-persecuted social caste. Barred by statute from public office and a whole range of noble occupations, the Jewish patriarchs, the king's Jews, gained a prosperous living as intermediaries. Not that the majority of Jews were rich. On the contrary, Jews were often very poor (the people-religion included large numbers of beggars).²

Christians were forbidden by canon law from charging interest; and feudal society, especially the monarchy, increasingly needed moneylenders. The dilemma was solved through the Jews - the elite amongst them were

the financiers, bankers and merchant traders of medieval Europe. However, because of the monarchy's unmatched ability to field military force, this was a grossly unequal symbiotic relationship. The king's Jews were "one of the major fiscal resources of the monarchy".³ They had to pay supertaxes and debts owed to Jews reverted to the monarch upon the death of the creditors. Acting as a "kind of sponge" to soak up wealth from every class, the Jews were then "squeezed by the royal treasury".⁴ Monarchical exploitation of the whole population could that way be partially masked.

Peasants, townspeople and aristocrats together blamed the Jews, not the king, for their spiralling debts, along with their anxieties and feelings of insecurity. Feudalism, it should be stressed, was in an advanced state of decomposition - in England its essential forms had all but been hollowed out by the last quarter of the 14th century. There is an associated heightening of rural class struggles and a flight from the land to the overcrowded, disease-ridden but anonymous urban centres - a horizontal social mobility that indexes the breakdown of old methods of control. In point of fact the whole of feudal society in Europe comes to be characterised by "acute crisis".⁵ The paintings of Hieronymus Bosch (c1450-1516) brilliantly capture this process: eg, *The garden of delight* and *The last judgement*.

Genoa, Florence, Venice and Pisa provide the best known examples of mercantile states - proto-capitalisms though still operating within the feudal nexus. These city-states fabulously enriched themselves by acting as the middleman between the opulent Greco-Muslim east and the expanding wants of the Catholic west. But their local manufacturing industries - eg, shipbuilding, silks, book printing, processed food, glassware and woollens - rapidly developed too. So there grew both a proletariat of the sea and a proletariat of the town. During the late medieval period it is clear that production was progressively moving away from production for immediate use and becoming instead production for exchange. Capitalism was maturing within the feudal womb. As it did, new, experimental, political forms were created. Take the commune of Venice. Whereas other city-states were governed by a "small group" of consuls, power in Venice was considerably more centralised.⁶ Yet, though the doge ruled for life, he was

chosen through a complex electoral system designed to minimise the individual influence of the greatest families. Strict limits were placed on his powers: eg, the doge could not choose his successor, nor could he own property abroad.

However, the Italian proto-capitalisms were “internally massively penetrated by the old social and political order”. The aristocracy increasingly ran their landed estates along commercial lines and collaborated, as partners or clients, with all kinds of business enterprises. Despite that, the ethos of society remained essentially feudal. Land thereby triumphed over trade. Urban culture replicated the countryside. The bourgeoisie constantly “turned class traitor”.⁷ Successful businessmen abandoned trade, purchased land and married their richly-dowried daughters to noblemen. The capitalist dynamic remained subordinate, interstitial, limited. Capitalism could not be generalised, as it was beginning to be in the 18th century and definitely was in the 19th century.

Taken as a whole then, we see the laws of a declining feudalism and a rising capitalism collide and produce a whole series of social forms that of themselves cannot make the transition to capitalism. The Italian city-states are riven with debilitating social strife, tend towards oligarchical tyranny or simply reach the point of marooned decay. By the 17th century Venice is coming to rely on tourism, gambling, prostitution and “frivolity”.⁸ Transitional forms therefore have their own particular laws of both rise and decline.

Nevertheless, despite the false starts, hesitations and temporary reversals, the overall direction of social development was unmistakable. Custom and overt military force was being successively rivalled, joined and superseded by universal money relations backed by law - under classic capitalism military force is still vital, but it ceases to be the primary means of extracting surplus product.

Ironically, as money, banking and trade assumed more and more importance, the role of Jews diminished - they were “eclipsed by Italians” even in their Egyptian “stronghold”.⁹ As money-lenders the Jews were effectively overtaken by Christian banking houses, such as the Bardi of Florence. Moreover, under circumstances of a declining feudalism, and the associated social dislocation and turmoil, Jews were deliberately, cunningly

moulded into scapegoats. That kept them unassimilated ... and therefore defenceless and dependent. Anti-Semitism took on a vicious new intensity.**

** All monotheistic religions tend towards intolerance. So it is no surprise to find the early fathers of the Christian church inveighing against the Jews. Following the teachings of the *New Testament*, Jews were charged with having killed Jesus, so they belonged to a lower order of existence and deserved to suffer. Following Constantine's elevation of Christianity into the religion of the Roman empire, legal measures were enacted against these recusants. Eg, conversions to the Jewish faith were forbidden by the *Codex Theodosianus* (438). Jews were barred from the legal profession and public office by the same set of laws. Inter-marriage between Christians and Jews was also outlawed.

Monarchs, bishops and princes throughout western Europe enacted multiculturalist legislation in the 13th century to ensure that Jews were kept separate and easily distinguishable from their Christian subjects - they were forced to wear special badges, horned hats, stripes of cloth, etc. Protected by the crown because of their disproportionate tax contributions and continued ability to advance credit for spending on ostentatious luxury and endemic warfare, the Jews were nevertheless subjected to periodic forced expulsions ... they would then, after a suitable interval, be recalled - that or their piecemeal return was quietly tolerated. Through such a nuclear option, accumulated royal debt would be cancelled in an instant. Eg, the 'most Christian' king St Louis issued a decree in 1257 or 1258 ordering the removal of Jews from his French realms. In 1290 an overborrowed Edward I of England agreed to "implement" the new policy: "total expulsion".¹⁰ In 1492 the united monarchy of Spain forced through what was perhaps the biggest act of 'ethnic cleansing' under feudal conditions: estimates of the number of expelled Jews vary from 100,000 to 800,000.¹¹ They were forbidden to take silver and gold money away with them.

Monarchical grand larceny had to be sprinkled with holy water. The church hierarchy readily obliged. The *Talmud* was condemned as heretical. Christian sensibilities were deeply offended by its contents. Using the religious hatred laws of the day, Jews were declared to be polluters of both the body and the mind. From a position of weakness the Jews responded in kind: the law of classical medieval Judaism, the *halakhah*, practised by virtually all Jews from the 11th to the 18th century, legitimises discrimination against gentiles in almost every area of human interaction -

crime, sexuality, business, etc, and inculcates a general attitude of scorn and hatred towards gentiles.¹²

According to the church's demonology, kings do all Christians a great service by driving out the Jews. Not only were they Christ killers. Medieval church propaganda charged the Jews with being responsible for the "murdering of Christian children to use their blood for ritual purposes".¹³ Supposedly they mixed innocent blood into the unleaven bread specially baked for celebrating the annual passover festival. They were also commonly blamed for the Black Death and virtually every social woe. Such bizarre nonsense was readily believed by those below because it suited their material interests to do so - or, what fundamentally amounts to the same thing, it gave them an easy explanation for the progressive disintegration of society and the collapse of traditional bonds and relations. Jews imposed usurious rates of interest and were in every way derided by the church and heretical lay preachers alike. It followed in the popular mind that their extermination would banish all social ills - poverty, war, depopulation, plague. Medieval anti-Semitism was therefore a highly distorted form of the class struggle.

Bewildered, dislocated, desperate, the masses madly struck out in the name of Christianity's Judeophobia. They needed no prompting from above ... and indeed they were frequently roundly condemned by bishops, popes and kings. Ostracism, discrimination, expulsion and mass slaughter sanctioned by the holy father in Rome was one thing: riot, disorder and looting was another. Orders were issued time and again to put a halt to such unofficial outbreaks. Undeterred, in "militant and bloodthirsty pursuit of the millennium", the first target of the heretical and anti-clerical flagellants was the Jews.¹⁴ "In every town they entered, the flagellants rushed to the Jewish quarter, trailed by citizens howling for revenge upon the 'poisoners of the wells'".¹⁵

The flagellants were only one of many sects convinced that the end of times and the second coming of Christ was at hand. Millenarian revolutionary movements followed one after another. Attacks on Jewish moneylenders, Jewish merchants and Jewish property were therefore a frequent occurrence in late medieval Europe. Many, many thousands were

horribly put to death. Sometimes these misdirected expressions of class war gathered such momentum that they threatened to engulf the whole social order. They never could ... that is to say, they never could put in place a viable alternative system. Individual bishops and barons were hunted down and killed. The “wild rebels” of Bohemia even momentarily established their communistic order in 1420.¹⁶ Yet, given their ruling principle of equal distribution rather than abundant common production - which was beyond their historic reach - they were forced to engage in social banditry. Though it started with robbing the Jews and the nobility, it ended with robbing the peasant masses themselves.

Certainly a peasant state was never a realistic possibility. Peasants could combine long enough to terrorise, or even put to flight, their feudal lords. But they were constantly dispersed and thereby disorganised by space and the necessity of sowing and harvesting their individual plots. Within itself peasant democracy is inherently time-limited, parochial and in the last analysis individualised and therefore reliant on some other force. That is why it tends to give rise to the ‘great man’ who brings forth sunshine, rain ... and nowadays, in North America, Japan and western Europe, demands for fat agricultural subsidies.

Analaogous

In eastern Europe, especially in the Russian empire, a broadly analogous ‘feudal’ position for Jews continued well into the 19th century. There were rich Jewish merchants and bankers; typically, though, Jews worked as tax-gatherers, loan sharks, peddlers, cobblers and vodka-sellers. When the tsar abolished serfdom in 1861, all strands of Judaism were thrown into crisis. State-sponsored capitalist development meant ruination for countless small-time traders and middlemen. Impoverished Jews turned to the dances, escapism and raptures of Hasidism - this split the traditional community down the middle. Subsequently, however, Jews formed the first generation of proletarians in the Congress Kingdom of Poland and then Russia itself. Whole swathes embraced democratic, socialist and revolutionary ideas with a wonderful fervour and enduring enthusiasm.

In this they were following the example of a not insubstantial layer of Jewish intellectuals in Europe. The sons (and daughters) of Jewish merchants shared their fathers' "ability" to "compare, abstract, and generalise" because of contact with different countries and different modes of production. Hence they could free themselves from the marketplace and the "unremitting" compulsion to make money.¹⁷ Isaac Deutscher located the paradoxical position of these intellectuals by coining the phrase 'non-Jewish Jews'. Perhaps the first of them was Benedict Spinoza, who spectacularly fell foul of the Jewish religious establishment in Amsterdam. He was excommunicated. Other notable non-Jewish Jews include Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx, Gustav Mahler, Rosa Luxemburg, Jules Martov, Leon Trotsky, Sigmund Freud, Eric Fromm, Albert Einstein; and more recently Claude Levi-Strauss, Tony Cliff, Saul Bellow, Isaac Asimov and Stephen Jay Gould. Their background lay in Judaism. However, they rejected, often forthrightly, the religion of the ancestors. It was too constricting, too hidebound, too flawed to be taken seriously. And yet the non-Jewish Jew only lived on the borders of any specific national culture. They were at one and the same time part of the intellectual mainstream and outsiders. They belonged and yet did not belong. Intellectually they drew on *universal* cultural influences and thereby felt themselves free to reject and overturn conventional assumptions, moral norms and eternal truths. "It was this," says Deutscher, "that enabled them to rise in thought above their societies, above their nations, above their times and generations, and to strike out mentally into wide new horizons and far into the future."¹⁸

The French Revolution and the irrepressible spread of industrial capitalism seemed to hold out the prospect of European anti-Semitism being quickly, finally and mercifully extinguished. Capital as capital has no heavenly aims to pursue, no interest in upholding one or another gruesome religious doctrine, no wish to discriminate against any nationality. Not because of some innate humanism. Essentially capital views living human beings as mere objects, or, put another way, in terms of hard cash - either as potential consumers or sellers of labour-power. Capital turns human labour-power and human beings themselves into things. What best suits capitalism and the creation of what Marx called "abstract labour" is a mobile and homogenous labour force - that way, profits and accumulation are

maximised.¹⁹ Capitalism therefore begins by sweeping aside all customary barriers - local craft narrowness and fragmentation, religious superstition and bigotry, notions of chivalry and feudal vassalage. What it leaves in place is money as the prime relationship between people. The old irrationalism was not so easily killed though.

Capitalism *as a system* reaches its zenith in the 1880s. From around that time onwards its essential forms begin to decline - ownership and management diverge, the so-called night-watchman state gives way to an all-pervasive monster, competition to monopoly, free trade to protectionism, production to finance. There was a subjective concomitant: leading representatives of capital were haunted by the inexorable rise of working class political power. British Chartism and the First International announced another future. The 1871 Paris Commune sounded a siren warning. Social democratic parties were then formed on the basis of Marxist, or semi-Marxist, programmes in one country after another: Germany, France, Italy, Austria, Belgium, Poland, Russia. Soon they had behind them an ocean of popular support, which promised at any moment to drown capitalism in a final, cataclysmic floodtide. Our rulers felt that their system lived on borrowed time and they acted accordingly. After unsuccessfully unleashing harsh, oppressive measures, the better placed states oversaw an organised retreat. Concessions were granted to the working class virtually across the board: rising incomes, health services, free primary and secondary education, unemployment benefit, pensions, etc. Suffrage was steadily extended too. Trade unions grew rapidly and were able to reduce competition between workers within the national space ... and towards that end they were easily tempted into government commissions, arbitration arrangements and consultation committees. Capitalist retreat was also a process of capitalist incorporation. To preserve capital, the capitalist state had to subordinate the aim of profit maximisation to survival and negatively anticipate certain features of socialism.

As the ruling classes were compelled to rely more and more on bureaucratic regulation of the economy and *consent* from those whom they ruled, there began a ruthless battle for hearts and minds. Blessed by Pius IX, social Catholicism emerged from the bowels of ignorance and religious obscurantism: Wilhelm Liebknecht scathingly described this kind of

ideology as “a bastard edition of socialism for the use of stupid people”.²⁰ It advanced a programme of minor reforms and palliatives and promised to defend conservative values: in short, the state, the church and the vestigial remnants of patriarchal production. Social Catholicism divided the population - the still substantial middle classes, but crucially the working class - along religious lines. Catholics were pitted against freethinkers, atheists, socialists, foreigners, but especially Jews.

In turn French royalist and clerical agitation blamed public corruption in the Third Republic upon the Jews. This culminated in the 1894-1906 Dreyfus case. It was not only social Catholicism. In northern Germany Martin Luther's vile anti-Jewish diatribes were invoked. In Russia, tsarism, the Orthodox church and the Black Hundreds resurrected the medieval accusation that Jews practised ritual child murder. The 13th century was thereby reborn in the late 19th century.

Racism

The return of Christian Judeophobia readied the popular mind for racist pseudo-science. National, ethnic and racial prejudice has existed more or less throughout recorded history. Racism as a systematic ideology, however, is the spawn of capitalism. Racism was first used during the period of primitive accumulation to excuse Britain's Atlantic trade in black skins - slave merchants and plantation owners alike righteously cited the *Old Testament*: Noah had, for the strangest reasons, condemned one of his grandsons to be a “slave of slaves”.²¹ His descendants - ie, Africans - were ‘natural’ slaves. Classifying blacks as somehow deserving of slavery, or as sub-human, was necessary for the slave merchants and plantation owners and their whole socio-economic network. Only with such sophistry could feeling, thinking human beings justify, normalise or put out of mind the brutal seizure, hellish transportation, callous sale and ruthless economic and sexual exploitation of millions of men, women and children. Eg, Jane Austen is supremely indifferent to slavery in her novels. As far as I am aware, the abolition of the British slave trade in 1808 rates not a mention. When an enriched slaveowner character returns from the West Indies he is

unproblematically counted amongst the respectable gentlemen. Eg, Sir Thomas Bertam, that despite his Antigua sugar plantation, in *Mansfield Park* (1814).

The biblical-based system of racism coincided with the political incorporation of Irish-Catholic voters into a newly created 'white' America. Beginning with the Virginia slave codes of 1705, to be a 'Negro' was to be equated with being a slave and to be excluded from all participation in the state. This soon led to the privileging of all whites - no matter how poor. Race, not class, thereby became the great distinction in society. Paradoxically this form of social control mirrored the protestant ascendancy in Ireland. Indeed the "absolute" disenfranchisement of African-Americans in Virginia occurred "about the same time".²² Yet with Copernicus, Newtonian physics, the Enlightenment, Darwinism and the class politics of Marxism, religion carried less and less intellectual weight and conviction. A 'scientific' racism had to be invented.

A whole raft of academics jumped to meet the intellectual needs of those with wealth and power by creating the necessary *ideology*. And they were well rewarded: university chairs, medals, knighthoods and all manner of public honours and paid advancements. Every country and its dominant people were given a racial classification by the social Darwinists. This spurred on and glorified European imperialism in Africa, Australia and Asia ... the white man's burden. 'Scientific' racism was, of course, inevitably turned against the European working class movement by a declining capitalism ... the *internal* working class could no longer be controlled simply - or, more accurately, mainly by commodity fetishism: ie, the apparent naturalism of money, the market and the threat of unemployment. Lies, manipulation and half-convincing 'new' theories play an ever greater role in capitalist societies. Bourgeois society claimed to uphold the 'latest word in science', but actually revived the worst aspects of the past. Hence, as pointed out by Georg Lukács, 'scientific' racism "both contested outmoded Christianity and renewed it, thus addressing itself to believers and unbelievers at the same time".²³ Combined with vulgar anti-Semitic agitation and propaganda, it was used to flatter, poison and once again scapegoat. 'Scientific' racism puffed up the most atomised, despairing and backward sections of workers and the petty bourgeoisie, and gave them an

easy, semi-officially approved, target to unleash their pent-up anger and frustrations upon. With some foundation the conservative French thinker, Raymond Aron, suggested that “racism is the snobbery of the poor”.²⁴ ‘Scientific’ racism also explained the ruination of the middle classes to themselves and united them with the rich and powerful. Crude jokes and insulting labels, sneering looks and business boycotts, desecration of cemeteries and backstreet muggings became sadly the everyday manifestations of so-called racial superiority.

The bourgeoisie continued to rule, albeit in a new way. Their justification no longer lay in political economy alone, but the ‘scientific objectivity’ of zoological materialism. “On the plane of politics,” Trotsky mockingly remarked, “racism is a vapid and bombastic variety of chauvinism in alliance with phrenology.”²⁵ Racially, bourgeois Germanics and Anglo-Saxons were typically put at the pinnacle of the evolutionary ladder - women and the poor were naturally inferior (hence eugenics). Latins and Slavs came next, Asians and Arabs somewhere in the middle and Australian and African blacks languished at the bottom. They, and all “undesirable” groups, were classified as savages and closer to the apes than civilised human beings.²⁶ Of course, none of that had the slightest basis in science. “Race was a social category, not a scientific one.”²⁷ However, society was to be organised as if class-races and a hierarchy of national races actually existed.

Jews were painted like a bacterial infection: “the mere fact of his existence is as bad as the plague,” Hitler ominously wrote of the Jews.²⁸ The Jews were an inferior race and yet were engaged in an all-embracing conspiracy for world domination. Towards that end they were supposedly the source of parasitical exploitation via the banks and stock exchange and at the same time they were Marxist trade union and political leaders who organised the workers against exploitation. Jews were anti-national and therefore anti-patriotic. Put another way, collectively Jews were traitors. Their removal would restore the iron laws of nature and thereby cure the sicknesses of the nation. The growth of anti-Semitism from the late 19th century onwards produced Zionism as a counter-reaction. Zionism explained the reflux of anti-Semitism not in the decline of capitalism. To

use a modern concept, anti-Semitism resided in the genes. The promise held out by the Enlightenment and assimilation had proven illusory. Anti-Semitism was no anachronism, a leftover from medieval times. No, it was an endemic and permanent feature of European civilisation. The solution? The Jews were a nation which for 2,000 years had been without a state. That had to be rectified. As an alien minority scattered throughout the world, Jews would always be hated and subject to persecution. They urgently needed to 'return' to Zion.

Modern, or political, Zionism, had its mid-19th century precursors. As a real movement, however, it was founded in 1897 under the leadership of urbane *literati* - centrally Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) and Max Nordau (1849-1923). They were not religious, but nationalist, Jews. Herzl's seminal pamphlet, the *Judenstaat* (the Jewish state) explains that the "Jewish question" is more a "national question" than a "religious one" and can only be solved by making it a "political world-question".²⁹ Why did Herzl, Nordau and many other *assimilated* and *secular* Jews come to this conclusion? Because of the Dreyfus case, because of Richard Wagner's venomous outpourings, because of the *Protocols of the elders of Zion*, because of cold-shouldering in polite society, because of coarse insults, because of physical attacks. Secular non-Jewish Jews suddenly, rudely, horribly discovered that they were Jews not accepted citizens. They had been defined as outsiders.

Rabbis told their congregations that the Jews would eventually return to Israel: "next year in Jerusalem", runs the end of the passover seder. A few fanatics and dreamy romantics did migrate to join their co-religionists dotted here and there in Palestine. But for the great majority this was not a practical option. Going to a parched, primitive and impoverished Palestine, which was anyway overwhelmingly populated by Arabs and under Ottoman rule, was an absurdity as far as the vast majority of western European Jews were concerned. Not even amongst eastern European Jews did Palestine offer much in the way of attractions. Instead, in their hundreds of thousands, fleeing poverty and persecution, they headed westwards - especially to America. Here was their promised land.

Zionism represented not only a bid to escape anti-Semitism. It was an alternative to Marxism and working class socialism. Herzl's whole strategy

relied on negotiations with the powers-that-be. He courted the Ottoman sultan in Istanbul, and the German, French and British governments. Common ground was even found with the Russian tsar and his ministers. Both sides wanted Jews to give up on Russia. The mutual slogan of tsarism and Zionism was: “Jews out!” Herzl fawningly explained to Count von Plehve, the tsarist police minister who was responsible for countless anti-Semitic provocations and many pogroms, that strengthening Zionism would weaken the revolutionary movement and vice versa.

Zionism took broadly the same approach to the Third Reich - it cooperated with the Nazi authorities in encouraging Jews to leave for Palestine. This began with Ha'avara, the transfer agreement between Germany and the Yishuv (Jewish Palestine). Agricultural and other such equipment worth many millions of marks was purchased in Germany between 1933 and 1939 through a Palestinian bank and then sold in the Yishuv. Zionism deliberately flouted the economic boycott of Nazi Germany, which had been initiated mainly by non-Zionist Jews with the aim of securing some leverage over Germany. Not a few Zionists actually welcomed Nazi legislation banning mixed marriages and putting an end to assimilation. Jews, wrote Dr Joachim Prinz, a Zionist rabbi, who subsequently rose to become a leading light in the World Zionist Organisation, had every interest in abiding by the new laws requiring a declaration from them that they belong to the “Jewish nation and Jewish race”.³⁰ Not surprisingly in Nazi Germany, the only surviving legal Jewish organisation in the mid-1930s was the Zionist movement, and the only legal Jewish paper was *Judische Rundschau*, a Zionist paper, which exhorted its readers to “wear the yellow star with pride”. Nazi propagandists excusing the Nuremberg laws of 1935, which stripped Jews of their citizenship, noted: “The ardent Zionists, of all people, have objected least of all to the basic ideas of the Nuremberg laws.”

