

Liberation Theology: A Comparative Study of Christian and Islamic Approaches

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Abstract

Research into liberation theologies has rarely had an interreligious perspective. To that end, I shall carry out a comparative study of Christian and Islamic versions of liberation theology and I shall highlight the similarities and differences in their approaches. It will be a thematic study that is structured around three key mentalities which are shared by the approaches of both religious traditions. Firstly, the need to reinterpret their own religions from the perspective of the poor; secondly the interrelated emphases on action, orthopraxy and the agency of the oppressed; and thirdly a rejection of excessive other-worldliness. I conclude from my analyses with the following hypotheses: firstly, due to the lack of an authority akin to the Catholic Church, Islamic liberation theology is comparatively more likely to create the potential for social upheaval and is more likely to lead to an attenuation of metaphysical religious feeling; secondly, all liberation theologies contain latently the potential for creating millenarian outbursts; the best example to offer from modern history of this latent feature becoming manifest is in the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979.

Keywords

Liberation Theology, Political Theology, Islam, Radical Politics, Comparative Theology

1. Introduction

We are undergoing a revival of religious politics in the world: “the repoliticization of religions that have rejected the marginalized, privatized status afforded or forced upon them by modernity”.¹ The Christian and Islamic liberation theologies that I shall investigate in

¹ Jeffrey R. Halverson, *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam: The Muslim Brotherhood, Ash'arism, and Political Sunnism* (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 127.

this essay are a testimony to this. Regardless of what may be the causes for this revival, there is reason to be sceptical of the prevailing wisdom that modernity involves the increasing secularisation of politics, and the relegation of religious sentiment into the private sphere.

I intend to make a comparative study to examine the similarities and differences between how Christians and Muslims have created theologies of liberation. It will be my contention throughout that these discourses of radical political struggle are the potential causes of social upheaval in the future and that this has been confirmed by history. When the utopian and millenarian mentalities of certain radical intellectuals become united with the demands of the most oppressed strata in a society, a potentially revolutionary situation is created. Mannheim argues that this can be seen for the first time in the more radical offshoots of the Reformation.² The single best example of this from the twentieth-century is the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran. The spread of Christian liberation theology in Latin America and Islamic liberation theology in various Muslim countries creates the potential for similar social upheavals; such a potential will almost certainly remain latent in the near future, as only a critical concurrence of certain conditions could lead to the social upheaval as it occurred in Iran. Thus, although we cannot expect any imminent revolutions soon or predict when they will occur, nevertheless we must understand their causes and that is why I have chosen to study this topic.

2. Literature Review

Following soon after the Second Vatican Council, liberation theology emerged in the Latin American Catholic Church during the late 1960's. Since then there has been a growing scholarly literature on the phenomenon.³ It has been criticised on various grounds and

² Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1936), pp. 190ff

³ Some key examples of the secondary literature (in chronological order of publication) are as follows: Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978); Deane William Ferm *Third World Liberation Theologies, An Introductory Survey*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986); Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987); Paul E. Sigmund *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Christopher Rowland [ed.] *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [Second edition: 2007]); David Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology*, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2002); Ivan Petrella *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto*, (Hampshire, England: Asghate, 2004).

many debates have emerged as a result.⁴ On the other hand, the concept of ‘Islamic liberation theology’ has not received quite as much attention. A recent study by Hamid Dabashi⁵ is one of the few publications devoted solely to this subject in English-speaking academia. This is particularly surprising because, as my essay will demonstrate, there have been and continue to be sustained efforts by Muslim writers and intellectuals to form an Islamic theology of liberation. The relatively unknown status of many of these writers outside of their own countries and the paucity of scholars with the proficiency in the relevant languages are both undoubtedly important (but not exhaustive) explanations for this lack of attention. As indicative of the post-9/11 situation, there has been instead a significant interest by scholars in Islamic fundamentalism and the compatibility of Islam with democracy and other Western values.⁶

Thus I argue that there has been too little study of the Islamic discourse that fits into neither the category of reformist and Westernised liberal Islam, nor the category of fanatic, intolerant, radical Islam, but which is instead orientated towards the aim of liberation, in common with the emancipatory tradition of secular socialism. Even more rare are comparative studies of Christian and Islamic liberation theologies, which endeavour to compare and contrast the converging and diverging ways that they have been conceived. I have not been able to find any examples of such a comparative study in English-speaking academia, or at least not in any academic journals or scholarly publications. Hence, for such a study, whereof we can only expect findings and conclusions of a preliminary and provisional nature, thereof I proceed with the appropriate caution and tentativeness.