However, the Zionist movement’s attitude to the Nazis was worse than a simple coincidence of interest. Its leaders were determined to ensure that any attempt to rescue European Jewry from the clutches of Nazism had to be subordinated to increasing migration to Palestine. David Ben Gurion (1886-1973), Israel’s first prime minister, in a letter of December 17 1938 addressed to the Zionist executive, grudgingly wrote:

If the Jews are faced with a choice between the refugee problem and rescuing Jews from concentration camps, on the one hand, and aid for the national museum in Palestine, on the other, the Jewish sense of pity will prevail and our people's entire strength will be directed at aid for the refugees ... We are risking Zionism's very existence if we allow the refugee problem to be separated from the Palestine problem.³¹

Of course, no Zionist in the 1930s had any idea that Nazism would culminate in mass extermination. Nor did Zionism conclude anything akin to the Stalin-Hitler pact. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Zionism bears its share of moral responsibility for the failure of the European working class and the Nazi regime's 1943-45 genocide.

Incidentally, Herzl was no democrat: he favoured a constitutional monarchy or an aristocratic republic. Despite that, he did oppose all notions that his proposed Jewish state should be a theocracy (there is a religious strand within Zionism, historically the most notable being the Mizrahi, but it never constituted anything like a majority). Unsurprisingly, Lenin, and other Marxists, experienced no trouble in dismissing Zionism as "definitely reactionary".³² Zionism was a secular, but dogmatically anti-assimilationist ideology, which insisted that Jew and gentile could never live peacefully together. According to Zionism, the only escape from anti-Semitism and feelings of non-belonging lay in a mass exodus of Jews, crucially from eastern Europe. When they eventually formed a majority in Palestine a *specifically* Jewish state would be formed (*Eretz Israel*). This nationalism of the oppressed needed the active collaboration of the oppressors. The tsar would have to let Herzl's people go and one of the big powers would then have to assume the role of sponsor in a hostile Levant. Point four, the last point, of the short programmatic declaration agreed by the first World Zionist Congress, explicitly states that as a "preparatory stage" it was necessary "to obtain the consent of various governments necessary for the fulfilment of the aims of Zionism".³³ This launched what was to be a fraught sponsor-client relationship.

Marxist arguments

Marxists opposed Zionism on the basis of two main arguments. Firstly, Zionism distracted the Jewish population in eastern Europe - there were around 10 million of them - from confronting their real oppressors. Zionism sapped and divided the overall working class movement. By promoting their Palestine solution, the Zionists encouraged Jews to desert the practical struggle to establish a new, democratic and socialist order in Europe. Their destiny was not bound up with far-away Palestine, but where they actually lived: ie, Europe. Secondly, if by some quirk a Jewish state were established in Palestine - which most Marxists doubted - then it would be no haven, rather a death trap.

Karl Kautsky, though writing in 1926, was still capable of making, or in this case, remaking, a chillingly accurate prediction (he revisited his 1914 pamphlet *Are the Jews a race?* and - whether acknowledged or not - this work provides the foundations for later Marxist studies such as Abram Leon's *The Jewish question*). "There is hardly any possibility that the Jews in Palestine will become more numerous than the Arabs", Kautsky reasoned. Equally to the point, he rightly warned:

[E]very attempt made by the advancing Jewry in that country to displace the Arabs cannot fail to arouse the fighting spirit of the latter, in which opposition to the Jews the Arabs of Palestine will be more and more assured of the support of the entire Arab population of Asia Minor, in whose eyes the Jews appear as foreign rulers or as allies of the English oppressor. It is a delusion to imagine that the Jews arriving from Europe and America will ever succeed in convincing the Arabs that Jewish rule in this country will ever rebound to the advantage of the Arabs themselves.³⁴

He was assuredly correct here, except, of course, that after World War II the Palestinian Jews rebelled against their exhausted British sponsor and were eventually adopted as clients by US superimperialism. The 'special relationship' between Israel and the US fully "matured" after the 1967 six-day war.³⁵

The victims of Nazism flocked to Palestine in the 1930s in unparalleled numbers for one good reason: no other place was willing to grant them permission to enter. No country welcomed Germany's persecuted Jews. In

1935 a reluctant Britain accepted 19,000, the US 6,252, Argentina 3,159, Brazil 1,758, South Africa 1,078, Canada 624. As for Palestine, 61,854 Jews legally entered in 1935. But growing Arab opposition closed that door too. In 1939 a mere 16,400 were allowed in by the British mandate authorities.

In July 1938 an international conference on the Jewish refugee crisis was called under the auspices of the US in the French town of Évian. Practically its results were exactly zero. The British insisted that Palestine could not feature on the agenda and Chaim Weizmann was refused permission to address the conference on behalf of the Zionist movement. Christopher Sykes, a pro-Zionist historian, writes that western governments confined themselves to “edifying speeches in favour of toleration” and that some, such as the Australian delegate, merely warned of “the danger to themselves of alien immigration”. The sole exception was the tiny Dominican Republic, which offered to take 100,000 Jewish refugees - sufficient to embarrass the US into offering to take a similar number. But the Zionists did not protest. As Sykes notes, they regarded Évian with “hostile indifference”:

They wanted a Jewish Palestine and the Dominican Republic could never be that ... Even in the more terrible days ahead they made no secret of the fact, even when talking to gentiles, that they did not want Jewish settlements outside Palestine to be successful If their policy entailed suffering, then that was the price that had to be paid for the rescue of the Jewish soul.³⁶

True to form, Britain’s ‘generosity’ led the *Sunday Express* editorial to splutteringly complain that Jews were “overrunning the country”.³⁷ The *Daily Mail*, of course, did the exact same. Only going one better by enthusiastically backing Oswald Mosley - Britain’s very own Hitler. The pervasive atmosphere of appeasement and hostility to the Jews meant that *The Times*, under editor Geoffrey Dawson, steadfastly forbade mention of anti-Semitism in Germany between 1933 and 1939. So much for official Britain’s anti-fascism.

After World War II, many European Jews, at least those who remained alive, understandably sought out Palestine in a traumatised search for

safety. The depths of Nazi barbarism far surpassed anything predicted even by the most pessimistic Zionists - they expected mass discrimination, mass economic expropriation, even mass expulsions. Not mass extermination. Tsarist pogroms were put onto an industrial footing by German fascism. Horrendously, between four and seven million Jews died. Could the existence of an Israeli state have prevented this orgy of concentrated slaughter? The only honest answer must be no. Even if it had been established in 1938, Israel would have been “able to absorb” limited numbers: a quarter or perhaps a half of Germany’s half million Jewish population over “five or 10 years”.³⁸ There were at that stage some 400,000 Jews in Palestine. Anyway, in 1938-39, after the annexation of the Sudetenland, that option no longer existed. All migration was halted by Germany. With or without Israel the Hitler regime would still have tried to destroy European Jewry. Moreover, if Rommel had not been stopped at El Alamein, would the Nazis have tolerated Israel and spared the lives of its citizens? Israel would surely have become another killing field.

Palestinian question

The world-historic crime perpetrated by the Nazis led to a crime, albeit of far smaller proportions, perpetrated in turn by Zionism on the native Palestinians. Over a million were driven from their country of birth. Perhaps they could have been integrated into the body politic of the ‘front-line’ states. But, apart from Jordan, they were not. They were kept stateless. That created, as Kautsky predicted, a stubborn and deep-rooted Palestinian national consciousness and hence the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, al Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Hamas, etc. Indeed throughout the Arab world Palestine remains a potent cause which expresses wider national consciousness. I would add, parenthetically, the fact that the Palestinians are part of the Arab nation explains their success in maintaining their sense of identity and commitment to the struggle for self-determination.

The first ideologues of Zionism paid little or no attention to the Arab question. Walter Laqueur, a writer sympathetic to Zionism, dubs it the

“unseen question”.³⁹ Indeed there are not a few who have claimed that the Palestinians simply did not exist. Chaim Weizmann told a Zionist meeting in April 1914 that Palestine was a “country without people”.⁴⁰ Israeli prime minister Golda Meir came out with a similar statement in 1969: there is “no such thing as the Palestinian people, they do not exist”.⁴¹ And Joan Peters revived the outrageous lie in her intellectually threadbare book, *From time immemorial* (1984). She maintained that the Palestinian refugees of 1947-48 had *not* been expelled from their homeland - they were migrants who had arrived in successive waves since the 19th century. Apart from a few nomads, Palestine had been virtually empty until Zionist colonists arrived. It was their energy and economic success that sucked in Arabs looking to make a living.^{***} Their territorial claims were thereby dismissed as at “best suspect and worst utter fabrication”.⁴² Serious authorities on the Middle East have experienced little trouble in exposing Peters’s flawed scholarship, plagiarism and falsifications. The 1931 census carried out by the British mandate authorities showed that there were just over a million inhabitants (including around 174,000 Jews) in Palestine.⁴³ But Peters was determined to erase the Palestinian question as history and therefore had to resort to barefaced lies.

^{***} In Britain and Israel the reception of Joan Peters’s book was almost entirely negative. Nevertheless, in the US politicians, academia and the press lined up to pay compliments. The historian, Barbara Tuchman, described it as “an historical event in itself”. Leading neo-conservative Daniel Pipes marvelled at the “historical detective work”. Elie Wiesel, one of the foremost propagandists of the holocaust industry, paid tribute to the “insight and analysis”. Indeed there were over 200 positive reviews and notices in the US press. Apart from Bill Farrell in the *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, Alex Cockburn in *The Nation* and Norman Finkelstein, virtually nothing critical was published. There was, as Edward Said wrote, a “conspiracy of praise” (E Said and C Hitchens [eds] *Blaming the victims - spurious scholarship and the Palestinian question* London 2002, p22). Despite academic opinion later being forced to admit that her thesis amounted to little more than fraud, Peters’s book was republished in 1986 as a paperback and once again became a bestseller. Her claim of an empty Palestine was reproduced by Alan Dershowitz in his equally commercially successful book, *The case for Israel* (2003).

Most Zionist leaders have been slightly more honest. Theodor Herzl knew full well that there was a Palestinian population of some description. But he claimed that Jewish colonisation would help improve their miserable lot by bringing the benefits of civilisation - the same comforting story European colonialists told themselves about their African and Asian

victims. In that spirit Labour Zionists - led by David Ben Gurion, and by the 1930s the dominant strand in Zionism - reassuringly argued that Palestinians would materially benefit from Jewish colonialism, even that ordinary Jews and Palestinians were bound together by ties of class and Semitic brotherhood. The anti-Jewish riots that periodically erupted in Palestine should have disabused them of such comforting notions.

What the Labour Zionists had been saying was either self-delusion or more likely pure Machiavellianism. Building a socialism in a backward part of the world under the guidance of rabbis and in cooperation with the bourgeoisie was always a nonsense; the suggestion that the natives would welcome outsiders coming in and dispossessing them of their land was just nonsense on stilts. However, such claims hid real intentions and chimed with the socialist convictions of the Jewish masses in eastern Europe.

Jews coming to Palestine in the 20th century were a settler-colonial people of a special type. There was no specific homeland - apart from the European continent as a whole. Yes, having fallen under the spell of thinkers such as Ber Borochov (1881-1917), many entertained notions of building a socialist Israel. Leftwing Zionists founded the communistic kibbutz. However, their socialist-civilising mission was in essence no different to British colonists in Australia or New Zealand, or the Dutch colonists in South Africa. The kibbutzim were well-armed colonial outposts. Land might have been purchased from the local Arab villagers and effendis according to the laws of the day. But the same can be said of the European colonists in America before and after 1776. There existed a completely unequal relationship between the colonists and the colonised.

Fully in accord with the colonial spirit, the Jewish trade union movement, the General Federation of Workers in the Land of Israel, or the Histadrut (federation), vigorously campaigned to get employers to hire Jewish labour and at *higher*, Jewish, rates of pay. The Israeli state, even in its pre-1948 embryonic form, allowed, if not actively encouraged, this partial violation of the law of value and a lowering of profit rates. Labour Zionism therefore institutionalised an historic compromise between labour and capital, whereby Israeli-Jewish capital lowers its rate of exploitation and Jewish workers form themselves into a labour aristocracy at the direct expense of their 'brother' Palestinian Arabs.

Histadrut flourished as an institution in post-independence Israel. It went far beyond mere trade unionism. Histadrut ran, or oversaw, countless cooperative enterprises, banks, industrial concerns, agro-businesses, employment agencies and holding corporations. Histadrut grew into “an economic empire” in its own right, employing some 25% of Israel’s workforce.⁴⁴ It should be emphasised, however, that since the 1980s the influence of Histadrut has greatly diminished.

Vladimir Jabotinsky, leader of revisionist Zionism - and spiritual father of Likud, Menachem Begin and Binyamin Netanyahu - was rather more blunt and therefore more honest than the Labour Zionists. He well understood and appreciated Arab objections to the Zionist programme of Jewish colonial settlement. But between two *incompatible* interests, force decides. He recommended that, like the native Americans, the Arabs had to accept second-class status or be violently expropriated. The Arabs should be encouraged or, failing that, compelled to make new homes in one or another of the neighbouring Arab states which emerged from the wreckage of the Ottoman empire after World War I. Jabotinsky did not relish conflict between Jews and Arabs. It was to be expected, though. Superior European technology, generous support from the mega-rich Rothschild family and British imperialist sponsors meant that Zionism would emerge victorious. Of that Jabotinsky was confident.

Like the Labour Zionists he too underestimated, or discounted, the inevitable growth of Palestinian national consciousness and the subsequent national resistance movement. Kautsky, by contrast, had, with great foresight, warned Jewish workers tempted by Zionism that the “final victory” of the Arab people was almost certain. For him, the only question was “whether this victory is to be obtained by the peaceful method of a successive forcing of concessions, or by a period of wild guerrilla warfare and bloody insurrections”.⁴⁵ What would happen then to the poor Jewish settlers lured to Palestine? They would be treated as loathed enemies by the Arabs. Jews escaping pogroms in Europe would face a worse pogrom in Palestine.

Kautsky, of course, had no thought or idea, either in 1914 or in 1926, that Germany could produce a Nazi state, let alone Hitler’s ‘final solution’. Theoretically he was ill-equipped to even contemplate such a staggeringly

awful outcome. Having betrayed the practical fight for revolution in 1914, he retreated to an essentially passive evolutionism. He refused to acknowledge that capitalism was *overripe* for socialism. World War I and the murderous nationalism it unleashed was a terrible aberration. In Kautsky's later writings, a parody of what went before, capitalism was assumed to have a future that was essentially peaceful and rational, and would thereby facilitate an almost effortlessly smooth transition to socialism. Despite the Nazi counterrevolution, despite the 50 million killed in World War II, despite Korea, Vietnam and Iraq there are still those 'Marxists' who stubbornly repeat this garbage. Apparently all Kautsky got wrong was the "timing".⁴⁶

Noam Chomsky likewise predicted that Israel would eventually succumb militarily. Writing in 1983, he said: "Sooner or later Israel will face military defeat. It came close in 1973 - or the need to resort to a nuclear threat, with the consequences that one hesitates to imagine. Short of that, it will drift towards social, moral and political degeneration."⁴⁷ From our present vantage point it is the latter outcome that appears more probable. There exists a huge military disparity between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Israel is armed with the most sophisticated weapons by the US and refuses to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty - in January 2007 the Federation of American Scientists estimated that Israel had produced enough enriched uranium for "at least" 100 nuclear weapons but "not significantly more than" 200.⁴⁸ A nuclear exchange between Israel and Iran would be a nightmare scenario. It would be foolish, of course, to discount the possibility of an Israeli military defeat. On the night of October 8-9 1973 defence minister Moshe Dyan warned the Israeli cabinet that the country was approaching the point of "last resort". Thirteen tactical nuclear weapons were armed and "readied for use" against Egyptian and Syrian targets.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, it is the continued existence of a resentful, unreconciled and growing Palestinian population that represents the greatest threat, as far as the Israeli establishment is concerned. The whole Zionist spectrum is haunted by the so-called demographic "time bomb". Hence 'leftwing' Zionists - eg, Benny Morris - in all seriousness argue for a "caged" Palestinian state so as to diminish the "enemy within us".⁵⁰ There

are many essentially similar proposals to strip Israeli Arabs of their citizenship and expel *en masse* this “fifth column”.

And, as Marx pointedly remarked, “A nation which suppresses another can never itself be free.” The brutal oppression of the Palestinians has fed back into Israel’s internal politics, leading to “social, moral and political degeneration”. The arbitrary rule of violence in the occupied territories then spreads “like gangrene through Israeli society”.⁵¹ The press and media are increasingly supine and uncritical, the courts no longer protect individual rights and democratic norms, there is omnipresent Shin Bet surveillance and an education system whose underlying mission is to militarise society. Zionist politics are notoriously fractious and sometimes turn fratricidal: in 1995 prime minister Yitzhak Rabin was gunned down by a rightwing fanatic. The response of the decrepit Labour Zionist elite was flabby and half-hearted. Rabin’s government was humiliatingly replaced by the Likud ‘counter-reformation’. Whereas Israeli society once boasted of its egalitarianism, this was replaced by neoliberalism and a yawning wealth gap. Those falling below the poverty line grew from 26% in 1979 to 32% in 2008. The Raub Centre in Jerusalem reported in 2009 that levels of “income inequality and poverty in Israel are among the highest in the west”.⁵² The “net worth of its 500 richest individuals exceeded one third of total GDP”.⁵³

What of secular Israel? Though the state was founded under the leadership of Labour Zionists, top politicians have come to embrace religious history and terminology so as to rally Jewish support both within and without Israel. Religion is too powerful a weapon for the right not to exploit. Hence, as in many capitalist countries, the state and religion are *increasingly* joined together by a whole complex of ideological, personal and financial interconnections. Though it is a minority - about 10% of the population - orthodox Judaism is Israel’s official religion. There are two chief rabbis (one Ashkenazi, the other Sephardi, both orthodox). The orthodox rabbinate is generously financed by the state and exercises an overbearing degree of power. There is a whole system of orthodox religious schools and state schools are themselves required to provide religious indoctrination in the classroom. Since 1953 marriage between Jews has only been possible if done through an orthodox ceremony. There are no

civil marriages in Israel and interfaith marriages are “not legally recognised by the state”.⁵⁴ Only those converted to Judaism by orthodox rabbis are legally recognised. Meanwhile, the ‘law of return’ allows all Jews - defined once again in orthodox religious terms - to migrate to Israel and almost automatically be granted citizenship. Neither reform nor conservative Judaism - to which the vast majority of religious Jews *outside* Israel are affiliated - enjoy such an elevated constitutional position. Indeed orthodox rabbis dismiss all non-orthodox denominations as “not Judaism at all, but another religion”.⁵⁵ They are branded as “destroyers of Judaism”: reform Jews are even said to be akin to the ancient Hebrew renegade, Zimri, who deserved to be slain.⁵⁶

Various ultra-orthodox sects are excused military service because of their “family background”. This has allowed the formation of a ballooning parasitic caste of religious fundamentalists who do not work, but live off government subsidies. Prayer and assiduous study of the *Talmud* forms their way of life. That and fathering large families. Sixty percent of prime-aged ultra-orthodox men attend the *yeshivot*, the religious schools. They are the ones dressed in black with beards, long sidelocks and Borsalino hats. Others form special, segregated, military units, recruited from the *yeshivot*. Israeli settlers in the occupied territories are often religiously motivated to the highest degree of fanaticism. Some even hysterically talked of unleashing civil war against Ariel Sharon’s ‘unilateral’ withdrawal from Gaza and the evacuation of the 8,000 settler population (his right centrist strategy was to get out of Gaza in order to strengthen the hold on strategically important areas of the West Bank). The hard core of the settler movement has a vision of a greater Israel based not on Britain’s pre-1947 mandate, but the *Bible* and Solomon’s kingdom that fancifully stretched from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea to the banks of the Euphrates. Meanwhile they openly dismiss democracy and declare that their aim is to “overthrow” state law and “put in its place” religious, *halakha*, law revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai.⁵⁷ The dream is of establishing a Maccabean theocracy.

Many of them embrace kabbalah mysticism - made fashionable through celebrities such as the pop singer Madonna - and the bizarre claim that secular Jews are really the mythical Amalekites who were the bitter

enemies of the ancient Hebrew tribes. The Amalekites attacked and harried the Hebrews in the Sinai peninsula after their flight from Egypt. Horrifyingly, Yahweh told Saul to exterminate the Amalekites: “Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, do not spare them; but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”⁵⁸ According to rabbi Aron Moss, who teaches kabbalah, Amalekites are “alive and well today, albeit in a different form. No longer a foreign nation, today’s Amalek is an internal enemy.” His solution: “annihilation”.⁵⁹

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Zionism and the holocaust industry

The Israeli state has built the Nazi genocide into a ubiquitous cult. Together, book-nation-land-holocaust forms an ideological quadrinity. Children are indoctrinated into the holocaust cult, relics and heroes are honoured and, in service to the state, it is projected into the realms of metaphysics. Hitler's final solution is supposedly a "mystery", it "negates all answers" (Elie Wiesel).¹ Yet the cult's anointed high priests are ready with quick, well honed, self-serving answers which uphold a Judeaocentric view of the past, which is in fact designed to manipulate the present. Eg, World War II becomes the background, if not a small detail, to the holocaust.²

The attempted Nazi destruction of European Jewry certainly condones the 'return'. Dispossessing the Palestinians of their land finds justification in Nazi crimes. Jewish sufferings are also used to exempt Israel from observing the catalogue of 'human rights' selectively espoused by the so-called international community.³ Because Jews were the special target of systematic racism, oppression and killing, that somehow excuses Israel. Palestinian prisoners are tortured and Israel blatantly treats 20% of its own population, the Israeli Arabs, as second-class citizens (not least when it comes to housing, land ownership and education). As for the West Bank, the Palestinians have been pressed into a series of disconnected reservations by the encroaching system of Jewish settlements, checkpoints, closed areas, military outposts and prohibited roads. And, of course, the Gaza strip has been called the world's largest open prison.

Naturally, Zionism wants to confine its official cult of victimhood to Jews. Hitler's death machine is in fact deliberately depoliticised. Jews who were killed first and foremost because they were communists or social democrats are counted as Jews, not communists or social democrats. Other victims - such as the physically and mentally disabled, homosexuals, Poles, Russians, etc - are either downplayed, or are to all intents and purposes

ignored. Eg, though around half of Europe's Roma population was exterminated by the Nazis, their fate hardly ever rates a mention. Hitlerism becomes not German counterrevolution, but the penultimate chapter in a seamless story of two thousand years of Jewish exile, persecution and survival, which culminates in the triumphant establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

Since 1967 the cult of Jews as the ultimate victims has been underwritten, endorsed and actively promoted by the western European and US establishment. An ideological cloak for the US special relationship with Israel, which implicitly legitimises the national oppression of the Palestinians. With that special relationship cemented, a holocaust industry blossomed *outside* Israel, and after squeezing Swiss banks and German industrial companies for collective compensation in the 1990s, is now worth billions of dollars. It boasts a bureaucratic elite and has its own well remunerated, professional cadre, its favoured institutional recipients and carpetbaggers, its special annual commemorative day and university chairs, its museums and memorials, its assigned place in the school curriculum and in various countries a battery of protective laws.

Hence along with other self-serving members of the great and good, Labour and Tory leaders *routinely* mark Holocaust Memorial Day - the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet forces on January 27 1945. The very next day they will *routinely* vie with each other over who can keep out the most migrants. Rank hypocrisy, of course. But surely few, if any, can beat the *Daily Mail*. Nowadays, this jewel in the crown of Associated Newspapers devotes pages to Holocaust Memorial Day and righteously denounces the horrendous Nazi crimes perpetrated against the Jews. Melanie Phillips, its swivel-eyed columnist, defends Israel against "protean" anti-Semitism, urges a military strike against Iran to stop its "genocide bomb" and lambasts the "deranged 'Jewish conspiracy' theories prevelant throughout the 'civilised world'".⁴ Yet in January 1934 Lord Rothermere, the main shareholder of Associated Newspapers, wrote a vomit-inducing *Daily Mail* article headlined: 'Hurrah for the blackshirts'.⁵ Before and after having declared for Oswald Mosley's version of fascism, the noble lord expressed a fawning admiration for Hitler - despite the "minor misdeeds of individual Nazis".⁶ Not that the *Daily Mail* showed

much in the way of sympathy for those on the receiving end of those “minor misdeeds”: “the way stateless Jews from Germany are pouring in from every port of this country is becoming an outrage”.⁷ Understandably, the *Daily Mail*, owned by the present-day Lord Rothermere, is not enthusiastic about parading its glorious past: no online archive facility is available for the 1930s. And the *Daily Mail* still splutters, froths and spits venom about migrants and asylum-seekers flooding the country: towards that end it “hunts for immigrant ‘horror stories’”.⁸ So the holocaust industry is just as much about hypocrisy and forgetting as it is about remembering.

There is a far-right fringe of neo-Nazi deniers, BNPers and historically trained apologists such as David Irving who, either subtly or crudely, attack the holocaust industry. Yet, as shown by relentless exposure in authoritative books and in the pages of *Searchlight* and other such journals, they are neither intellectually honest nor politically serious. Quite frankly they are beneath contempt. Thankfully, however, a few writers - who *are* intellectually honest and politically serious - have dared challenge the holocaust industry and its fragile ideological constructions.

One who instantly springs to mind is Norman Finkelstein. Till September 2007 he taught political science at De Paul university in Chicago* and in American terms he must be considered a principled leftwinger. Though he has a youthful background in Maoism, Finkelstein nowadays stands, he says, in the “same tradition as Noam Chomsky”.⁹ Despite that, because of that, political trajectory, Finkelstein fondly imagines that the nonviolent resistance of Mahatma Gandhi holds out the prospect of a solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Leave aside this latter day nonsense. If success is measured solely by the furious condemnation an author generates, then his *The holocaust industry* (2000) is without doubt a triumph.¹⁰ His detractors include not only the ‘usual suspects’ on the pro-Zionist right, but ‘politically correct’ anti-Zionists too. They denounced the book: above all though they denounced the author himself: all pretence at balance and rationality was abandoned.

* In March 2007 the university authorities refused to renew his tenure. There was a student sit-in and world wide protests from fellow academics. Finkelstein agreed to resign in September 2007 after coming to a settlement on undisclosed terms.

Freelance leftwinger Toby Abse damned Finkelstein as providing “considerable comfort to every holocaust-denier, neo-Nazi and anti-Semite on the face of the planet”.¹¹ The SWP used almost exactly the same words. Alex Callinicos warning that Finkelstein came “dangerously close to giving comfort to those who dream of new holocausts”.¹² Piling on the *ad hominem*, liberal journalist Jonathan Freedland said Finkelstein is “a Jew who doesn’t like Jews” and who “does the anti-Semites’ work for them”.¹³ An assessment echoed by Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of the left-of-centre US journal, *The New Republic*. He branded Finkelstein as the lowest of the low: “He’s poison”.¹⁴

Finkelstein, however, is no easy target. His background and personal profile hardly fit that of the usual anti-Semitic holocaust-denier. He is Jewish, and both his mother and father were survivors of the Warsaw ghetto and Nazi concentration camps. Apart from his parents, every member of his immediate family perished at the hands of the Nazis. In his own poignant words: “My earliest memory, so to speak, of the Nazi holocaust is my mother glued in front of the television watching the trial of Adolf Eichmann (1961) when I came home from school”.¹⁵ Still, for some, grotesquely, all this proves just how pathological and dangerous Jewish ‘self-hatred’ can be - the enemy within.

Finkelstein is author of an impressive string of meticulously well-researched anti-Zionist works: *Image and reality of the Israel-Palestine conflict* (1995), *The rise and fall of Palestine* (1996) and ‘*This time we went too far*’ (2010). He entered the literary limelight, however, with his extended rejoinder, co-authored with Ruth Bettina Birn, *A nation on trial: the Goldhagen thesis and historical truth* (1998). This was an excoriating attack on *Hitler’s willing executioners*, the “number one” bestseller written by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen.¹⁶ The SWP enthusiastically championed it at the time of publication - that is, until criticism of Finkelstein mounted to such a degree of intensity that it caused the more flaky media celebrities and trade union bureaucrats to run for cover. The very people the SWP craves as allies.

True to standard Zionist doctrine, Goldhagen argued that the German people *as a whole* were (and still are?) inherently anti-Semitic and therefore

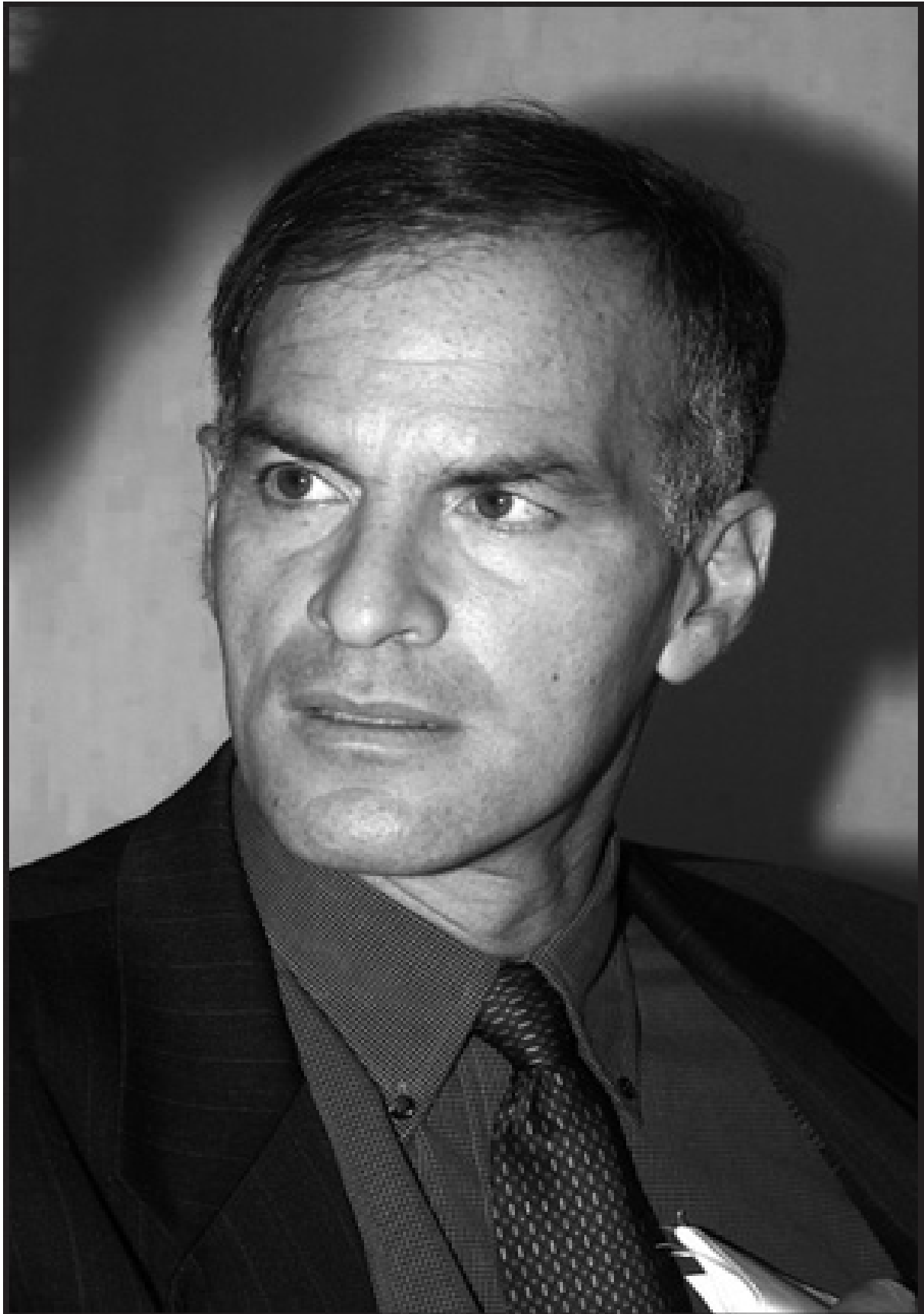
the Nazi genocide was an event just waiting to happen. Hitler's regime, or an approximation, was inevitable, he says. Europe was destined to exterminate Jews and presumably always will be. Nowadays, in the name of the Zionist-imperialist consensus, anyone who seriously doubts or disagrees with this claim is likely to be vilified and cast into the outer darkness. Abraham Foxman, head of the US Anti-Defamation League, therefore sought to anathematise Finkelstein and Birn after their criticism of *Hitler's willing executioners*: "The issue is not whether Goldhagen's thesis is right or wrong, but what is 'legitimate criticism' and what goes beyond the pale."¹⁷ A belligerent approach, which some on the British left seem to share.

In contrast to the sound and fury generated by his detractors, Finkelstein's project seems eminently rational - to make the Nazi genocide explainable. This caused a frisson of delighted commentary on the far right. Some such people have attempted to show the innocence of the Nazi regime by highlighting the one-sidedness, the numerous half-truths and downright lies peddled by the holocaust industry. Rescuing real history from the clutches of "holocaust correctness" has, of course, nothing to do with aiding neo-Nazism.¹⁸ Quite the opposite. By firmly establishing what is true the left takes away the only effective weapons the deniers of genocide possess - the lies, distortions and self-justifications of Zionism.

Finkelstein's approach is designed to cut away the falsehoods that have been built up around the real Nazi genocide. Towards that end Finkelstein begins by making a distinction:

In this text 'Nazi holocaust' signals the actual historical event; The Holocaust its ideological representation ... Like most ideologies, it bears a connection, if tenuous, with reality. The Holocaust is not an arbitrary, but rather an internally coherent, construct. Its central dogmas sustain significant political and class interests. Indeed, The Holocaust has proven to be an indispensable ideological weapon.¹⁹

Finkelstein seeks to understand how "the Nazi holocaust" became



Norman Finkelstein: according to his critics a self-hating Jew. "The Holocaust" - ie, according to Zionist propaganda, a "categorically unique historical event", which "cannot be rationally apprehended".²⁰ That can only mean stepping on a lot of highly sensitive toes - some powerful, some just desperate for certainty in a disturbingly uncertain world. A sad confirmation of the "sacralisation of the holocaust" - a term employed by the radical liberal scholar, Peter Novick - is found in much of the leftwing condemnations of Finkelstein: eg, reaction to his considered opinion that "much of the literature on Hitler's 'final solution' is worthless as scholarship". The field of holocaust studies is "replete with nonsense, if not sheer fraud", laments Finkelstein.²¹ This particular passage prompted an outraged Alex Callinicos to ask, "How different is [Finkelstein's] assertion from the holocaust revisionist David Irving's rantings?"²² Well, actually, Alex, there is all the difference in the world.

Irving's well researched "rantings" were transparently motivated by Nazi apologetics. Despite that, it would be a fundamental mistake to dismiss out of hand his extensive body of work as just worthless trash. For instance, in his readable *Churchill's war: struggle for power* (1987), Irving shows how Churchill's prime motivation during World War II, apart from self-aggrandisement, was his heart-felt mission to defend and preserve the British empire. Certainly not pursuing a noble 'anti-fascist' crusade - least of all humanitarian concern for the plight of European Jewry. Churchill and George VI both earnestly expressed gratitude to Hitler for having rescued Germany from communism in 1933 ... and certainly in World War II the mass extermination of Jews was a "mere detail" for them. The horrors of the Nazi death camps became a leitmotiv only many years after World War II. Looked at from this angle, there are aspects of Irving's *Churchill's war* with which the left should readily concur.

Naturally within a Manichean universe, there is no place for such subtleties. Hence *Socialist Worker's* 'What we think' column demanded censorship: "There is only one reason for denial of the Nazi holocaust. It is to *make it possible again* ... Holocaust deniers should be confronted whenever they raise their heads, and Irving's books should be banned from every public, college and school library."²³ This begs an obvious question -

if Finkelstein's views now come "dangerously close" to Irving's, then why not demand that *The holocaust industry* be removed from libraries too?

Finkelstein's remit is to explain the way in which the ruling classes and their ideologues have managed to expropriate the memory and indeed the whole discourse around the Nazi genocide - to the extent that its victims have been used to give a moral sanctity to the post-World War II bourgeois order, which nowadays never tires of parading its anti-racist and anti-fascist credentials.

We have already cited Callinicos and his criticism of Finkelstein for his blunt statement that "the field of holocaust studies is replete with nonsense, if not plain fraud". Let us ask ourselves therefore whether or not there is a field of *social* scholarship that is not "replete with nonsense, if not plain fraud" - especially when we are dealing with one that has so many different and competing *contemporary* vested interests at stake. Callinicos's criticism actually betrays an instinctive hostility to anything which might upset respectable liberals.

The simple fact, as Finkelstein details, is that what he calls 'The Holocaust' has become a sort of trademark which rests on the "uniqueness" and "incomprehensibility" of the Nazi extermination of the Jews. The self-interested promotion and jealous defence of 'The Holocaust' brand has been so successful that even a few gentiles have gained wealth and notoriety by masquerading as Jewish survivors of the camps - an ironic example of chutzpah. Those Jews who have done the same have usually won holocaust industry praise rather than condemnation for their efforts. Finkelstein himself has investigated and chronicled these abuses of memory.

Proprietorial

Inevitably, transforming the Nazi horror into a trademark has led to proprietorial disputes between self-proclaimed guardians of memory. Take Elie Wiesel versus Simon Wiesenthal - their acrimonious squabbling only came to an end with the latter's death in 2005. Many will know that Wiesel, a genuine Auschwitz survivor, was the first to systematically apply the word 'holocaust' to the Nazi's genocidal terror. He also engaged in a bitter

struggle with Wiesenthal as to who had the moral right to wear the crown of The World's Most Important and Saintly Witness to the Holocaust - or "The Event", as Wiesel called it, which he describes in his memoir, *And the sea is never full* (1969), as "the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted". Indeed, he has gone one further and claimed that 'The Holocaust' is "non-communicable" - "we cannot talk about it" - and that "the truth lies in silence". Not that this has prevented Wiesel and others, notes Finkelstein, from making "personal fortunes by talking and writing about" the "non-communicable".²⁴ Wiesel, says Finkelstein, is a near perfect example of the holocaust industry at work. Of course, this could be yet another example of twisted and internalised 'anti-Semitism'. So it is instructive to read a review of *And the sea is never full* by David Goldberg, senior rabbi at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London, which appeared in *The Independent*.

Rabbi Goldberg comments that Wiesel's "mock-modest tone of 'Aw shucks, fancy me, the yeshiva student from Sighet, here in the White House/Elysée Palace/Kremlin' soon wears thin" - calling the Nobel Prize winner "vain, arrogant, gullible and naive about international affairs". In conclusion, Goldberg writes:

[Wiesel] seems to spend his time touring the world with an entourage of Nobel winners, organising conferences like 'The anatomy of hate and conflict resolution'. Ferried first-class to five-star hotels, the great and the good deliberate at length and issue insipid declarations which Wiesel solemnly reproduces. How one would love to get on to the gravy train!

Alas, this wanton review will have scuppered my chances.²⁵

Funnily enough, who can recall outraged protests about the rabbi's barbed remarks? No accusations of unconscious self-loathing and suchlike. Yet when Finkelstein likewise attacks Wiesel for being part of the 'holocaust remuneration business' (or, if you prefer, the gravy train), there are howls of protest - including from many who would consider themselves Marxists. Almost hysterically, they join with the paid Zionists in slamming Finkelstein for his "anti-Semitic" language, his "Jewish self-hatred", and so on. Yet, there is not that much which separates rabbi Goldberg from

Finkelstein, at least in terms of moral disgust, with the crass exploitation of history.

There have been blatant attempts at thought control. With *A nation on trial* there came a concerted attempt to intimidate Finkelstein and Birn, and those publishing them. Birn has made the prosecution of Nazi war criminals her life's work and is a leading authority on the archives that Goldhagen consulted for his book. When she first published her critical evaluation in the (Cambridge) *Historical Journal*, Goldhagen immediately responded by hiring a big-shot London law firm to sue Birn and the Cambridge University Press for "many serious libels", even though the *Historical Journal* had given him ample opportunity to write a full rebuttal. Shortly after Birn's article appeared, Finkelstein's equally scathing findings were published in *New Left Review*, and subsequently Metropolitan - an imprint of Henry Holt press - agreed to publish both anti-Goldhagen essays in book form (*A nation on trial*).

This prompted the influential American magazine, *Forward*, to carry a front-page story warning its readers that Metropolitan was "preparing to bring out a book by Norman Finkelstein, a notorious ideological opponent of the state of Israel". Henry Holt press was urged to abandon its plans, because Finkelstein's ideas "are irreversibly tainted by his anti-Zionist stance". Leon Wieseltier personally met the president of Henry Holt press, Michael Naumann, to impress upon him the true nature of Finkelstein - "a disgusting, self-hating Jew", the sort of person "you find under a rock". Naumann refused to buckle, however. When the book was finally published, Elan Steinberg, the executive director of the World Jewish Congress, damned Holt's decision as "a disgrace".

Not that things ended there. The Canadian Jewish Congress denounced Birn - who is chief historian of the War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity Section of the Canadian department of justice - for involvement in *A nation on trial*, claiming that Finkelstein was an "anathema to the vast majority of Jews on this continent". Adding to the pressure on Birn's employer, the CJC filed a protest on the grounds that Birn was "a member of the perpetrator race" (ie, Birn was born in Germany). Goldhagen then entered the bear-pit, denouncing Birn as "a purveyor of anti-Semitism" and maintaining that, in effect, Finkelstein was of the opinion that the victims of Nazism deserved to die. *The New Republic* piously proclaimed that "there is

a difference between censorship and upholding standards” - that is, *A nation on trial* should never have been released. As an aside it is worth noting that Goldhagen was subsequently nominated for the post of holocaust chair at Harvard University.

The sorry episode described above illustrates the fear of truthfulness which has developed. A phenomenon that can be neatly illustrated by the progressive mangling of Martin Niemöller’s famous *mea culpa* (“First they came for the communists ...”). *Time* magazine’s sneaky ‘new’ version promoted the Jews to first place and dropped both the communists and the social democrats. Al Gore publicly did the same too - and for good measure he dumped the trade unionists as well. Gore, *Time* and others have all added ‘Catholics’ to Niemöller’s list - even though he did not mention them. In the heavily Catholic city of Boston, they were added to the ‘quotation’ inscribed on its holocaust memorial.

Naturally, the establishment-sanctified US Holocaust Museum airbrushes out the communists from its roll call of official victimhood (but, interestingly, the holocaust bureaucrats decided to retain the social democrats as authentic, bona fide victims). Others have decided to include gays - the fact that Niemöller did not was obviously a mere oversight on his part. This footloose and fancy-free attitude to what should be a basic, easily verified and hence non-contested truth clearly demonstrates that the battle for memory is yet another form of the class struggle.

Once upon a time, at least in the US, to ‘harp on’ about the Nazi extermination of the Jews was a sign of distinctly dangerous pinko-commie leanings. Now it is a badge of moral uprightness. Niemöller himself symbolises this shift in bourgeois ideology. In the late 1940s and 1950s the protestant pastor, who spent eight years in Nazi concentration camps, was regarded with grave suspicion by American Jewry in the shape of organisations like the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Deformation League. Niemöller’s instinctive opposition to the McCarthyite witch-hunt made him *persona non grata* for American Jewish leaders who were desperate to boost their anti-communist credentials - to the point of joining, and partly financing, far-right organisations like the All-American Conference to Combat Communism and even turning a blind eye to veteran members of the Nazi SS entering the country. Indeed, the American Jewish Committee enthusiastically joined in the hysteria whipped up against the

Rosenbergs, and its monthly publication, *Commentary* (November 1953), actually editorialised about how the couple - executed as Soviet spies - were not really Jews at all. (This tradition of toadying before the US establishment long continued - the Simon Wiesenthal Centre handed Ronald Reagan its 'Humanitarian of the year' award in 1988.)

A defining feature of the holocaust industry is the dual insistence upon uniqueness and inexplicability. An amalgam promoted not only in Israel, but nowadays in Anglo-Saxon schools, universities, museums, books, TV documentaries, films, etc. Of course, to proclaim an event as unique is, at least in part, to explain it. By the same measure, every single event that has ever happened is 'unique'.



Nazi propaganda poster. The spirit of Christianity shown as an ally against the triple-headed foe - Judaism, Communist Party of Germany and the Social Democrats.

But in order to establish its categorically unexplainable uniqueness the holocaust industry must necessarily rip the Nazi genocide out of its actual and therefore historical context. The origins of the gangster-bureaucratic killing machine thereby lie hidden in the darkest recesses of the human psyche and its results are simultaneously elevated into something that lies beyond reason. For Zionism the Jews were inevitable victims while they

lived amongst gentiles. The Babylonian exile, the Roman sack of Jerusalem, the medieval hatred of Jews, the tsarist pogroms, Dreyfus and the Nazi genocide that way fuse into a single, and for that matter predetermined, event.

Don't blame capitalism

As for the ideologues of post-World War II capitalism, they exonerate their own system, not least by the simple device of adopting a thoroughly false set of logical propositions. Capitalism is categorically equated with democracy and the Nazi regime was without doubt the antithesis of democracy: ergo it supposedly follows that capitalism is the antithesis of Nazism. Instead of blaming capitalism - albeit in a state of decay, and therefore indirectly - the mass extermination of the Jews is put down to an ill-defined totalitarian other, which supposedly links ancient Sparta with mandarin China and John Calvin's Geneva with Leon Trotsky. These enemies of the 'open society' are thus deemed responsible for the final solution.²⁶

As described by Marx, capitalism comes to dominance covered in blood, dirt and gore. America's natives were decimated by European germs and guns; Tasmanian aborigines were completely wiped out; the slave trade cost millions of lives in Africa itself - that before the transportation of survivors across the Atlantic and their ruthless exploitation in the Americas. Maybe in all 10 or 20 million were killed; and India and Ireland witnessed mass famines which were greatly exacerbated by the callous indifference of the British authorities. Indeed, the numbers who died prematurely due to overexploitation during the industrial revolution in Britain was horrendous too. The total death count in these episodes far exceeds that of the Nazis. But these deaths "occurred as part of the process of accumulation, usually primitive accumulation, and most of the deaths were incidental to this process".²⁷

Therefore - even set against this carnage - the killing of the Jews and other 'sub-humans' stands out as an aberration. The left would be badly mistaken to claim that Nazism was part of the "normal" functioning of

capitalism.²⁸ Not because of the total numbers involved, not because their suffering was worse, nor even because of the concentrated time span within which the killings took place. John Rose, writes that the “thoroughly capitalist nature” of the holocaust made it different.²⁹ An assessment which clearly needs qualifying. The Atlantic slave trade, the leaping, westward expansion of the US, the settler colonisation of Australia and the imperial exploitation of India and Ireland had a rational, if terrible, logic from the point of view of capital. But the extermination of European Jewry made no sense for German capitalism. It destroyed labour, often highly skilled labour. It should also be emphasised that in their attempt to exterminate the Jews, the SS was quite prepared to disrupt Germany’s war effort. Railway wagons were to carry a human cargo of Jews from across the German empire to the death camps, not munitions and supplies to the hard pressed eastern front. The whole thing was driven by a social madness, a deadly irrationality ... though planned and administered by career-minded bureaucrats.³⁰ There was still capitalism in Germany, but political power had passed into the hands of the Nazi mafia. This loss of control by the capitalist class and the deliberateness and sheer scale of the killings mark out the Nazi final solution.

As German forces grabbed Poland and then plunged deep into the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa), Nazi persecution of the Jews within the Reich became a general system of outright mass extermination. As Hitler’s empire spread, old enmities, bribery and threats saw local killing gangs mushroom into existence. The Nazis were often successful in recruiting rightwing nationalist Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians and Ukrainians - specially selected Jews were also formed into auxiliary units to police the ghettos and concentration camps. However, there were many who boycotted, or resisted, the killing of their neighbours. But it was the shattered nerves of the *Einsatzgruppen* (the SS killing squads) that persuaded the Nazi leadership to adopt more impersonal - ie, industrialised - methods. Even the *Einsatzgruppen* eventually became sickened by the face-to-face shooting of batch after batch of men, women and children.

The plan for the ‘final solution’ was coldly decided, in January 1942, by the SS, the German army, industrialists and civil servants at a specially arranged conference held at Wannsee, a suburb in the outskirts of Berlin. It

was agreed to build a series of giant death camps - Auschwitz, Birkenau, Chelmno, Majdanek, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka. Once put into effect, the whole operation drew upon the achievements of advanced capitalism: an efficient railway network, doctors to oversee the initial selection of inmates, technicians and scientists who advised on poison gases, engineering firms which designed and built crematoria. The Nazi death machine “could not have occurred in earlier periods” of history, simply because neither technical nor social forms had yet evolved sufficiently for such a purpose.³¹ The development of the means of production brings not only the possibility of communism, but the actuality of mechanised killing.

One Auschwitz officer described the camp as “murder by assembly line”. The whole operation of human extermination was carried out by an SS bureaucracy which used the market whenever necessary. Indeed the smooth routine of mass killing relied on the complicity of thousands of grey executives in associated industries and other branches of the ‘normal’ state apparatus. Capitalist firms, crucially the biggest monopolies, were fully complicit in the Nazi crimes. All worthwhile scholarship shows how, despite German industry’s repeated denials, camp factories were created, run and supplied by the SS “*in conjunction with* company officials”- including, of course, those at the highest level.³² For example, Siemens operated factories at Ravensbrück and in the Auschwitz subcamp of Bobrek, among others, and sold electrical parts to other concentration and death camps. On the company’s balance sheet the horror added up. In the camp factories conditions were murderous. Malnutrition, disease and death were all too common: the life expectancy of the “average” slave labourer is estimated to have been three-and-a-half months.³³ An extreme example of what Marxists call absolute exploitation. Nevertheless the bottom line announced profits.

Nazism was undoubtedly hoisted into power due to support from key sections of the German ruling class. A fact that should never be forgotten. Amongst the helpers of the Nazis were: Georg von Schnitzler, leading director of IG Farben, the chemicals and pharmaceuticals giant; Emil Kirdorf, the union-hating coal baron; Fritz Thyssen, head of the huge steel trust; Albert Vogler of United Steel Works; August Rosterg and August Diehn of the potash industry; the Cologne industrial magnet, Otto Wolf; and

a conglomerate of banks headed by Baron Kurt von Schroeder, which included Deutsche Bank and the Kommerz und Privat Bank, the Dresdener Bank, Deutscher Kredit Gesellschaft and Germany's largest insurance concern, the Allianz. These hugely powerful individuals and companies bankrolled Hitler. Eg, following massive overspending on election propaganda, offices and full-time staff, the Nazi party was bailed out on January 16 1933; a cabal, which included some of Germany's biggest capitalists, agreed to "take over the business debts". Goebbels records in his diary that the party's dire financial situation had "fundamentally improved overnight".³⁴

Till 1932 business, the banks and the Junker landlords mostly kept the Nazis at arms length and in general looked down upon them as uncouth thugs. Hitler was contemptuously dismissed as "that Austrian corporal". Yet, terrified by the swing of working class votes away from the tame social democrats to the wildly unpredictable 'official communists' in the November 1932 elections, and the growing ungovernability of Germany, core members of the capitalist class opted for Hitler. Eg Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, king of the arms manufacturers, became, in the words of a repentant Thyssen, "a super Nazi".³⁵

Nor did the Christian churches oppose Hitler. Paul Oestreicher - a German-born Church of England minister - freely admits that when the Nazis came for their first victims, the communists, "the church remained totally silent". Faced with the banning of the Communist Party and the mass arrests of its militants, many of the "silent Christians nodded their heads". Using the well known Christian metaphor, the church cowardly "passed on the other side".³⁶ Throughout Europe they mostly kept equally quiet, while Jews were persecuted, deported and then killed. Under Pius XII the Catholic church adopted an official policy of neutrality between the big *capitalist* power blocs. However, as we have shown, not least in the case of Franco Spain, there can be no hiding the fact that the Vatican gave its blessing to a whole string of extreme rightwing and fascist regimes. They were virulently anti-Marxist and therefore seen as doing god's work. Crude, but perhaps divinely directed instruments. The Catholic church did raise objections to the Nazi ideology of race. It contradicted church doctrines. In March 1937 the papacy issued the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* (With

burning concern), which condemned as false and heretical the teachings of Nazism. But it did not condemn the extension of the Nuremberg laws, nor the Nazi 'final solution'. The Vatican strove to avoid "an open breach" - as it was to continue to do throughout World War II. The goal was to safeguard the "institutional interests of the church in a perilous political world".³⁷

In September 1935 a few German Christians in the protestant Confessing Church did demand that their church take a public stand in defence of the Jews. "They were," writes Victoria Barnett, "overruled by church leaders who wanted to avoid any conflict with the Nazi regime."³⁸ Many Christians fully shared the Nazis' anti-Semitic outlook and prejudices. During the 1930s, church sermons and publications exuded hatred for the Jews. The protestant sects typically combined anti-Semitism with German chauvinism. The most extreme example of this being the German Christian Movement, which "embraced Nazism and tried to Nazify Christianity by suppressing the *Old Testament*, revising liturgies and hymns, and promoting Jesus as an Aryan hero who embodied the ideals of the new Germany".³⁹ Not surprisingly then, those few Christians who did express solidarity with the persecuted Jews - such as the Catholic priest, Bernhard Lichtenberg, and the protestant deaconess, Marga Meusel - "received no public (and little private) support from their respective churches".⁴⁰ Only after the defeat of Germany in 1945 did the various denominations issue rather vague statements regretting their failure to resist the Nazi regime.

After World War II dozens of prominent German capitalists were prosecuted for war crimes. They included the directors of Krupp - the backbone of the Nazi state's military-industrial complex - which, of course, used forced labour on a large scale. Also prosecuted were members of the board of IG Farben, which supplied the Zyklon B crystals for the death camps. IG Farben also ran a synthetic rubber factory at Auschwitz. During the trials at Nuremberg, the American prosecutors were at pains not to portray the proceedings as a condemnation of capitalism as such. Rather, as stressed by the American academic, Jonathan Wiesen, the trials were designed to be seen as punishing "*individuals* who had committed crimes". Nonetheless, it was clear that the trials established "a strong link between German industry and all aspects of the Nazi economy" and, "more

specifically”, between German business and the crimes of national socialism. The Nuremberg trials resulted in the conviction and imprisonment of both company owners and directors.⁴¹ Alfried Krupp, the owner of Krupp, was found guilty of employing slave labour and plundering businesses in France and the Netherlands. He was stripped of all his property and business holdings and sentenced to 12 years imprisonment. However, in January 1951, during the Korean War, all capitalists still in prison were released in an act of “clemency” by the US high commissioner for Germany, John J McCloy - after which “almost all of their assets were returned to them”.⁴²

Hitler promised Germany’s capitalists that he would swiftly crush the workers’ movement, put a stop to social anarchy and leave the capitalists free to amass profits undisturbed and to rule their economic empires as they saw fit. President Hindenburg was persuaded to accept a Hitler-led coalition government after combined lobbying by businessmen, bankers, rightwing nationalist ministers and the German high command. Thanks to their efforts, Hitler was sworn in as chancellor on January 30 1933.

Therefore it is not just mistaken to talk about the collective guilt of the German people. It is criminally wrong. There was and remained another Germany. The mass of workers - including German Jews, of course - who had supported the communists and the social democrats, were never reconciled to the Nazi regime (till mid-1941, there were more ‘communists’ and ‘social democrats’ in the camps than ‘Jews’). Nor were the bulk of Catholic workers or wide sections of the intelligentsia pro-Nazi. There were even a few individual capitalists, such as the celebrated Oskar Schindler, who, either overtly or covertly, opposed the Nazis. Meanwhile, other capitalists, especially the leaders of the monopolies, happily profited from the use of forced and slave labour, the ‘Aryanisation’ of Jewish property and the looting of Nazi-occupied Europe.

However, it would also be true to say that few capitalists would have actually liked the direction taken by the Nazi regime from the late 1930s onwards. Thyssen, for example, wanted some degree of cooperation with Britain and the US. He ended up fleeing Germany. Locking up the Marxists, forcing down wages and banning strikes was one thing. Creating full employment through an arms economy, forcing women to return to home,

hearth and children, putting gauleiters into the factories to oversee management decisions, embarking on a futile war with Britain, the Soviet Union and the US, introducing slave labour, which had to be trained and was then in wave after wave put to death by the SS - all this was in capitalist terms highly irrational. In other words, Nazism and the extermination of the Jews was not a natural “development” of capitalism in “all modern states”.⁴³

Capitalism does not inexorably lead to fascism, as insisted upon by ‘official communist’ doctrine in the first half of the 1930s. On the contrary, Nazism, and fascism in general, is merely one of a growing range of counterrevolutionary options, sometimes appearing in the form of soberly calculated concessions, sometimes appearing as maddened attacks on those very same concessions, but always determined by the fact that the capitalist class increasingly finds control over its own society slipping out of its hands. Capitalist decline and the transition to socialism therefore combine to produce partial, unsustainable and therefore increasingly contradictory solutions. The specific preconditions for fascism in the 1930s being the paralysis of the capitalist class, a crushed and frenzied petty bourgeoisie - that and the failure of the working class to make revolution. Linked to that failure was, of course, the counterrevolution within the revolution under Stalin.

There is a chilling parallel between Hitler and Stalin.⁴⁴ Of course, many more died in the Soviet Union - at least 20 million, compared to 10 million in the Nazi slaughter; but this took place over a period of around 20 years, not three or four. While large numbers of Stalin’s victims were singled out for execution, the vast majority died due to the appalling conditions that prevailed in the camps. The gulags were not designed for mass extermination as such. Nevertheless, sentences as short as five years led to death rates as high as 50%. Mass arrests in the Soviet Union took place in order to engender fear and because of the extreme instability of the system itself. That is why its own elite was decimated time and again. There was no conscious and deliberate choice of an ethnic section of the population for industrial liquidation. True, some minority groups were deported and it would seem that Stalin had this in mind for the Jews in the 1950s - thankfully he died before he could put this into operation.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Forty-one theses on the Arab awakening and Israel-Palestine

1. The Arab awakening has been truly inspiring. People were prepared to die in order to see an end to the military, semi-military and monarchical dictatorships.
2. here were many factors behind the Arab awakening. Increases in food and other commodity prices, falling living standards and growing poverty. However, there was more to the Arab awakening than economics.
3. All classes and strata were swept up in the maelstrom. In other words, there was a movement towards a democratic revolution. That is to be unreservedly welcomed and encouraged. Whatever happens in the short to medium term, US imperialism and imperialism in general have suffered a huge setback. Israel too has been weakened.
4. Obviously no genuinely democratic revolution has really happened anywhere in the Arab world. A few presidents have gone. But in the main it has been the forces of Islamism that have gained the most. There is the danger that a declining US will reimpose imperialist control by reaching an historic compromise with Islamist forces, crucially the Muslim Brotherhood. We have already seen imperialism derailing, buying-off, incorporating the popular movement. That is what has happened in Libya.
5. Marxists support those who are fighting for a real, thoroughgoing revolution that clears away all the muck of oppression. That means abolishing the secret police, replacing the professional army with a popular militia, closing down the old ruling parties, beginning land redistribution and the formation of co-ops, confiscating corrupt wealth, and putting privatised and nationalised industries under workers' control.
6. Clearly the working class is not in a position at the moment to take power in any Arab country. Hence the Marx-Engels strategy of making the revolution permanent. Communists do not want to see stable

governments, but an ever widening democratic space available to the working class. Specifically that means demanding free speech, ending censorship, winning the right to publish, the right to form trade unions, co-ops, workers' defence guards and political parties. Working class parties must not align themselves with any left nationalist, Islamist or liberal coalition or government. Indeed they must constitute themselves as parties of extreme opposition.

7. Only when the workers' party commands a clear popular majority and can realistically hope to carry out its entire minimum programme should taking part in/forming a government be considered.
8. Besides particular struggles to overthrow this or that leader, this or that regime, there is abundant evidence of the continued existence of an unresolved Arab national question. The mass movement in Tunisia fed into Egypt and the mass movement in Egypt fed into Yemen, etc, etc.
9. There are nearly 300 million Arabs in a contiguous territory that stretches from the Atlantic Ocean, across north Africa, down the Nile to north Sudan, and all the way to the Persian Gulf and up to the Caspian Sea. Though studded with national minorities - Kurds, Assyrians, Turks, Armenians, Berbers, etc - there is a definite Arab or Arabised community. Despite being separated into over 20 different states and divided by religion and religious sect - Sunni, Shi'ite, Alaouite, Ismaili, Druze, Orthodox, Catholic, Maronite, Nestorian, etc - they share a strong bond of pan-Arab consciousness, born not only of a common language, but of a closely related history.
10. Arabs are binational. There are Moroccans, Yemenis, Egyptians, Jordanians, etc. But there is also a wider Arab identity, which has its origins in the Muslim conquests of the 7th and 8th centuries. Admittedly the Arabs were politically united for only a short period of time historically: eg, under the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates.
11. It was the disintegration of the Ottoman empire, through the combined efforts of Russian tsarism and Anglo-French imperialism, that triggered the birth of modern Arab nationalism. Hence European capitalism helped both to disunite the old Arab nation and to create the conditions for a rebirth.
12. Hopes invested in the Young Turks quickly passed. So did illusions in platonic imperialism. Britain encouraged Arab nationalism against

Ottoman Turkey in World War I, only to disappoint and betray. France and Britain greedily carved up the Middle East between themselves. Pleas for a single Arab state in the Mashreq fell on deaf ears. The creation of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq suited the needs of Britain and France, but was a crime as far as Arab nationalists were concerned. It ran completely counter to their aspirations.

13. Inevitably the two imperial robbers generated independence movements. The Balfour declaration (1917) and Zionist colonisation in Palestine fed Arab nationalism too. However, the Saudi and Hashemite royal houses agreed to serve as puppets and, together with their British and French masters, again and again stymied the forces of pan-Arabism.
14. After 1945 and the triumph of US superimperialism, the Arab countries successively gained formal independence. But the Arab world remained Balkanised along the neat lines on the map drawn by the old colonial powers.
15. Oil money brought huge riches for the elites in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, etc. While that allows for a degree of clowning and posturing, the military, political and economic control exercised by the US cannot be hidden. Oil revenue is recycled through the purchase of US and British arms, invested in the money markets of London, New York, Frankfurt, Zurich and Tokyo, or frittered away on palaces, luxury jets, gambling and vanity projects.
16. Hence the situation in the Arab world is broadly analogous to Italy, Poland and Germany in 19th century Europe. The national question remains unresolved.
17. The most famous candidate for Arab unifier was Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-70). This uncrowned Bonaparte led the Free Officers' revolution in 1952, which overthrew the pro-British monarchy of Farouk I. Nasser then oversaw a radical agrarian reform programme, nationalised the Suez canal, allied Egypt with the Soviet Union and put his country on the course of state-capitalist development. This went hand in hand with crushing both the Muslim Brotherhood and the working class movement.
18. Nasser called it 'Arab socialism'. Especially with his success in the 1956 Suez crisis - an Israeli invasion followed by a pre-planned joint

French and British intervention and then an unexpected American veto - Nasser's popularity soared throughout the Arab world. Pro-Nasser Arab socialist parties, groups and conspiracies were sponsored or established themselves. His name became almost synonymous with pan-Arabism.

19. Nasser demanded that natural resources be used for the benefit of all Arabs - hugely popular with those below. Everyone knew he meant oil. Of course, the house of Saud instantly became an implacable enemy. Nonetheless, because of mass pressure the Ba'athist authorities in Syria sought a merger with Egypt. Despite the repression suffered by their co-thinkers in Egypt, the 'official communists' and the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood likewise favoured unity.
20. The United Arab Republic was formed on February 1 1958. Nasser was appointed president and Cairo became the capital. Yet the UAR proved fleeting. Syrian capitalists did not gain access to the Egyptian market and Egyptian administrative personnel were painted by Syrian generals, bureaucrats and top politicians as acting like colonial officials. The union ignominiously collapsed in 1961, despite opposition from the Damascus street. However, from then onwards the UAR became a hollow pretence. It united no other country apart from Egypt.
21. The 1967 six-day war with Israel proved to be the final straw for Nasserism. Israel's blitzkrieg destroyed the air forces of Egypt, Syria and Jordan on the ground and by the end of the short-lived hostilities Israel occupied the Sinai, the West Bank and the Golan Heights. Nasser was humiliated and died soon after a broken man.
22. As for Ba'athism, though it succeeded in spreading from Syria to Iraq, petty bourgeois nationalism ensured that the two Ba'athist states became bitter rivals. Nor did 'official communism' - an ideology of aspiring labour dictators - do any better. Under instructions from the Kremlin the 'official communists' tailed bourgeois and petty bourgeois nationalism. Working class political independence has been sabotaged again and again. So has Arab unity. Eg, the 'official' Communist Party opposed the incorporation of Iraq into the UAR. State independence became a kind of totem. One disaster inevitably followed another. Mass parties were reduced to rumps or were liquidated.

23. Evidently, Arab reunification remains a burning, but unfulfilled task. The fact that Nasser's short-lived UAR saw the light of day is testimony to mass support for Arab unity. What was a potent sentiment from the 1950s and into the 1970s needs to be revived in the 21st century in light of the Arab awakening and given a new democratic and class content.
24. Communists need to take the lead in the fight for pan-Arab unity. This task is inseparable from the struggle for socialist revolution and the formation of mass Marxist parties, first in this or that Arab country and then throughout the Arab world. A Communist Party of Arabia.
25. Marxists ought to advocate the formation of a democratic, centralised Arab republic - the form one can envisage for working class rule. This can only happen if first the working class sweeps away the existing regimes in Egypt, Syria and Iraq: that is, the most populous of the Arab countries. A revolutionary war might well be necessary to unite the entire Arab world - in particular so that the Arab masses can benefit from the oil wealth of the sparsely populated Arabian peninsula. It would be a just war, a war of liberation.
26. Zionism and the question of Palestine remains a contentious issue on the left. Conventionally, in Britain at least, what passes for the Trotskyite left damns Zionism as almost akin to fascism and calls for the immediate abolition of Israel and its replacement by a single, democratic, secular Palestinian state. At its most perverted, this stance - long since abandoned by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation - blurs into anti-Semitism. Under Gerry Healy the Workers Revolutionary Party's anti-Zionism served as a politically correct codeword. Meanwhile, the WRP's colour daily paper *Newsline* pumped out an endless stream of foul anti-Semitic propaganda and was in truth well rewarded for its efforts. Not in the form of sales to an eager British public ... rather subsidies and handouts worth many tens of thousands of pounds from grateful Middle Eastern regimes.
27. While communists have no truck with Zionism and condemn the colonial-settler origins of Israel, we recognise that since 1948 a definite Israeli Jewish nation has come into existence. To call for its abolition is unMarxist. Such a programme is either naive utopianism or genocidal. Both are reactionary. The Israeli Jewish nation is

historically constituted. The Israeli Jews speak the same language, inhabit the same territory, have the same culture and sense of identity.

28. No *democratic* solution to the Israel-Palestine question can be won without the consent of the Israeli people. Yet, the fact is that despite the courage of a tiny minority of socialists, anti-militarists and refuseniks, the Israeli people have consistently, often overwhelmingly, supported the wars of their rulers irrespective of the atrocities involved. Why? Israel is a colonial settler state and all such states face the fundamental problem of what to do with the people whose land they have stolen.
29. During the wars of 1947-49, 1967 and 1973 well over a million Palestinians fled or were forcibly driven out of what is today Israel and those who remain - constituting some 20% of its population - deeply resent their position as second class citizens. Today there are over four million Palestinian refugees, according to the United Nations. Both the enemy within and without engender a permanent state of insecurity.
30. Israel lives alongside those it dispossessed in perpetual conflict and war. Understandably, the Israeli population feels under siege and therefore willingly - desperate and maddened - supports, urges on, even the most misjudged acts of Israeli state terrorism in the vain hope of crushing the dispossessed Palestinians and ending the perpetual state of conflict, war and oppression.
31. The Palestinian national movement has been sustained only because of the existence of and its relationship with the wider Arab nation. Solving the Israel-Palestine question requires a combined Arab and proletarian solution. Communism and nationalism are antithetical. Nevertheless we champion the right of all oppressed nations to self-determination. In the conditions of Israel/Palestine that means supporting the right of the Palestinians where they form a clear majority to establish their own state. Such a state is only realistic with a working class-led Arab revolution.
32. Communists do not deny the right of the Israeli Jewish nation to self-determination on the basis of some half-baked or perverted reading of classic texts. The right to self-determination is not a Marxist blessing exclusively bestowed upon the oppressed. It is fundamentally a demand for equality. All nations must have the equal right to

determine their own fate - as long as that does not involve the oppression of another people. Hence communists recognise that the US, German and French nations have self-determination. Today that is generally unproblematic. However, we desire to see that same elementary right generalised to all peoples.

33. The only realistic and progressive solution to the Israel-Palestine question today must be based on the mutual recognition by both Palestinians and Israelis of each other's national rights. Of course, it would be an excellent thing if both nations *chose* to live together in a single, democratic and secular state - why on earth would anyone wish to oppose such a thing? But that possibility does not even *occur* at the moment to the vast majority of Israelis. Of course, for Islamists and for much of the left in Britain alike, that matters not a jot - the Israeli Jewish nation has no right to exist. Therefore Israeli Jews have no right to determine the kind of state they wish to live under.
34. The immediate call for a single Palestinian state, within which the Jewish Israeli nationality is given citizenship and religious, but not national rights is, in present circumstances, to perpetuate division. Israeli Jews will not accept such a solution - the whole of the 20th century since 1933 militates against that. Israeli Jews would desperately fight with all means at their disposal ... and at huge cost in terms of human suffering and lives.
35. There is, however, the danger that the poles of oppression would be reversed if a single Palestinian state was born as a result of a violent caesarean operation. The Jews would become a dispossessed and oppressed nationality. The whole thing can be prettified by painting the "liberation of Palestine" as being the result of a "socialist revolution" led by the "Arab working class". Pure deception. When all is said and done, what is being talked about here is the military conquest of Israel rather than a rapprochement between two peoples. Without military conquest, itself a highly unlikely outcome, the immediate call for a single-state solution remains totally impractical. Israel is fanatically nationalistic and militarily very strong - it is fulsomely backed by the US and in terms of its armed forces is ranked by some armchair generals as the fourth or fifth most powerful state on the face of the planet.

36. Does it follow that Israel cannot make peace with the Palestinians? That any Israeli settlement with the Palestinians is bound to be phoney? There can certainly be no *democratic* settlement on the basis of Israel as a *religious* state - any more than there can be on the basis of an *Islamic* Palestine. Yet the Israeli people are a real, living entity and cannot be dismissed, or wished away, just because Israel began as a settler colonial state - albeit of a special type. Settlers did not come mainly from a single home country. They came fleeing from Nazi Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union.
37. A two-state solution effectively falls at the same sort of hurdles as the single-state solution. We cannot expect the Zionist state, as presently constituted, to concede the territory necessary to create a contiguous, viable Palestinian republic. Without a serious transformation in the regional, and indeed global, relation of forces, any such solution will inevitably leave in place the oppression of Palestinian and Israeli Arabs, and will thus be a mockery of democracy.
38. It is the job of communists to produce the change in regional and global conditions that will make a democratic solution possible. Whether this leaves present-day Israel/Palestine as two states, one state, a federal republic, etc will be dictated largely by the course of the Arab revolution. To this end, our immediate demands must be: the complete withdrawal of Israel to its pre-1967 borders, an end to military interference in the West Bank and the perpetual siege of Gaza, and full democratic and civil rights for all Arabs in Israel.
39. Additionally, for a democratic settlement to be possible, Palestinians must have the right of return. This is a right of habitation decided upon individually, or by family group. It is not a demand for a folk movement of the entire diaspora - which now inhabits not just Jordan, Kuwait, the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, etc, but the US and many countries in western Europe too. Communists demand substantial compensation for the Palestinian people as a whole from the state of Israel for the historic injustice that was perpetrated upon them.
40. Only through the process of Arab reunification can we expect the growth of an anti-Zionist 'enemy within' the Israeli-Jewish nation and

the growth of trust and solidarity between the two peoples and their eventual merger.

41. Equally, the Zionist colonial project and the arbitrary divisions among Arabs are substantially propped up by global imperialism. It is incumbent upon communists in the imperialist countries to force the termination of all military aid to Israel.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Free speech and religious hatred laws

The Racial and Religious Hatred Act (2006) was met by an extraordinarily broad, though totally uncoordinated, chorus of disapproval. Not only from the Tories, Liberal Democrats and Scottish and Welsh nationalists. Christian, Muslim and secularist organisations, novelists, comics, artists, media workers and newspaper columnists ranging from Melanie Phillips to Mark Steel all expressed strong objections. Yet prime minister Tony Blair was determined to make “incitement to religious hatred” a criminal offence. The government badly needed a legislative sop to tempt back Muslim voters who were lost because of the ‘war on terror’. Even before it was given royal assent, the religious hatred law served to reel in a few prized Muslims. Eg, Tariq Ramadam and Inayat Bunglawala accepted seats on the home office’s task force to combat Muslim extremism - the project was allocated an initial £5 million budget.

Disgracefully, the only opposition party backing the Blair government was Respect, in the form of its lone MP. Having traipsed through the division lobby alongside New Labour, George Galloway subsequently claimed that the two successful amendments forced upon the government rendered the legislation “completely useless”. Prosecutors will have to prove an “intention to stir up religious hatred and only cases of direct threats will even be considered for prosecution”. The Commons vote, he concluded, was “an insult, particularly to those in the Muslim community, who face bigotry because of their religion and who only want the law to treat them in the same way as those who face racial discrimination”.¹

The Labour government’s first attempt to introduce religious hatred legislation came in 2001 - following the September 11 suicide attacks on New York and Washington. Home secretary David Blunkett shamelessly declared that laws were urgently needed in order to crack down upon the rash of vandalism inflicted on Muslim properties and the verbal abuse and

physical assaults suffered by many ordinary Muslims. While in those days the Commons proved to be a pushover, there followed two defeats in the House of Lords. Their lordships were unwilling to see a further narrowing of their freedom of expression for the sake of returning Muslims to the Labour fold.

A second attempt came in early 2005. Once again the government experienced no trouble dealing with the Commons. However, ermined opposition remained undiminished. On this occasion, though, the government was thwarted not by those sitting on the red benches: rather lack of time. A general election intervened and that meant the parliamentary timetable became impossibly squeezed. The government had to put its plans on hold.

After Blair's third sweeping general election victory in May 2005, his government reintroduced the legislation. By July 2005 it had successfully been passed through the Commons. Yet, still unpersuaded, the peers voted through a couple of clauses intended to water down the legislation: eg, nothing in it should "be read or given effect in a way which prohibits or restricts discussion, criticism or expressions of antipathy, dislike, ridicule, insult or abuse of particular religions or the beliefs or practices of their adherents, or of any other belief system or the beliefs or practices of its adherents, or proselytising or urging adherents of a different religion or belief system to cease practising their religion or belief system". Confidently, arrogantly, the government dug in its heels. Its own 'compromise' amendments were to be railroaded through. Or so Blair thought.

Nevertheless, despite two amendments being passed by the Commons - and Galloway's recriminations - the law now says that someone will be guilty of a crime if it is proved they *intended* - through "discussion, criticism or expressions of antipathy, dislike, ridicule, insult or abuse", etc - to stir up religious hatred. If words, actions, images, etc, are considered "threatening", not merely "abusive" or "insulting", to followers of a particular religion or belief system, they are deemed to be against the law. Needless to say, in the real world, "abusive" words are frequently perceived as "threatening".

Offence and rights

The religious hatred laws were a further consolidation of the pernicious culture of offence. Of course, in the past religious people went to great lengths to get what they considered immoral, salacious or irreligious banned. Nowadays, religious groups, ethnic-based organisations and individual believers respond to almost every journalistic debunking, artistic home truth or humorous put-down by claiming that they have been deeply offended and thereby made an easy target for hatred.



‘The nude dancer before the commission of morality’ (*Der Komet* 1911).

Artist: Hans Bolz.

They cite the ‘right’ *not to be offended*. Implementation of that ‘right’ is what Oliver Finegold, the *Evening Standard* reporter, demanded after Ken Livingstone acerbically told him he was like a Nazi concentration camp guard in February 2005 because he worked for a publication that was then part of the *Daily Mail* group of newspapers. As already noted, in the 1930s

the *Daily Mail* welcomed Hitler's regime and gave generous backing to Oswald Mosley and his blackshirts.

To ensure this 'right' not to be offended, the call had long been made by various religious believers for legal measures to protect their self-image, their historic personalities, their doctrines. The *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons are another case in point. Obviously the rightwing Copenhagen daily has an awful anti-migrant agenda. But its 12 cartoons, or at least two or three of them, though *intended* as a provocation, could only provoke those who *wanted* to be provoked. Certainly Islamic neo-fundamentalists suddenly found themselves with a heaven-sent cause. They could be suitably offended and they used their politically inflated hurt to rally wider forces to the holy flag.

In Europe, they are both victims and victimisers. Islamic terrorism is no invention of the rightwing media. The first protests in Britain happened on Friday February 3 2006 outside the Danish embassy in London. Most sections of the bourgeois media focused on supporters of al Ghuraba - a small sect established by former leaders of Al-Muhajiroun - who displayed placards which variously read: "behead", "butcher", "slay" or "massacre" those who "insult Islam". The comment pages of the conservative press combined the shrill, circulation-boosting demand for police prosecutions, along with a barely concealed shudder of personal fear. Memories of the 1989 *fatwa* imposed on Salman Rushdie by ayatollah Khomeini, requiring his quick execution, were still fresh in the memory. The National Union of Journalists was at pains to "defend the principle of the freedom of the press and other media", but expressed serious concern for its members' safety too.²

Outside the Danish embassy there were also slogans such as "Free speech, go to hell" and "Freedom equals hypocrisy". Here were much more acceptable messages - at least for a part of the Islamic establishment. To all intents and purposes the Muslim Action Committee - which claims support from 350 mosques and staged a 10,000-strong protest in London on February 18 2006 - adopted the exact same stance on free expression. Only more courteously. MAC's Shaikh Faiz Saddiqi was widely reported as saying that he wanted to see the Press Complaints Commission code of conduct changed so as to prevent the publication of any images of

Mohammed. Sir Iqbal Sacranie of the Muslim Council of Britain was insistent. British newspapers which had reprinted the cartoons should “apologise for the enormous offence and distress caused”. He also detailed a whole raft of draconian measures designed to ensure that nothing of the like ever happens again. Mohamed Abdul Bari, chair of the East London Mosque, offered a similar opinion on freedom of speech: the “hallmark of any civilised society” is not just that it allows freedom of speech, “but that it accepts this freedom also has limits”.

Pandering to the culture of offence, Jack Straw told BBC Radio 4’s *The world this weekend* that freedom of speech “has to be exercised responsibly and does not extend to an obligation to insult or be inflammatory”.³ Essentially the same formulation came from US state department spokesperson Kurtis Cooper: “These cartoons are indeed offensive to the belief of Muslims ... We all fully recognise and respect freedom of the press and expression, but it must be coupled with press responsibility. Inciting religious or ethnic hatreds in this manner is not acceptable.”⁴

Politics has an ineluctable logic. Still joined with the Respect popular front, the SWP positioned itself behind those establishment Muslims who were asking for the state to ban anything that might cause them offence. We should not “allow ourselves to be fooled by arguments about freedom of speech”, said a sneaking, short-sighted, shameful Alex Callinicos.⁵ And that was the SWP-Respect message for the MAC demonstration. The Respect leaflet on the Danish cartoons implicitly called for censorship: “‘Freedom of speech’ should not be abused as a convenient cloak for racism.” In other words, free speech, with or without quote marks, must have definite limits. After all, it does in the SWP. Rank and file members are not permitted to openly express disagreements. If they do, they face disciplinary action - that or summary expulsion.

The idea that the Danish cartoons are “little” different from the “Nazi propaganda in the 1930s” and that Britain stands on the threshold of the mass extermination of Muslims - as hysterically claimed by Yvonne Ridley at Respect’s ‘Islamophobia’ rally on February 17 2006 - was clearly ludicrous.⁶ Such irresponsible hyperbole actually draws attention away from the real dangers facing Muslims in Britain; and the idea that Muslims

are bound to be thrown into an uncontrollable frenzy by the publication of cartoons depicting Mohammed is in itself deeply patronising. Rational Muslims can obviously handle silly jibes and when necessary give as good as they get. Nor are the petty bourgeoisie in Britain - or Denmark, for that matter - flooding into the ranks of some embryonic Nazi movement. And in the event that they were, calling for still greater state powers would, inevitably, be to compound mounting problems. Illusions are sown in the state and its supposed neutrality, and you can be sure that laws such as the Religious Hatred Act would be used not to protect vulnerable minorities, but to further isolate, silence and scapegoat them.

The SWP-Respect needed racism in order to excuse its abandonment of any pretence of defending free speech and free expression. Since 1945, racism has been, of course, increasingly unacceptable in polite bourgeois society. The same cannot be said of calls for new blasphemy laws. Yes, the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons were commissioned as part of an ongoing campaign to demonise Muslims in Denmark and a few of them were certainly intentionally offensive. Eg, one cannot know exactly what was in the artist's head when he drew the picture of Mohammed with a bomb in his turban. But it is not hard to guess. Mohammed would have approved of planting bombs. Some/all Muslims believe that doing so is in accordance with their prophet's views. Ergo, because of the nature of their religion all Muslims are potential bombers.

That notwithstanding, the response of those who were offended by the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons was to regard them not as an attack on their 'race' - which, however dubiously, conveys notions of biology - but their religion. The Muslims in Britain website makes this abundantly clear: "Muslims face intimidation and bullying, not because of the colour of their skin, but because of their cultural identity."⁷ And hardly any of the speakers at the February 2006 MAC rally said anything that could even vaguely be interpreted as opposition to the cartoons on the grounds of their alleged 'racism'. The Muslim establishment wanted such images banned first and foremost because they regard them as sacrilegious. That should clinch the matter.

Nevertheless, the operative conclusion for both SWP-Respect and MAC is the same. The state has to be persuaded to take the necessary powers to

stop insults or offence to Islam. Laws that restrict or ban racism should be extended to include religion. The Catholic church eagerly jumped on board to agree: Benedict XVI announced that “it is necessary and urgent that religions and their symbols be respected, and that the faithful not be subjected to provocations injuring their outlook and religious feelings”.⁸ Other religious cults doubtless agree. In other words, to prevent offence to Muslims, Britain could - certainly if the



George Galloway: disgracefully supported New Labour.

SWP-Respect had anything to do with it - adopt 'updated' blasphemy laws which would shield *all* religions from hostile criticism, ridicule and

provocation. The defender of *faiths*, Charles Windsor, would presumably approve.

Freedom for those who think differently

Why is free speech of such importance? Why should the left wish to see it cherished, safeguarded and extended? Socialism can only be an act of self-liberation of the great majority, for the great majority. It follows that the working class cannot be approached or treated as little children who are incapable of handling awkward and complicated questions. If socialism is ever to be realised, the overwhelming majority of the population - ie, the working class - has to master complex truths, including those contained in and revealed by Marxism. However, what spontaneously dominates in bourgeois society are the ideas of the bourgeoisie. While the education system, the media and government spin play a role here, it is not the major one. Habit, custom, the everyday workings of the capitalist system itself make what is irrational appear to be rational. Eg, most people see nothing at all strange in the fact that they have to daily sell their ability to labour to an employer. The only way that Marxism can triumph over what is dominant, apologetic, absurd, diversionary and *irrational* is through an unrestricted fight over ideas. A *class* struggle *necessarily* conducted in the public eye, where everyone can gain a firm understanding, freely engage and eventually take sides. Winning that battle for hearts and minds is why the Marxist left has historically advocated and defended free expression.

It should hardly need saying, but say it I must, free speech is *not* the same as shouting 'Fire!' in a crowded cinema or giving the go-ahead to a crazy demagogue to urge on fanatical followers to assassinate apostates or plant bombs in gay pubs. Such 'freedoms' are *rightly* against the law. What SWP-Respect was doing in 2006, however, was to line up with those who would manage, restrict and roll back our collective right to freely conduct the battle of ideas. True, SWP-Respect had no problem with free speech in the abstract ... as long as no-one gets upset, no-one is insulted. An old and very dangerous position. The medieval Catholic church approved of that kind of free speech. So did Adolph Hitler. So did Joseph Stalin.

Marxism has never recognised the ‘right’ not to be offended. There is no such *democratic* right. Democracy, if it is for real, if it is not just for show, means the unhindered exchange of all manner of different viewpoints, some of which will be regarded as deeply insulting, offensive and perhaps even threatening. Marxism itself comes to mind. Marxism is an insult, Marxism is an offence, Marxism is a threat, specifically to the bourgeoisie, reactionaries, racists, fascists, liberals, fake lefts, etc, and in turn is subject to insult, offence and threat by those very same forces and elements. Lenin once remarked that throughout the “civilised world the teachings of Marx evoke the utmost hostility and hatred of all bourgeois science (both official and liberal), which regards Marxism as a kind of ‘pernicious sect’”.⁹ And, of course, I am writing as a partisan, not an aloof or neutral observer, after all: “first they came for the communists ...” Yet neither under capitalism nor under socialism should Marxists fall for the temptation of calling for state measures to protect Marxism.

That does not imply or suggest that the left should be indifferent about what is being published in the press and broadcast on radio and TV. Obviously not. Using all our strength we should answer, contribute and engage on the widest scale. Hence, Marxists hardly argue that freedom of speech *should* “be abused as a convenient cloak to cover up racism” ... or religious hatred, sexism, homophobia, national chauvinism, trade union sectionalism, opportunism, etc. Marxists oppose everything which divides and therefore weakens the working class. But we fight to overcome what divides, what weakens the working class not through bans, not with prohibitions, not by censorship. Our sharpest weapon should be criticism. So Marxists are being perfectly consistent. Others, not least the bourgeoisie, but also our opponents within the workers’ movement, will use free speech for ends that are thoroughly dishonest, loathsome and hateful. That is inevitable. But in the immortal words of Rosa Luxemburg, “freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently”.¹⁰

Marx as a consistent champion of free speech

Marx himself, it can usefully be pointed out, was a lifelong opponent of censorship. Even as a young man, in 1842, he was to be found passionately proclaiming in favour of the unrestricted freedom of the press against the Prussian state and its censors: “Whenever one form of freedom is rejected, freedom in general is rejected,” he defiantly wrote.¹¹ Marx, it should never be forgotten, conducted an heroic struggle, first as one of the main contributors and subsequently as editor of the Cologne-based newspaper, *Rheinische Zeitung* - the Prussian state imposed double and then triple censorship. Finally, in March 1843 the authorities closed it down.

Magnanimously, the Prussian king announced that censorship would “not prevent serious and modest investigation of the truth”. Serious! Modest! Such loaded words instantly bring to mind Jack Straw’s injunction not “to insult”, not to be “gratuitously offensive” and the ever so reasonable request for “press responsibility” issued by the US state department. Ditto, the SWP-Respect warning that “‘Freedom of speech’ should not be abused”. All have the whiff of censorship about them.

In an extended reply to the Prussian authorities Marx elegantly cut through the cant: “Is it not the first duty of the seeker after truth to aim directly at the truth, without looking to the right or left? Will I not forget the essence of the matter, if I am obliged not to forget to state it in the prescribed form?”¹² No writer can discover the truth if placed in a bureaucratic mental straitjacket. As with any independent-minded spirit, nor did Marx want anyone telling him how and what to write: “You marvel at the delightful variety, the inexhaustible riches of nature. You do not ask the rose to smell like violet, but must the richest of all, the spirit, exist in only *one* variety? I am audacious, but the law commands that my style be modest. *Grey, all grey*, is the sole, the rightful colour of freedom ... the official colour!”¹³ Marx claimed the right to treat the ludicrous seriously and the serious ludicrously. The truth can never be what a government commands. State machines are not interested in the truth: only in perpetuating and aggrandising themselves; something which goes hand in hand with endemic suspicion, requirements to be responsible and a pathological fear of exposure. To ensure public order, thought must be manacled, placed behind high walls and put under the guard of prison wardens.

During these times - the early 1840s - Marx took delight in showing how the servile deputies of the Prussian diet sought to put a stop to journalists reporting their proceedings. They obviously regarded their debates as a private matter and outsiders had no business poking their noses in where they were not wanted (rather like the SWP and its conferences). When members of the fourth estate daringly lifted the veil, they were accused of irresponsible behaviour and treated as spies who had revealed vital secrets. Honourable gentlemen could no longer uninhibitedly express themselves. They felt constrained when they knew that some untrustworthy stranger would be publishing their words. And over the years, as parliamentary reporting became the norm, as the democratic space in society was inch by inch extended, professional politicians have turned lying, deception and double-talk into an art. Indeed, it is perhaps the case that as a species bourgeois politicians no longer even know how to tell the truth.

Marx's glowing description of the Paris Commune serves as a criticism of both 19th century parliaments and those on the left today who exhibit the exact same morbid fear of openness:

[T]he Commune did not pretend to infallibility, the invariable attribute of all governments of the old stamp. It published its doings and sayings, it initiated the public into all its shortcomings.¹⁴

Obviously, free speech comes with some unpleasant consequences. All decent people feel disgust for the bile and filth that daily pours from the pages of the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun*. The same goes for the well-researched pro-Nazi apologetics of David Irving. But the last thing anyone on the left should do is to call for censorship and bans. On the contrary, there must be freedom, even for sick, daft and crazy ideas. The long-term interests of the workers' movement demand it. Marx can be usefully quoted yet again:

Keep in mind that you could not enjoy the advantages of a free press without tolerating its inconveniences. You could not pluck the rose without its thorns! And what do you lose in losing a free press? A free press is the omnipresent open eye of the popular spirit ... It is the merciless confessional that a people makes to itself, and it is well known that confession has the power to redeem. It is the intellectual mirror in

which a people beholds itself, and self-examination is the first condition of wisdom.¹⁵

What of religion? In 1842 the same young Marx was fearlessly campaigning against the Prussian state's legal protection of the Christian faith from "frivolous" and "hostile" attack. Such little phrases were nothing but gagging devices. Replying to the censors, Marx went to the heart of the matter: "Religion can only be attacked in a hostile or a frivolous way, there is no third way."¹⁶ Of course, he never thought that freedom of expression was a perfect thing in itself, some kind of be-all and end-all. Free speech is not the same as general freedom. But it is surely one of its preconditions. Free speech allows us to beam a sharp light on what lies under the surface of events and what is kept hidden away by the state, and thereby we can educate ourselves. Certainly without free speech thought itself is diminished and impoverished.

Legal cases

Naturally, in 2006 the Blair government issued Prussian-like assurances that the religious hatred legislation would not affect any criticisms of the "beliefs, teachings or practices of a religion or its followers". Eg, the claim can be made that this or that religion is "false or harmful". Nor would proselytising "one's own religion or urging followers of a different religion to cease practising theirs" be against the law. Repeating some of the more religiously hateful, violent and even genocidal passages contained in books such as the *Bible* and the *Koran* is specifically ruled out as incitement. Nevertheless, junior home office minister Paul Goggins, a former Catholic seminary student, contradictorily announced that people could speak with impunity - unless one "intended to stir up religious hatred" or were "reckless as to whether religious hatred would be stirred up". In other words, soothing assurance combined with a government big stick.

Goggins solemnly pledged that there would be nothing stopping pointed jokes or comic tirades against a religious denomination or religion in general. "We're putting on the face of the bill a very clear commitment that, providing people are not setting out to incite hatred, then they can have

robust discussion, criticism, ridicule, even expressed in abusive and insulting terms,” said the honey-tongued Goggins. Comedian and actor Rowan Atkinson summed up the resulting paradox: “So effectively all that clause is doing is saying, ‘You have not committed an offence, unless of course you have committed the offence, in which case I am afraid you have committed an offence.’”

Government officials tried to give the impression that the only intention was to protect a vulnerable minority from hatred and thereby close “an unacceptable loophole”.¹⁷ Goggins gave the example of what the legislation would ban: a poster which had a group of three Muslim women - crucially one of whom is white - all wearing burqas and which claimed that this was the uniform of suicide bombers. But apart from one of the women being white - hard to tell, if she is wearing head-to-toe covering - actually this was already illegal under existing law.

The case that first extended race relations laws so as to include religion is *Mandla vs Dowell Lee*. The headmaster of a private school refused to admit a Sikh pupil unless he removed his turban and cut his hair. The House of Lords ruled that the term ‘ethnic’ in the 1976 Race Relations Act was to be “construed in a broad cultural and historic sense”. For a section of society to be considered an ‘ethnic group’ it had to be a distinct community. It had to be able to claim to have “a long-shared history and a cultural tradition of its own, often associated with a religion”. Sikhs were therefore a group defined by reference to ‘ethnic origins’, even though they were not ‘racially’ distinguishable from other people living in the Punjab. On the basis of this precedent, clearly defined “mono-ethnic religious groups” came to be covered by race laws.

Following that judgement came the 1986 Public Order Act. Section 17 defines racial hatred as hatred against a group of persons in Great Britain defined by reference to colour, race, nationality (including citizenship) or ethnic or national origin. Sections 18 and 19 make it an offence to use threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour or display any threatening, abusive or insulting written material or publish or distribute such material with the intention of stirring up racial hatred. It is also an offence if racial hatred is likely to be stirred up thereby, even if that was not the intention. Section 23 provides that it is an offence for a person to be in

possession of racially inflammatory material, whether written or recorded, if they intend publication to stir up racial hatred, or if racial hatred is likely to result. Basically, the 2006 legislation creates a new offence by inserting the words “or religious” into the 1986 Public Order Act as an amendment. So the new incitement to religious hatred offence mirrors the provisions described above, at least when it comes to England and Wales (Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own separate legislation).

To state the obvious, daubing moronic slogans on the walls of mosques, arson and incitement were already criminal offences. Indeed since 2001 there have been laws on the statute books which specifically created religiously aggravated offences. The government introduced its own amendment to the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act in order to take account of religious or anti-religious motivation. The 2001 law operated in tandem with a prosecution for another offence. So an attack on a religious person or religious property would firstly fall foul of laws on assault or criminal damage. Just as importantly, incitement to carry out such an attack was also an offence. But then there comes motivation.

A hypothetical example. Some puffed up Fuhrer splutteringly vilifies Islam as being irretrievably hostile to the English way of life at some back-of-the-pub private membership meeting. More to the point, in the course of his bombastic rant he ‘cleverly’ employs various coded encouragements and suggestions. Afterwards his Burton-suited goons travel to the other side of town. There, outside the local mosque, they insult, punch, kick and spit at those attending Friday prayers. That, if the police bothered to act, would surely not only count as incitement. There would in terms of the 2001 law be the additional element of religious hatred; a legal add-on which carries its own penalty when it comes to final sentencing.

The Crown Prosecution Service pressed home just 44 cases of religiously aggravated crimes in the year April 2003-March 2004. Eg, Mark Norwood, a British National Party activist in Shropshire, was convicted for displaying a poster with the words, ‘Islam out of Britain’, alongside a photograph of the burning World Trade Center. He was fined £300. So the burqa-wearing suicide bomber example of what the religious hatred laws were to tackle was more than covered by existing law. The Norwood case amply illustrates that fact. And perhaps the day will soon come when those who carry

humorous posters such as 'Eat the rich', too, could be prosecuted for causing 'alarm and distress' to rich people.

There was a reported 650% increase in 'faith hate crimes' in London in the immediate aftermath of the July 7 2005 bombings - mainly verbal abuse and minor assaults. There were 269 such crimes in the three weeks after the outrage. Here we had backward and profoundly disorientated lumpen elements taking their cue from the infinitely more bloody and destructive 'war on terror' launched by the US-UK alliance. But the reason why these incidents were officially reported as 'faith hate crimes' is simple. They are, and were, crimes. 'Aggravated offences' which carry harsher penalties because of the religious hostility involved.

Following the July 7 2005 London bombs a scaremongering government claimed that its religious hatred law was needed in order to prosecute firebrand Islamist preachers who supposedly support terrorism. A piece of hypocrisy - in reality terrorism is *any* form of military action primarily directed against civilians and has been used by all manner of armed forces. Eg, the Royal Air Force, when in February 1945 it destroyed Dresden in a murderous firestorm which killed 35,000 people; or the US atomic bombs exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, in which some 200,000 are thought to have died. So Muslim clerics are being targeted as well as courted. The government announced, meanwhile, a whole raft of oppressive laws and measures designed to gag, detain or deport ... and surely not only such men.

Not surprisingly, many religious believers felt compelled to take a stand against the legislation. Besides a whole range of Christian evangelists and Muslim revivalists there were moderate Muslims too. Anas Altikriti readily admitted that there were many contrary views on the subject within the Muslim Association of Britain. Speaking personally, however, he said: "I don't think it will do much good."¹⁸ Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, leader of the Muslim parliament, once an enthusiastic supporter of Respect, agreed: "I believe that respect for Muslims will not be achieved through laws." "The way forward is through more integration and closer cooperation." According to Siddiqui:

It was Muslim civilisation that created the basis for free speech, for free interaction, and this inspired European civilisation. But the Muslim

world declined because it abandoned this philosophy. It is so sad that today we should be perceived as standing against free speech rather than embracing it. It is indicative of the decline in Muslim scholarship.¹⁹

Whatever one may think of his grasp of history, Siddiqui gives the lie to the claim that the defence of free expression is secondary, compared to the need to be *perceived* as combating Islamophobia. In fact, such a stance is deeply insulting - Muslims were apparently incapable of seeing through Blair's ploy to win back their votes and all the left can do is try to pull the same trick through a Respect which, under SWP influence, appeared to believe that Muslims cannot be won to uphold gay rights, a woman's right to choose whether or not to have an abortion or even the secular equality of believer and non-believer. The SWP view would also seem to be that Muslims cannot be won to champion the freedom of all as the best way to protect their own freedom.

The Australian state of Victoria has its own religious hatred laws. A warning. They have not brought about peace and harmony; instead one religious group is set against another. Eg, Muslims successfully dragged two Christian pastors to the courts in 2004; they were found guilty of vilifying Islam. Seemingly all they were really guilty of was aggressively questioning Islam from a Christian fundamentalist point of view. Hence they expressed their opinion that Islam was incompatible with what they understand by 'western' democracy. Such claims should invite a corrective debate and discussion. Not fines or jail sentences. Understandably, both Christians and Muslims in Australia - who favoured the religious hatred law when first introduced - are to be found urging that it be scrapped. Worries about hostile court cases are certainly what has caused the Islamic Human Rights Commission in Britain to come out in opposition to the religious hate law. It cautions that, rather than enjoying "additional protection from the law", religious minorities will find themselves the "targets of prosecutions" under the legislation.²⁰

Quite frankly, the religious hatred legislation does nothing but add to the already overabundant legal arsenal available to the state (there are provisions for a maximum seven-year sentence - about the same as for the average rapist). It will certainly do nothing to eliminate the social evils that

it is purportedly directed against. That, and the enormous scope of the legislation, is what prompted Liberal Democrat MP Evan Harris (Oxford West) to propose a narrowing amendment allowing for attacks on religious belief to be outlawed when they are clearly a “proxy” for racial incitement. According to the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty that “sort of amendment makes sense”.²¹

Yet the law already recognised that religion can be used as a “proxy” for race. Eg, the case of David Wilson, a BNP activist, who in July 2001 put out hundreds of anti-Muslim leaflets in Pollokshields, an area of Glasgow with Scotland’s highest concentration of Muslims. Sheriff Linda Ruxton said that the leaflet clearly targeted the Pakistani community, even though the leaflet did not explicitly say so. In August 2002 she found him guilty of distributing “threatening, insulting and abusive” literature and stirring up racial hatred, contrary to the Public Order Act. He was sentenced to four months in jail.

Judges are not on our side

In general Marxists oppose such restrictions on, and violations of, free expression. Of course, they should resolutely stand against any and every manifestation of racism. The moot question is how. The Marxist programme is designed to achieve international working class unity - crucially through highlighting each and every democratic deficit or shortcoming. Should the bourgeois state and its legal system be trusted to deliver that goal? Hardly. On the contrary, surely it is a better bet to look to ever widening freedom, extreme democracy and working class self-activity. It is not insignificant then, that the first person to be convicted under the 1965 Race Relations Act was not an Enoch Powell or a Colin Jordan, or a John Tyndale. It was black power activist Michael X.

There are further lessons provided here by the six counties of Northern Ireland. Laws against inciting religious hatred have existed in the province since 1970. Have they reduced or eliminated religious sectarianism? Mike Macnair pithily comments: “to ask the question is to answer it”.²² Similarly, despite the race laws, it has seriously been suggested by Trevor

Phillips that Britain is in danger of “sleepwalking” into a “New Orleans-style segregation”. According to Phillips, the country is “becoming more exclusive” and “colour-coded”.²³ In short, those who pleadingly look to the capitalist-bureaucratic state to deliver social harmony have been cruelly shown to be wrong.

That is why George Galloway was such a disappointment. And, of course, he was fulsomely backed by the SWP. This was first made explicit at Respect’s national council meeting on September 10 2005. John Rees magisterially announced, against all the evidence, that the religious hatred law represented a gain for Muslims.²⁴ A stance dictated by Rees’s self-imposed popular-frontist template, which time and again led him to appease the most conservative forces in Respect. Therefore this was no “exploratory discussion” by national council members - as maintained by a shell-shocked Ken Loach (former member of the Workers Revolutionary Party and acclaimed film-maker). Rather what we had was yet further proof - if further proof were really needed - that, when it comes to principles, the SWP was in free fall collapse.

Tragically, awfully, revealingly - at least when it came to a formal defence of established democratic rights - the arguments of Tories and Liberal Democrats put the SWP, and by default Respect, to shame. Eg, David Davis warned that while an individual is “investigated”, they might well have their “character called into question” ... “Inevitably”, he went on to say, “we will end up with a situation where serious debate and freedom of speech are limited.” The result might well be a “tit-for-tat situation which encourages suspicion and mistrust between religions, rather than the harmony that we seek”.²⁵

Funny though it may seem, one of the best guides to the 2006 religious hatred legislation can be found on the website of the Christian Institute. To begin with, here we find the truth that, far from closing “an unacceptable loophole”, what is being created is in fact an entirely a new offence - one which surely takes English law into the realm of George Orwell’s *1984* and thought crimes. As we have shown, race laws have long been premised on what passes for objective notions of so-called ethnicity. The religious hate law deals with *beliefs*: ie, subjectivity. Previously legislation on ‘race’ - actually a political, not a biological concept - touched upon religion when

the two overlapped. It applied where “distinctions between race and religion” are deemed so minor “as makes no practical difference”.²⁶

To further extend race laws, so as to incorporate religious belief, making religion and race virtually synonymous, is to take us even deeper into the legal minefield. Usually people have no practical choice about their ‘race’ or ‘ethnic’ group. They are born into them and remain within them because of culture and inheritance. Under general circumstances one cannot realistically hope to ‘convert’ someone from one ‘race’ to another. Religion is something else. It is a belief, a form of consciousness, an ideology ... and people are constantly rejecting one religion for another or (thankfully) rejecting religion altogether for non-religion.

The Labour government claimed that the term ‘hatred’ - left undefined - goes beyond “ridicule, prejudice, dislike, contempt, anger or offence”.²⁷ Who will be responsible for making the semantic distinction? Judges and the courts. The legislation refers to behaviour, words or material which is “threatening, abusive or insulting”. Section 5 of the 1936 Public Order Act contains these very words, of course. Trade union and political activists know all about the use to which this has been put by the police. There have been countless arrests on demonstrations and picket lines. Others who have been caught under the same extremely broad net include a man masturbating in a public toilet when a police officer was present (*Parkin v Norman* 1982), gay men “cuddling” at a bus stop (*Masterson v Holden* 1986) and an evangelical preacher who displayed a placard in the centre of Bournemouth with the words ‘Stop immorality’, ‘Stop homosexuality’, ‘Stop lesbianism’.²⁸

The government repeatedly insisted that the new law was not designed to put a stop to “legitimate discussion, criticism, or expressions of antipathy or dislike of particular religions or their adherents”.²⁹ But once again it will be the courts who get to decide what is ‘legitimate’. Why should it be up to the attorney general and judges to adjudicate on religion? History shows that, once the state takes upon itself such powers, the most negative and unpleasant consequences tend to follow. So, despite the soothing - and hopelessly muddled - promises issued by the home office, it was always crystal-clear that under the guise of combating hatred the Blair government

was from the start engaged in a cynical manoeuvre. A manoeuvre designed to simultaneously win back Muslim votes ... and to cut away the substantial gains made in terms of freedom of expression by the working class and progressive movement since the middle of the 19th century. People engaged in criticising religion will certainly have to constantly watch over their shoulders and might sometimes be tempted to hold back out of fear of police investigation, Crown Prosecution Service prosecution or even provoking hostile mobs to take to the streets demanding the instigation of legal action.

The religious hatred legislation can only but foster oversensitivity in what is - thanks to the culture of offence - already an oversensitive climate. Far from encouraging toleration, mutual respect and overcoming irrationality and superstition, the opposite will surely happen. Neil Addison, barrister and author of *Harassment law and practice*,³⁰ says that the danger with such laws is that they “stimulate feelings of divisiveness”, create “thought crimes” and lead to “show trials, where judges, or juries, have to make decisions in areas where historians and philosophers have been unable to agree for centuries”.³¹ Bringing the courts into play will spur on those who have a material interest in being offended. Priests, rabbis, vicars and imams rely on holding critical thought at bay in order to keep their pampered living, their social standing and their flocks docile and intact. Instead of being forced to develop thick skins, the fanatics amongst them will have every reason to mobilise gullible protestors. So there will *probably* be more, not less, riotous outbursts of the type that forced the closure of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatt’s play *Behzti* by Birmingham rep in December 2004. That will *undoubtedly* breed a festering resentment amongst the rest of the population.

Scientific, rational and artistic endeavour can only but suffer. A climate of self-censorship is bound to grow. American lawyers described such restrictions on free speech as having a ‘chilling’ effect. Lawyers have a duty to advise their clients - broadcasters, editors, theatre owners, etc - about legal *risks*. The vaguer the law, “the larger the inevitable penumbra”.³² They will therefore increasingly advise that there *might* be a prosecution. Under these circumstances broadcasters, publishers, etc, are less likely to give the go-ahead to controversial films, articles, plays and books. Free

speech will therefore be ‘chilled’. Would Monty Python’s *The life of Brian* have been made under the new laws? Would it have been shown? Would Salman Rushdie have had his *The Satanic verses* published in Britain? What of the National Secular Society? Will it be allowed to freely operate unhindered and unmolested? What about the Marxist analysis of religion? Would a university or commercial publishing house be willing to include a book such as this in their catalogue?

The legislation has the real potential to criminalise devout believers too. Some religious groups feel obliged by god’s holy command to denounce their opponents using fire and brimstone language. The religious hate law would leave them wide open to prosecution. True, the crown prosecution service and the attorney general would have to give the go-ahead. Section 27 of the 1986 act requires that. In *Socialist Worker* Inayat Bunglawala - government adviser and media secretary for the Muslim Council of Britain - not only welcomed the legislation. He naively claimed that the attorney general and a “public interest test” would provide a sure-fire safeguard.³³ In reality, though, everything depends on *political* interest and the balance of class forces. If the law says that the crown has a duty to protect religious believers from hatred, that carries with it the danger of politically motivated police harassment, spying and raids, vengeful arrests and court cases designed to disrupt and cow enemies of the government - *first and foremost the left*.

The home office chivalrously promised that prosecutions would be few and far between. But, to put it mildly, the workers’ movement has no reason to trust either government ministers or the state bureaucracy. Here a single example will suffice to show why: Iraq. The invasion, occupation and non-existent weapons of mass destruction prove beyond a shadow of doubt that the business of government in the UK is the business of falsification and systematic misinformation. With every justification Tony Blair was dubbed Tony *Bliar*.

Nor should we trust unelected judges to decide what is hateful and what is not. As mentioned already, the legislation includes neither a definition of “hatred” nor for that matter what constitutes a “religious belief or lack of religious belief”. The latter being designed to appease atheists, humanists and agnostics - the law “will also protect people targeted because of their

lack of religious beliefs or because they do not share the religious beliefs of the perpetrator”.³⁴ Do Jediists, Wiccaists and Satanists fit into the category of religious believers? Will they be protected from hatred? According to the government, when circumstances are unclear, “the courts will decide whether a particular group of people is protected, in the wider context of the criminal behaviour being considered”. The courts will rule whether or not a particular belief-system “qualified as a religion for the purposes of the new offence”.³⁵

For this reason, if no other, everyone from atheists and animists to Zen Buddhists and Zoroastrians should demand a repeal of the religious hatred legislation.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Secularism

The term “secularism” was first “adopted” in 1851 by George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906), an Owenite cooperative socialist.¹ Secularism for him was “a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite, or inadequate, unreliable and unbelievable”.² Holyoake urged the abolition of all religious oaths, as required by law, and the disestablishment of the Church of England. His secularism combined a materialist approach, when it came to studying nature, with an ethical striving for the earthly perfection of humanity - physically, morally and intellectually. Once he began publishing *The Reasoner*, local secular societies were established throughout Britain. They tended to see religion as the root of all evil. And, though an agnostic, and increasingly craving respectability in later life, Holyoake has the enduring honour of being the last person in England to be officially prosecuted for atheism.³ He got six months.

Obviously, secularism, albeit without the name, has a history that long predates 1851. Of course, we need to be careful about projecting modern concepts onto the distant past. That said, I think we can safely trace secularism all the way back to ancient Greek philosophers such as Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, Theodorus, Epicurus and Democritus in the first millennium BCE. These intellectuals mocked the old gods and their all-too-human attributes and began to explain nature in a materialistic fashion: that is, without reference to mysticism or spirits. Epicurus is supposed to have taught that the gods, if they existed, made no impact on human affairs. Similar thinkers arose in the Middle East, India and China. Indeed, Confucianism and Theravada Buddhism as religions are almost secular in the sense that they show little or no concern for supernatural beings. They are more social *practices* than *belief* systems -

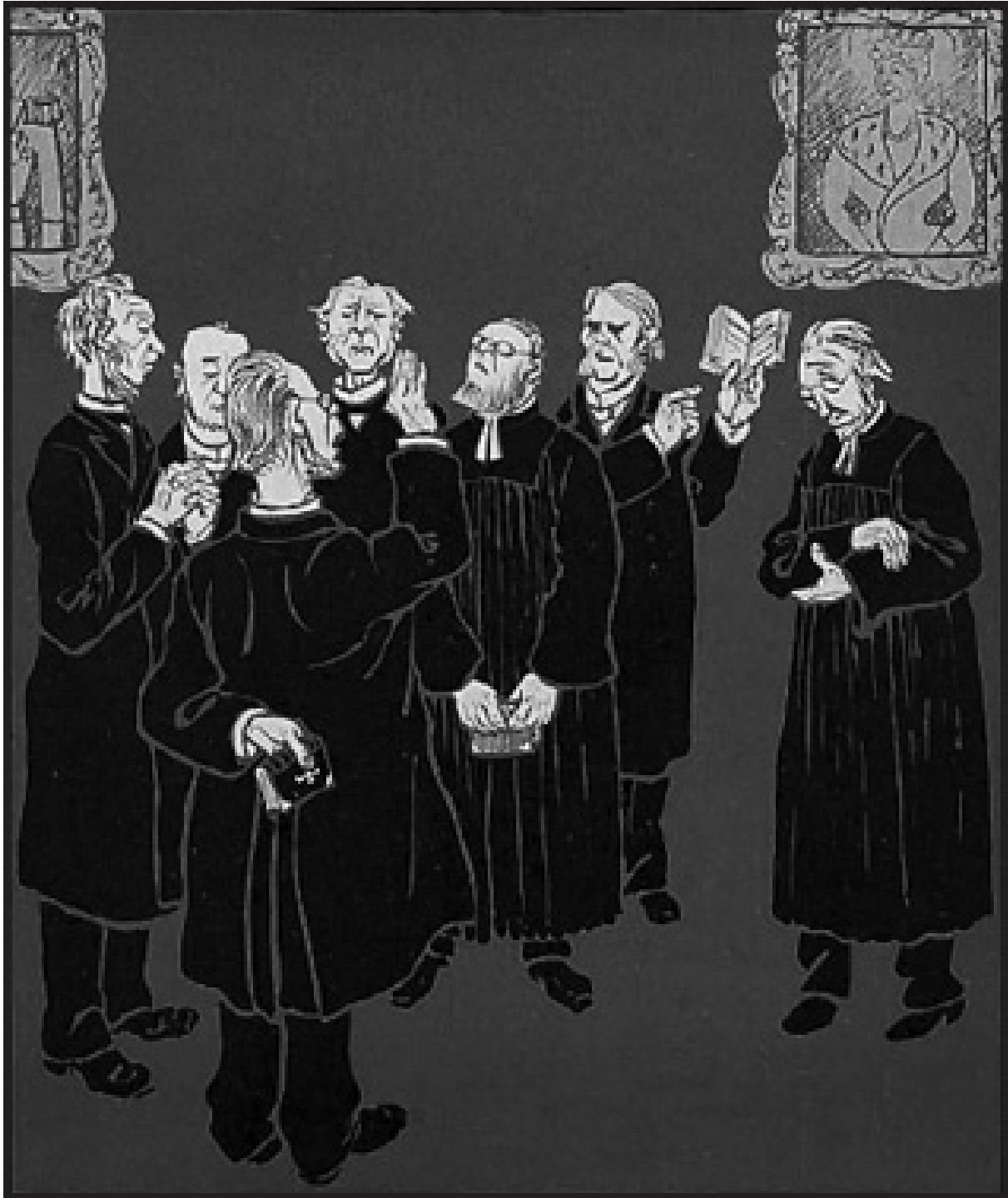
devotees strive to do the right thing (either by loyally serving their superiors or achieving individual salvation).

Modern secularism develops out of the Enlightenment, and therefore, ironically, in the main out of western Christianity. Long-distance maritime navigation, the discovery of the Americas, machine production, new chemical and metallurgical techniques, the advance of mercantile, agrarian and industrial capitalism necessitates the rebirth and following that, the continuous expansion of scientific knowledge. Nature, not the *Bible*, not even the works of Aristotle, thereby becomes the primary source of practical truth. An ever growing intellectual space encouraged by, and in turn feeding into, social criticism. A rising arc which can be traced under names such as Hugo Grotius, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith and Georg Hegel. Marxism represents both the pinnacle and negation of bourgeois thought.

State and secularism

Today secularism carries a variety of meanings. In the realm of philosophy it is a rejection of religious ways of seeing the universe - there is no need for god or the supernatural. Secularism is also sometimes associated with the diminishing prestige and power of organised religion and the absence of theological categories in mainstream political discourse. Then there is the growth of scientific knowledge and the so-called consumer society. As a result, western European countries are sometimes described as secular. But when it comes to the state - and that is what particularly concerns us here - things are pretty straightforward. Secularism denotes the separation of religion from the state and abolishing discrimination between religions. People should be free not to believe in god and free to believe and practise the codes of their creed.

Naturally, secularism is flatly rejected by the traditionalists who stand guard over Catholic orthodoxy. Doctrine and history dictate that the Vatican cannot concede that religion can simply be a private affair. Their god is “author and ruler” not only of individuals, but also of society.



‘Condemning liberal theology’ (*Simplicissimus* 1911). Artist: Thomas Theodore Heine.

Nevertheless, though the Catholic church might in its madder theological moments still hanker after state formations along the lines of Eamon de Valera’s Ireland, the fact of the matter is that there has been a long history

of retreat and compromise. When forced, the Catholic church is ready to grant that “a secular education in the public schools may be the only possible one”.⁴

Equally to the point, a wide array of religious people say they would be perfectly happy with a secular constitution - it does, after all, promise an end to discrimination by one religion against another. Hence, in the name of mutual toleration, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45), a brave anti-Nazi Lutheran pastor and theologian, founded what has been called secular Christianity. Inevitably condemned as an oxmoron by his critics. Bonhoeffer rejected what he called “cheap grace”, which is “sold in the market” and sees “the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner”.⁵ In fact, Bonhoeffer took his stand on the cardinal importance of this world, not the next. Other secular Christians can be cited. Eg, Paul Tillich, Rudolph Bultmann, Joseph Fletcher and John Robinson. There is also the noted Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor. Despite being a committed Catholic, he favours the separation of church and state because, while secularism allows the growth of what he calls “unreflective unbelief”, it also allows religion as a conscious, albeit hard, choice.⁶

Most countries are nowadays explicitly secular according to the terms of their constitutions.⁷ However, there are shortcomings and rank hypocrisy involved with many of these claims. Three examples will suffice.⁸

- Germany: special taxes are collected by the federal government on behalf of the Lutheran and Catholic churches - other religious groups have to go to the effort and expense of collecting contributions from their membership without the state's helping hand. Religious lessons are part of the school curriculum, but once again only for the two preferred denominations. In defence of this arrangement Angela Merkel described the Judaeo-Christian heritage as the “lead culture” (*Leitkultur*) in Germany. Calls for implementing a genuinely secular approach have been “sharply criticised” by both Lutheran and Catholic clerics.⁹
- India: rightwing Hindu parties and groups - not least the Bharatiya Janata Party - lambaste secularism and the supposed special

advantages granted to the large Muslim and Christian minorities by the 1947 constitution. Their aim is to establish a Hindutva. Supposedly a cultural solidarity embracing all Indians; in reality a dangerous “xenological nationalism”.¹⁰ Of course, non-Hindus have no privileges. Within limits each major religious ‘community’ regulates ‘personal law’. A practice inherited directly from the divide-and-rule British Raj. This multiculturalism freezes horizontal communal divisions and ensures in particular the continued oppression of women (with the partial exception of the Sikhs). And the fact of the matter is that it is Hindus who enjoy an elevated position in India. Named Hindu charities are given tax advantages, adoption laws favour Hindus and state schools often teach Hindu songs as part of morning prayers.

- USA: the writers of the US constitution firmly rejected any reference to god. Hence the US state officially derives its authority not from god, but the people. Then there is the first amendment (1791). It says, in part, that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” In the same amendment, freedom of speech, the press and peaceable assembly are guaranteed. There was, as might be expected, opposition; religious fanatics prophesised divine retribution. Eg, in 1802 the “atheist and infidel”, Thomas Jefferson, received a letter from the Danbury Baptist Association asking him why he would not proclaim national days of fasting and thanksgiving like his predecessors, George Washington and John Adams.¹¹ In his well considered reply, Jefferson spoke of his determination to create “a wall of separation between church and state”. However, the supreme court has over the years allowed violations. Church and other ecclesiastical property is exempt from taxation; the US currency bears the national motto, “In god we trust”; the pledge of allegiance includes the phrase, “one nation, under god”; US armed forces, congress and many state legislatures employ chaplains; and courts often have a crier or clerk who opens proceedings with the words, “God save the United States and this honourable court”. And, while it has rightly been said that the first six US presidents rarely invoked the blessing of the almighty, that was

certainly not the case with Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George W Bush.

Anglicanism, blasphemy and constitution

What of the United Kingdom? Though probably now superseded by religious hatred legislation on the one hand and on the other the European convention on human rights, blasphemy laws remain in force. According to William Blackstone - the 18th century Tory legal commentator - blasphemy is denying god's "being or providence; or by contumacious reproaches of our saviour Christ. Whither also may be referred all profane scoffing at the holy scripture, or exposing it to contempt and ridicule."¹² Blasphemy laws forbid the publication of matter which "vilifies or is contemptuous of", or which denies the truth of, the "Christian religion or the *Bible* or the *Book of common prayer*".

Most religions seem to have undergone a humour bypass operation. The last public prosecution under these laws was in 1922, when John William Gott was sentenced to nine months hard labour for comparing Jesus to a circus clown. However, in 1976, *Gay News* editor Denis Lamon was privately prosecuted for blasphemy by Mary Whitehouse - and found guilty. He published James Kirkup's poem, 'The love that dares to speak its name', which portrayed Jesus having sex with Pontius Pilate and the 12 disciples.

With or without these arcane laws, the constitutionally established religion of the English part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland remains in many ways a nationalised form of Catholicism. The Church of England traces itself back less to the 1534 Act of Supremacy and more to the 6th century and St Augustine of Canterbury (and therefore the apostolic succession). Henry VIII's schism and the creation of the *Ecclesia Anglicana* saw virtually no change in administrative structures, theology, liturgy or ecclesiastical law. True, during the reign of Edward VI there was an influx of continental reforms and innovations inspired by Martin Bucer, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. But, apart from the brief return to Catholicism with Mary and the domination of puritanism under the Commonwealth, Anglicanism was equated with the nation.

The Church of England is Erastian. It operates under the direction of the monarchical state and performs loyal, grovelling service. A cocksure Edmund Burke (1729-97), celebrated this salient fact: "The body of all true religion consists, to be sure, in obedience to the will of the sovereign of the world, in a confidence in his declarations, and in imitation of his perfections."¹³ In the late 20th century, JCD Clark lamented the loss of certainty. What the jaundiced Tory historian called the "atheist, multi-racial, high-divorce, high-crime society" was nostalgically contrasted with the Anglican ascendancy that saw the aristocratic-gentry oligarchy safely through the convulsions that punctuated the period from the 1660 Stuart restoration to the Reform Act of 1832 (the measure, which gave the middle classes the vote, was castigated as unChristian by the Church of England hierarchy).¹⁴ Anglicanism took a middling theological position between the "extremes" of Rome and Geneva, but, unlike them, never taught that there is a right of people to rebel against unjust government.¹⁵ The Church of England saw itself as the guarantor of the state its world view was resolutely elitist and unfailingly conservative. Rebellion was sinful and ran counter to the natural order and god's divine will. The fabulous wealth of the landed elite went unquestioned. Ditto the poverty of the mass of the population. Starvation was certainly considered a deserving fate for the indolent, the feckless, the profligate.

British state identity and religion has historically intertwined. It should never be forgotten that official Britain was founded as a nation-state which was aggressively Christian and aggressively protestant. Catholic France constituted its defining other. Even after the treaty of Westphalia (1648) European politics were still commonly fought out using ludicrous justifications culled from the *Bible*. There was a "dark alliance" between religion and war (Daniel Defoe 1701). Religion focused, legitimised and drove on state violence. True, after 1688, the so-called Glorious Revolution, and then the 1832 extension of the franchise, the Church of England's self-conception contracted somewhat. Other denominations had to be recognised - no matter how reluctantly. Yet it was only in the 1960s that the Church of England began seeing itself as a voluntary society of believers and not as the nation at prayer.

Nowadays the Church of England talks about the plural society. Despite that, it remains the *established* church. True, alongside the Church of England countless coexisting and semi-incorporated Christian factions are benignly tolerated - Roman Catholicism, Baptism, Methodism, etc. All have been digested into the status quo. And, needless to say, the political class has a beady eye on the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh mosques, temples and gurdwaras.

Nevertheless, state, established church and monarchy together form a single organism. Church and monarchy constitute what Walter Bagehot called the “dignified parts”, as opposed to the “efficient parts”, of the constitution.¹⁶ Royal weddings and state funerals are conducted according to high church ritual. And, of course, the monarch, the head of state, is also head of the established church. There is a quid pro quo. The men and women of the armed forces are blessed by the Church of England; and its archbishops and bishops, the “lords spiritual”, sit by “ancient usage and statute” in parliament.¹⁷ As for the ‘impartial’ BBC, it broadcasts Christian services and homilies daily, and in state schools our children are taught the miracle stories of the *New Testament* as verity, or at the very least that Jesus was some sort of well-meaning founder of an admirable new religion. And, though Henry Tudor helped himself to the riches of the monasteries, it can hardly be said that today the Church of England shares the lot of the poor. While repeatedly complaining about severe financial shortfalls, it is hugely wealthy. The Church of England holds a portfolio of stocks and shares, real estate and other such assets which in 2007 had “grown to £5.67 billion”, according to a church commissioners report.¹⁸

Not surprisingly some explain the nose dive in Church of England attendance with reference to its thoroughly compromising over accumulation of earthly possessions and cosy partnership with the state. Former cleric Michael Hampson imploringly says: “For the sake of the future church it is time to disestablish and dismantle what remains of the ancient Church of England.”¹⁹

Socialists against secularism

In terms of the constitution, any idea that Britain is a secular country has been shown to be manifestly false. Nor has religion been removed from political discourse. Top politicians line up to parade their pro-religious credentials. A dull consensus which includes George Galloway. Whenever out trawling for votes, he nauseatingly pronounces upon his “deeply held” Catholic principles, which, of course, means he has to oppose abortion and euthanasia. And, when asked about Muslim schools, he repeatedly confirms his support for them ... naturally on the basis of equality. That means abandoning, of course, the traditional socialist demand for the separation of religion from schools. Nor was he challenged by the SWP (when it was affiliated to Respect). Being committed to and trapped within a popular-frontist logic, John Rees was determined to give Galloway *uncritical* support.

At Respect’s October 30-31 2004 conference SWP members were dragooned to vote down one basic principle after another. Particular venom was directed against those who called for Respect to constitute itself a “secular” organisation, “open to those of all faiths and none”, and to strive for a society “in which people of all faiths and none are equal.” Clear, and one would surely have thought, uncontentious. But no. Chris Bambery - then *Socialist Worker* editor - was the chosen spokesperson to put his organisation’s case.

He would be “concerned at Respect calling itself secular”. After all, secularism has been used in France to justify the Islamophobic ban on the hijab in state schools. Therefore one presumes secularism is now a bad thing and should be condemned. Exaggeration? Not at all. During his time in the labour movement in the west of Scotland, Bambery claimed he had never known “a resolution being put, saying we are secular”.



John Rees: the most conservative forces set his agenda.

Hard to believe, especially given the loyalist bigotry that still blights daily life in Glasgow. Anyhow, what he was saying is that socialists would be right to vote against any motion which suggested or demanded that those identifying with the Catholic church and those identifying with the Church of Scotland ought to be treated as equals under a secular constitution. He even depicted secularism as somehow akin to favouring discrimination against religious minorities. Further muddying the waters, he rhetorically asked: “Do we have a problem here with people with extreme religious views?” “No”, he boomed. And to rouse his troops into a frenzy he ended with a final flourish. The “real fundamentalists” are Bush and Blair, who are deliberately stoking up Islamophobia.²⁰ Those calling for secularism, he implied, were doing the same thing. He urged and got his vote to kill the motion.

Bambery put things too crudely - at least, it would seem, for some. Despite using deliberately Aeseopian language, Alex Callinicos tried to do something of a rescue job in his regular *Socialist Worker* column. Bambery had foolishly thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Therefore Callinicos slyly defined Respect as “an alliance against neoliberalism, racism and war that unites secular socialists and Muslim activists”.²¹ Presumably that formulation was designed to do a twofold job. Firstly, crediting SWPers with being “secular socialists”. Secondly, excusing so-called “secular socialists” voting down secularism. To create his own diversion, Callinicos too launched himself against the left in France, for defending “a secular definition of the state that refuses to acknowledge that millions of the victims of French imperialism now live in France, and are deeply and legitimately attached to their Muslim faith”. Unlike a bumbling Bambery, however, a cynical Callinicos does at least admit that there are disputed definitions of secularism.

Alex Cowper of the Fourth International’s section in Britain used similar arguments. Secularism should not be rejected by socialists. However, and here is the spoiler, the SWP “correctly opposed” committing Respect to secularism because it is a “broad-based organisation”.²² This abject middle-of-the-road approach fails to grasp the simple fact that secularism is not something for narrow-based organisations alone. Secularism is the answer for religious people and society at large - surely a very broad-based organisation. Effectively, Cowper counterposes secularism and religion and seems to view secularism as being exclusively for the private consumption of his cothinkers - and therefore socially irrelevant.

Nor is the Scottish Socialist Party much different. Its 2004 conference voted down an unexceptional motion demanding the abolition of all faith schools. Alan McCombes - SSP press spokesperson and policy coordinator - argued that such a commitment would unleash a reactionary storm. He might be right. Scotland has a deep religious fault line. The Catholic church, in particular, would almost certainly urge its flock to join a fanatical crusade against any move towards secular schools, as it has done over abortion. That is why any campaign for a secular education system would have to be conducted with the greatest care and sensitivity. In this case, though, any kind of conflict has to be avoided as far as the SSP is

concerned. So McCombes offered an alternative strategy. The soft course of a multiculturalist cop-out. Instead of secularism he recommended religious equality - not equality between religious and non-religious people. That means refusing to challenge the existence of faith schools and in effect condoning the continued indoctrination and segregation of children, and religiously coloured lessons and festivals. McCombes's backsliding won the day with the help of the Socialist Worker platform (which later defected to Tommy Sheridan's stillborn Solidarity lash-up). Particular concern was expressed by SW platform speakers for the sensibilities of their imagined 'Muslim community'.

The SWP's new-found hostility to secularism was also manifested over the question of Palestine. Chris Bambery may have claimed to have never come across a resolution on secularism. The poor man obviously forgets the countless resolutions on Palestine moved by ... the SWP. It used to routinely demand the immediate abolition of the Israeli-Jewish state and its replacement by a "democratic, secular Palestine". 'Used to' is the operative term, because at the October 2004 Respect conference the SWP fielded its majority to defeat that very position. Moira Nolan proposed an amendment deleting an offending paragraph which contained the phrase, "unitary, democratic and secular state". "Personally I agree with a unitary-state," claimed Nolan. "But it's about entering into dialogue with people" who "might not join Respect if they disagree" with a one-state solution. "We should be one step ahead of them, not 15."

On the face of it, her argument seemed to be pretty much in line with what the SWP had been saying on issues like socialism, republicanism and open borders: 'ordinary people' were not yet ready to adopt our position, so water down or abandon awkward 'shibboleths' in the bid to win votes. A deeply opportunist approach. But what the SWP really feared was not a single-state solution in Israel-Palestine. It was secularism. In Respect it was "Muslim activists" who set the programmatic limits ... and what they envisage is a single *Muslim* state solution - and that under the rule of an Islamic theocracy. The SWP's problem with secularism (along with the unrestricted right of a woman to choose to have an abortion) was that it was seen as endangering the continued presence of Galloway and "Muslim activists". Having correctly identified Muslims as a particularly politicised

section of the population, because of the ‘war on terror’, the SWP concluded that Respect must steer well clear of all mention of secularism.

Such is the predictable outcome of popular frontism.* It is one thing to march with the Muslim Association of Britain against the war and occupation of Iraq. It is quite another to establish a political party specifically designed to incorporate, or, that failing, be acceptable to Salma Yaqoob, Yvonne Ridley, Anas Altikriti and George Galloway. A political party objectively serves one or another social class or stratum, implies a shared world view and is by definition unity around a common governmental project. It is about the future as much as the immediate tasks of the present. And here’s the rub. In the words of the *Communist manifesto*, we seek to organise workers “into a class” and “consequently into a political party” which is politically independent of other classes and strata.²³ Or, in the words of Lenin, communists want to organise workers into a “separate workers’ party” and not “amalgamate” it with other classes and their political trends.²⁴ And, needless to say, as I have comprehensively shown in chapter 14, MAB hardly represents the interests of the working class.

* A popular front typically refers to an electoral formation in which the working class component, usually the majority, limits itself to achieving a ‘just’ or ‘peaceful’ capitalism, a progressive non-socialism. Towards that end, advanced demands are substituted by the lowest common denominator and ‘all things to all people’ platitudes. Often the liberal bourgeoisie or the trade union bureaucracy set the programmatic limits. Those who dare criticise this approach from the standpoint of Marxism constitute an accusing reminder of principles once held dear and life before the fall. Left critics are therefore organisationally silenced, surgically removed or, failing that, brutally crushed - the logic of the popular front is counterrevolutionary. Well known governmental examples being Kerensky’s in 1917 Russia, Spain’s in the 1930s, Léon Blum’s in 1930s France, Salvador Allende’s in Chile in the 1970s and Luiz Inácio Lula’s in 2000s Brazil. The results have not been good. On the contrary, workers have paid the price, often in blood. Of course, with the SWP we were not dealing with a popular front which involves mass parties of the working class. Respect was therefore one of those *unpopular* fronts of the type sponsored by the ‘official’ CPGB in the 1930s - it consisted of the CPGB, plus an ill-assorted collection of pacifists, left reformists, anti-fascists and Christians who had little in common apart from opposition to the Tory-dominated national government’s foreign policy.

Incidentally, John Rees brilliantly shot himself in the foot over the 1930s popular fronts presided over by Stalin and the little Stalins in every country. In 2003 he stated, rightly, that the “fault” with the popular front, “was that it subordinated the radical forces to the political priorities of the most conservative forces in the alliance”.²⁵ Exactly.

Secularism and equal rights

Be it Britain, Germany, USA, India, Israel, Iran or Saudi Arabia, any principled democrat must surely favour the complete separation of religion from the state. There should neither be the domination of religion by the state nor the domination of the state by religion. Hence, the privileged position for one particular cult - whatever it may be - in schools, state institutions and the legal system must be ended.

Of course, to simply promote the equality of all religions is an elementary mistake. There should be the equality of believers and non-believers. The mere equality of religions institutionalises - acclaims - difference and therefore disunity. In the last analysis, that serves the interests of capitalism, which in its declining phase relies on dividing the working class. That is why multiculturalism should be opposed. Yes, each 'culture' is considered separate but equal. But the intention is that each separate 'culture' will be an obsequious petitioner before the state with material interests to emphasise and exacerbate difference. Logically that leads to Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and even black schools.

What is objectionable is using the education system as a means to promulgate and normalise religious superstitions and customs amongst children. Parents, of course, ought to be able to take their children to religious ceremonies and celebrations. The same goes for Sunday schools and their various Friday and Saturday equivalents. Such occasions are a private concern and the state is obliged not to interfere. But there should be no prayers, no hymns, no sermons, no nativity plays, no equal celebrations of Easter, Diwali or Ramadan. In other words, keep the promotion of religion out of schools. Religion, like physics and geography, should be studied in schools as an academic subject. World history has, after all, been unmistakably shaped by religious ideas and billions still believe.

People should be allowed to worship whatever god, spirit or supernatural force they wish and practise their religion as they see fit - with the sole proviso that it does not harm others. By the same measure, people should have the right to deviate from established doctrines without any legal sanctions being incurred. So, from the biggest and most traditional church to the smallest and most obscure sect, there must be freedom of religious

observance. Once again, by the same measure, there must be freedom for the likes of myself to deny the existence of all gods and propagate atheism. The secular principle of mutual toleration is thankfully nowadays considered perfectly acceptable by most religious people. Secularism is about equality of all ... including agnostics and atheists.

Advocating secularism goes right to the heart of the UK's rotten, quasi-democratic constitution. Secularism rejects the situation whereby a particular religion and a particular religious institution is privileged by the state. Going back to the London Corresponding Society and the Chartists, the working class left has demanded the disestablishment of the Church of England and a complete separation of religion from the state. In short, a democratic, secular republic.

Does that amount to a declaration of war against religion? Not at all. A secular constitution should guarantee religious freedom, including the freedom of religious expression. Without freedom of religious expression it is self-evident that equality is fake - and, therefore, so too is secularism.

Marxists resolutely disagree with those who wish to conduct a war on religion. The idea that religion must be repressed or banned because of its harmful effects - eg, wars, hatred, irrationality - is dangerous nonsense. All such attempts are diversionary and martyrdom certainly fertilises religious feelings. Therefore we oppose university prohibitions on religious cults, the witch-hunting of Islamic scholars by the *Daily Mail*, government investigations into the Scientologists and visa bans on people like Louis Farrakhan and other such supposedly incendiary demagogues. Religion, by the way, often preaches demented gibberish and frenziedly invents social demons in order to give a sense of purpose to those who otherwise feel empty, abandoned and despised. Anyway, almost needless to say, Marxists neither defend nor seek to emulate the anti-religious nightmare perpetrated in the name of communism by the Stalinite states. At the most extreme Albania under Enver Hoxha declared itself to be officially atheist: in practice that meant a regime sadly reminiscent of Torquemada's inquisition. Life itself has certainly shown how pitiful and laughably hollow were such pretensions. It was not the Catholic church in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania or Croatia, nor the Orthodox church in Russia, Serbia or Bulgaria that collapsed under the weight of their own 'inevitable' decay, leave aside all the oppressive measures (exile, imprisonment, torture, killing) intended

to destroy them. It was, on the contrary, the entire edifice of bureaucratic socialism which turned to dust almost overnight.

France

Following September 11 2001, and despite protests to the contrary by many bourgeois politicians, Muslims have become the butt of increased repression and a divisive, ideological assault aimed at creating a climate of fear and intolerance. In France, of course, this includes the ban on “conspicuous religious symbols” in state schools - yes, a ban carried out in the name of republicanism and secularism. Of course, this is just a thin veneer for institutionalising Islamophobia. Although the law claims to be even-handed in its attitude to different religions, Muslim female garb is clearly the real target. Yet since all religious and political symbols are banned, there is no intention, so goes the claim, of singling out anyone in particular. But the French legislation specifies that symbols must not be “conspicuous” - therefore crucifixes are deemed acceptable provided they are not “of an excessive size”. If, for example, a student staggered into school carrying a cross on their back then that would definitely not be permitted. But then Christians do not normally carry crosses of “excessive size” as part of their everyday religious activity and manner of presentation.

Naturally, as secularists, Marxists defend the right to wear, or not to wear the hijab - Chris Bamberg might be surprised that this viewpoint was advocated by Ragad Altikriti of the Muslim Association of Britain. He argued that a “*secular* state should give the individual freedom of religious choice without interfering in that choice”.²⁶ On balance, however, Marxists urge: a voluntary discarding of the veil; best achieved in an atmosphere of working class confidence, democracy and female emancipation.

Unfortunately the left in France adopted a badly mistaken position - instead of opposing Jacques Chirac and his rightwing UMP government, the left either passively sat on the sidelines or actually backed the ban. Chirac was certainly not acting as the “prisoner of the left”. A laughable promise made by the French Socialist Party, French Communist Party (PCF) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire - and their co-thinkers in Britain - who,

panicking, urged people to vote for him in preference to Jean-Marie Le Pen of the Front National during the 2002 presidential elections. Chirac and the UMP were proceeding according to their own thoroughly obnoxious agenda. His secularism was, of course, pseudo-secularism. The hijab ban was cynically used to boost his government's Gallic credentials and to demonise France's five million Muslims - an oppressed minority which is overwhelmingly working class, often poor and disproportionately unemployed. Seen in that context, it has to be said that the left in France miserably failed. With a few honourable exceptions it has shown itself to be trapped in the past. The fact of the matter is that the heritage of the First Republic is a mixed one and the French left owes more to the statist tradition of Jacobinism than it often cares to admit. Let us see why.

The rising bourgeoisie in France militantly opposed the Catholic church and indeed many of its best thinkers and outstanding figures were deists or even outright atheists. One of the foremost demands during the opening phase of the great French Revolution was for the nationalisation of all ecclesiastical property. Church estates were subsequently sold off in order to meet the revolutionary government's growing budget needs. However, a complete separation of church and state was never achieved. Far from it. A state-sponsored constitutional church was established in 1790; its priests were expected to take their cue from Paris, not Rome.

Victory for the Jacobin mountain and their Hébertist and other such allies on the far left brought to power those who were committed anti-clericalists. Many wanted to deChristianise France. Priests certainly faced unremitting hostility from the revolutionary crowd. On November 23 1793 the Paris city commune actually closed all churches. Not that this was to the liking of Maximilien Robespierre (1758-94). As a matter of both moral principle and cold calculation he stood for religious toleration and feared that atheism and a war on religion would alienate the conservative peasantry and play into the hands of the forces of reaction. "There are," he observed, "people who are superstitious in perfectly good faith ... They are sick people whom we must restore to good health by winning their confidence; a forced cure would drive them to fanaticism."²⁷ Atheism was branded aristocratic. Anti-revolutionary too, because it fostered conditions that would provoke civil war and another Vendée. In short, declaring war on religion was either

treachery or childish immaturity. George Rudé generously draws a parallel between Robespierre and Lenin's tactical acumen. Though Robespierre lacked Lenin's theoretical sophistication and political vision, he knew when to "attack or withdraw".²⁸

Robespierre was, though, no secularist. He favoured neither the Catholic church nor atheism: rather a new state cult of the supreme being, based on the philosophy of Rousseau. This religion dispensed with traditional priests and stipulated that man had a sacred duty to "detest bad faith and despotism", "to punish tyrants and traitors" and "assist the unfortunate". Formally inaugurated on June 8 1794, while the cult ran against the grain as far as the revolutionary atheists were concerned, it was meant to "appeal to the bulk of religious-minded revolutionaries, whether professedly Christian or not".²⁹ Virtue was to be an end in itself - the cult was also launched to unite the revolutionary movement and the broad mass of the French people. It did not work. Both the deChristiansers and the deist followers of Voltaire saw an attempt to revive Catholicism through the back door. Robespierre was accused of hankering after becoming the pontiff of a new religion. Not that the masses were attracted. They remained stubbornly indifferent.

With Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) and then the full-blown, counterrevolutionary restoration of the monarchy, there ensued an extended period of half-hidden, half-open conflict between anti-clericalism and clericalism. Things began with a marked religious revival. Church congregations and those signed up to religious orders increased significantly. Bonaparte brought back the Catholic church in 1801, having agreed a concordat with Pius VIII; he tried to effectively reduce the church to being a mere instrument of the state. Under Charles X religion went onto the offensive. His coronation restored all the old religious paraphernalia, ceremonials and cant. There seemed the distinct danger that the state was going to become an instrument of the church. Yet, though bishops might have dreamt of a return to the conditions which prevailed under the *ancien régime*, "the terms of the concordat were too favourable to the papacy to abandon".³⁰ Negotiations to revise it therefore came to naught.

Despite that minor hiccup, bishops were in 1821 handed powers to supervise all secondary education. Then a high ecclesiastic was put in charge of the universities and in 1824 it was agreed that all teachers in

primary schools were to be appointed by the church - often priests and nuns were chosen. Added to that, the church was provided with special legal protection. Anything in the press that caused "outrage" to the church became an offence. And laws made the "profanation of sacred vessels" punishable with life imprisonment. Blaspheming against the "consecrated" carried the risk of the death penalty.³¹ In 1832 the Catholic church issued the encyclical *Mirari vos* which denounced as wicked all progressive ideas - the ending of censorship, separation of church from the state and education, universal suffrage, etc. The 1851-70 regime of Louis Bonaparte saw the church further consolidate its hold, especially over education. Half of boys and nearly all girls attended church primary schools. Even in state schools religious instruction was compulsory. Not that anti-clericalism and rationalism was completely routed. Though thrown back by Bonapartism, anti-clericalism maintained deep roots in French society, and throughout the rest of the 19th century a bitter struggle ensued.

Bishops, priests and monks fought hard to maintain their grip: they bayed against Dreyfus, revived medieval anti-Semitism and in general sought to undermine the Third Republic. The rise of the working class socialist movement, though highly fragmented till 1905, added a new enemy and an extra urgency. French utopian socialists and communists carried on and gave fresh impetus to the anti-clerical tradition of 1789. For good measure many were committed to a blood-curdling war on religion: hanging the last capitalist with the entrails of the last priest.

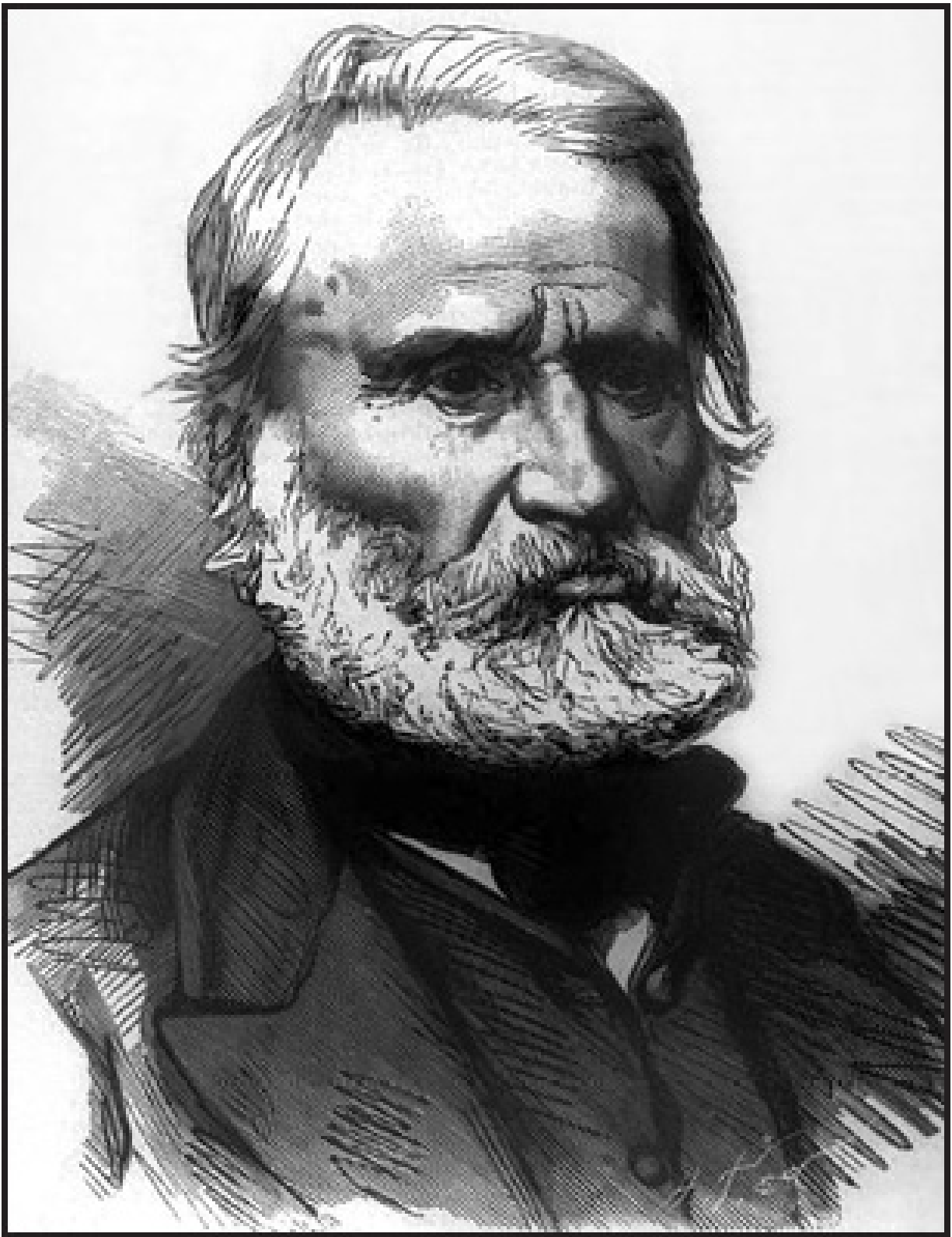
In retrospect, indefatigable revolutionist Auguste Blanqui (1805-81), could never forgive Robespierre for his cult of the supreme being. Indeed at times Blanqui was "inclined to regard the fight against religion as primary".³² His theory of history was a theory of ideas. From the beginning, the law of reason had fought for human progress against ignorance and superstition. Phantoms, ghosts and spirits had therefore to be banished. "God," according to Blanqui, "is a means of government, a protector of the privileged against a conflagration and a mystifier of the multitude. The proletariat ... should distrust any emblem which does not bear in bold letters the motto: atheism and materialism."³³ Marxists took a different view: they put the class struggle first, and demanded not the

abolition of religion; rather the neutrality of the state in relation to all religious beliefs or lack of them.

Meanwhile the French establishment was paralytically split. A swathe of the financial and banking elite, the army general staff, the old aristocracy and the Catholic bishops yearned for another Napoleon or dreamt of bringing back either the Orleanist or Bourbon dynasties. Liberal politicians, sections of the state bureaucracy and the middle class professions tried to advance their own position and satisfy the working class by championing anti-clericalism. After many battles and decades of small advances, the Catholic church and the French state were formally separated by law - in December 1905 Bonaparte's concordat was finally annulled. In retaliation the Vatican excommunicated all 341 deputies who voted for the legislation.

Article one of the new law read: "The republic will ensure freedom of conscience. It will guarantee the free exercise of religious practice"; article two: "The republic does not promote, finance or subsidise any religion."^{**} So crucifixes were removed from courtrooms, religious instruction in state schools ended, church administration was passed to laymen, church land was nationalised and all bishops and priests were removed from the public payroll. The legislation abolishing the concordat had been proposed by the socialist deputy, Aristide Briand (1862-1932), a supporter of Jean Jaurès (1859-1914). He became minister of cults ... and decided to pursue a thoroughly conciliatory course. Administration of the church by bishops was soon restored and church schools were allowed to continue, albeit without state grants. Today, however, something like a third of all schools in France are church-run and have since 1951 been generously financed by the state.

^{**} It is astonishing that supporters of the hijab ban in France seriously claim that it conforms to the 1905 law. If the wearing of the veil was already prohibited, why was the new legislation necessary? While the 1905 law did not specifically enshrine the right to wear or display religious regalia, it most certainly did not ban it. Equally to the point, it is clear that Blanqui's version of anti-clericalism lives on in the French left. Leftwing backers of this 'secularism of fools' are many indeed. Some of them claim that female school students who want to wear the hijab are part of a fundamentalist plot that endangers French secularism and democracy.



Auguste Blanqui. The fight against religion came before the fight against capital.

Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970) sought to construct a conservative bloc of the right and that effectively necessitated another concordat with the Catholic church. Though the French ruling class still claims to uphold the republican traditions of 1789, in practical terms the state now purchases the prayers of the church in order to ideologically reproduce the social forces of conservative France.

In inner minds and private conversations, the bourgeoisie of 20th century France were doubtless materialists of a practical kind. However, publicly they were eager to pay their respects to the Catholic church as a time-honoured Gallic institution. They generously paid tribute to its moral and spiritual teachings too: the merit of a clerical education “as a means of instilling the principles of social discipline and the sacredness of property into the minds of the lower orders was now more than adequately appreciated”.³⁴

Capitalism in decline

France can be generalised. Opposition to religion, as espoused by the bourgeoisie in the 18th century, reflected the confidence of a rising class which was convinced that private property, market competition, international free trade and equality before the law offered the key not only to technological, but social, progress. Bourgeois rationalists fervently believed that the development of capitalism and the application of science could solve all the problems of humanity. There was no room for religious superstition. Indeed, the church was vehemently denounced as a feudal hangover, an outworn barrier to human fulfilment.

With the tremendous growth of working class power and a dawning realisation that capitalism was stacking up intractable contradictions, that confidence wains. As organisation fills the vacuum left by a retreating law of value, paradoxically the system becomes ever more uncontrollable. Crises, inflation, wars, strikes, the mass socialist movement, fascism are modern ghouls and have to be explained away. They became bacilli

introduced by malevolent outsiders. In place of implacable anti-clericalism and philosophical materialism there comes the nihilism and moral relativism of academia and the end of hostility to institutionalised religion by the bourgeoisie *as a class*. Religion is given the go-ahead to pacify, console and misdirect the masses.

Intellectually, religion survives only in claims of a first cause, personal experience and in the ever diminishing gaps left by scientific progress. Standard cosmology “reliably” traces the universe back to 0.001 of a second after the big bang when the universe expanded from an ultra-dense singularity.[***](#) But what happened before that? Believers claim that god must have been the first cause ... as if the universe cannot be its own cause. And if there has to be a first cause what then was the cause of god? So-called religious experience is surely just as real as communing with the dreamtime ancestors by Australian aborigines, North American UFO abductions, the Loch Ness monster and visions of Zeus in ancient Hellas. Put another way: ‘I fervently believe in god and that proves he exists’. Of course, it proves nothing of the sort - except gullibility. Creationists and their ‘intelligent design’ adjuncts latch onto the difficulties biologists sometimes have in explaining the specific origins of this or that plant or animal feature, the missing links in the fossil record and the failure so far to create complex life in the laboratory. Here they claim to find the handiwork of their god. Logically flawed, desperate, but it will continue to give religion a modicum of hope.

[illegible]

As soon as scientists solve one problem, the ‘gap theologians’ dishonestly retreat, albeit deeper and deeper into smaller and smaller redoubts - for, while science advances, sometimes spectacularly, our knowledge of the universe will always be relative and never absolute. There will always be gaps. However, as the gaps shrink, so does god. Not for nothing does Philip Pullman in *His dark materials* trilogy (1995-2000) depict the once powerful

and vindictive Christian god as decrepit, doddering, senile. He is in the end blown away by a puff of wind.

David Hume, Thomas Jefferson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau adopted a hostile, thoroughly disrespectful attitude towards the church, its accumulated wealth and power, and muddled and contradictory doctrines. Yet nowadays mainstream politicians bend over backwards to display a toadying respect for organised religion. It is not that they are necessarily professing believers. A few have admitted to being agnostics or atheists: Neil Kinnock, Roy Hattersley and Ed Miliband come to mind. But, religious or not, the political establishment is determined to discourage anything that might upset Christian, Hindu, Muslim or Jewish sensibilities. No-one should say anything to offend religious leaders and their easily roused 'communities'. It is quite legitimate to hotly dispute the merits of Manchester United versus Manchester City, to prefer rap music to Beethoven or to vote Labour as against the Tory; but to question the religious version of the universe is another matter entirely. To deny the existence of god or mock the myths of Abrahamic religions is considered impolite, threatening and even unforgivably provocative. Religious feelings are deemed sacred.

Sections of the intelligentsia, the despondent, the defeated, the detached, seek comfort from religion. Artur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) and his metaphysical idealism shot to vogue with the bourgeoisie in Germany after the 1848 revolution because of the fear that the self-activity of the masses had provoked; Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) and his brand of theology later served as the source for existentialism and extreme subjectivism. Postmodernism, with its giddy celebration of fragmentation and difference, its loss of faith in progress, linear history and the supposed end of what Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) calls "metanarratives", is a fitting theory for a declining capitalism. It holds up a shattered mirror to the extraordinary complexity of contemporary capitalism. But the confusion that reigns in society is only exacerbated by its relativism and loss of historical perspective. Religious cults and their beliefs are depicted as merely another commodity - equal to and no different from any other. The Catholic church is no better and no worse than Superman comics, honour killings are a cultural trait akin to eating fish and chips, Albert Einstein's ideas on relativity should not be considered superior to the dianetics of L

Ron Hubbard. Each is just something to buy or buy into. Clearly, postmodernism is a theory of despair coined by disappointed, demoralised and disorientated intellectuals. Politically, for example, Lyotard was once an active Marxist. In 1948 he helped found Socialisme ou Barbarie (related to the libertarian Solidarity group in Britain) that rejected the orthodox Trotskyite analysis of the Soviet Union as a degenerate workers' state and predicted an imminent nuclear war. Nonetheless, in its own refracted way postmodernism eloquently testifies to the cultural consequences that flow from the failure to make the transition to socialism and therefore the general climate of instability and uncertainty that characterises the age.

Bourgeois society, unlike feudalism, is not dominated by organised religion. But nowadays it is increasingly coloured by religion and the desperate search for spiritual meaning. Postmodernism is for free-floating intellectuals. Others seek out certainty in a reinvented pre-modern version of religion. Fundamentalism - Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Jewish - is on the march. The establishment likes to patronise and promote a few outspoken atheists: eg, Richard Dawkins, AC Grayling, Christopher Hitchens and Jonathan Miller. Such people are condescendingly welcomed as adding a dash of controversy to the 'national conversation'. But they have never had much in the way of political purchase.

Moreover, the fact of the matter is that, while over the last two hundred years bourgeois rationalists have considered the eclipse of religion as an inevitable by-product of science, education and the growth of the productive forces, such an approach must nowadays be considered childishly erroneous. By their own volition, masses of people clutch at the fantastic. The real world repels, horrifies and disgusts. The conservative sociologist, Peter Berger, even talks of the desecularisation of the world - an idea that presumes, of course, that the world was once upon a time secular. Leave that point aside - there can be no doubt that the world is as "furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more than ever".³⁶

Official bourgeois society makes great play of taking religious representatives and their pronouncements seriously. When it comes to controversial ethical, political and social dilemmas, organised religion is granted a quite undeservedly elevated role. Priests, rabbis, imams and their holy lieutenants are sought out by ministers and media editors alike.

Members of the religious elite sit on government quangoes and commissions and are regularly asked to give their opinions in the press and on the radio and TV on issues as diverse as artificially assisted pregnancy, the Iraq war and homosexuality - as if they were experts. What is irrational is thereby made to appear as rational and authoritative. Added to which, one after another pseudo-science is promoted - today it is the selfish gene that supposedly explains male aggression, female underachievement in business, and youth crime. Life is drained of all its complexity and becomes little more than a means of transmitting genes down the ages.

Real scientific progress continues under a declining capitalism, but is visibly narrowed down and held back by the overriding need to save the system rather than advance human understanding. It is, therefore, thoroughly perverted. Eg, the military-industrial complex, directly and indirectly, absorbs a huge slice of government spending and the ingenuity of countless scientists, technicians and engineers. All wasted in developing, not the means of production, but the means of destruction.

Officially the bourgeoisie becomes ever more a pro-religious class. And it is not only a matter of outward display. A way of bamboozling an atomised population. As capitalism continues to become ever more uncontrollable as far as its controllers are concerned, bourgeois cynicism morphs into bourgeois credulity. Contemporary meaning is extracted from the oracular puzzles and elusive mists of ancient texts. Faith increasingly replaces reason. God tells them what to do and when to do it. God blesses their ventures and forgives them their failures. Praying to an almighty deity allows presidents and prime ministers, chief executives and army generals alike to cope with a runaway reality whose inner-workings and necessities are beyond them and which frustratingly mock their efforts, regulations and attempts to impose rationality. God - in reality the idea of god - provides consolation and again and again calls them back into action. As personalities, the more they invest into god the less concern they have for other living, breathing, thinking people. Love of god becomes a denial of humanity.

Let me close then by quoting some perceptive words written by Nikolai Bukharin and Evgeny Preobrazhensky in their *ABC of communism*: "if the

bourgeoisie begins to believe in god and the heavenly life, this merely means it has realised that its life here below is drawing to a close!”³⁷

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