3. Methodology

The approach that I shall use is both analytic and synthetic: analytic, because I shall endeavour to reduce the complexity of my object of study by identifying three key mentalities which unify both Christian and Islamic liberation theologies. I have thus chosen to do a thematic

⁴ Cf. Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), especially chapter three.

⁵ *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire*, (USA and Canada: Routledge, 2008)

⁶ For some pertinent examples: Hakan Yilmaz, ‘Islam, Sovereignty and Democracy: A Turkish View’ in *Middle East Journal* 3 (2007), pp. 477–493; Emre Toros, ‘The Relationship Between Islam and Democracy in Turkey: Employing Political Culture as an Indicator’ in *Social Indicators Research* 2 (2010), pp. 253–265; Khaled Abou El Fadl ‘Islam and the Challenge of Democratic Commitment’ in *Oriente Moderno* 2 (2007), pp. 247–300.

analysis rather than a study of individual authors. This is because it will yield more synthetic results, as we shall be able to outline certain conclusions regarding these religions and how they have been used to pursue liberation and emancipation.

For accuracy and reliability of information, I have tried to use primary sources in their original languages wherever possible. My scope of reference when discussing Christian liberation theology will be mainly restricted to Latin American Catholics, due to the fact that it is generally only within this constituency that Christian liberation theology has become anything more than an academic discourse. With Muslim writers, on the other hand, I have chosen a much broader scope: I will refer to authors from throughout the twentieth-century up to the present day and from several different countries and contexts. I hope this will show that, despite these differences, a unity of intention and approach can be discerned from all of the authors.

The following sections discuss in detail three ‘mentalities’ as I have called them. I use this term to avoid the impression that I am enumerating ideas and theories in the manner of a ‘history of ideas’; that is to say, I am not discussing the theoretical ideas of these individuals in abstraction from their concrete historical situations. Such an approach is the product of a particular form of idealism engendered by the Enlightenment, as Mannheim has written.⁷ By contrast, mentalities are ways of thinking that are influenced by the socio-political issues of the historical conjuncture within which they are formed, and are formulated as responses to those issues. However, these mentalities are not merely epiphenomenal products of social and economic forces either, as some vulgar and reductionist Marxian determinism might suggest.

4. Reinterpretation from the perspective of the poor and oppressed

Writers from both traditions are intending to reinterpret their religions from the perspective of the poor and oppressed; the fact that it is a *reinterpretation* is important because they are all consciously breaking with traditional ideas. Therefore, they both, intentionally or not, divide their own religions into two: that which has and which continues to “stand for stability rather than change, hierarchy rather than egalitarianism, the rich rather than the poor”⁸ and that which is

⁷ Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 192

⁸ Christopher Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, (UK: Polity Press, 1988), p. 14

based on “the suffering, struggle and hope of the poor . . . [and] a theological critique of society and its ideological underpinnings”.⁹

The Egyptian theorist of the Islamic Left, Hasan Hanafi, divided Islam between right-wing Ash’arite¹⁰ and left-wing Mu’tazilite¹¹ schools of theology; the latter stressed free will, rationality, scientific thought and social justice; the former led to political passivity by teaching determinism and fatalism, and it also discouraged rational scientific thinking.¹² Farid Esack writes of the importance to “expose the way traditional interpretation and beliefs about a text [such as the Qur’an] function as ideology in order to legitimize an unjust order”¹³; he has in the past written about how the conservative ulama¹⁴ in South Africa collaborated with the Apartheid regime,¹⁵ and they rebuked young Muslim activists against racial segregation for spreading anarchy and corruption.¹⁶ Esack proposes an interpre-

⁹ Philip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: Essential Facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America*, (USA: Temple University Press, 1987), p. 205 as cited in Robert J. Araujo, ‘Political Theory and Liberation Theology: The Intersection of Unger and Gutiérrez’ in *Journal of Law and Religion* 1 (1994), p. 68.

¹⁰ The dominant school of theology in contemporary Sunni Islam. It stresses the inadequacy of human reason to comprehend adequately matters of morality, metaphysics or theology. Human reason is especially incapable of knowing much about the Divine Essences or about the nature of the Godhead. It emphasises instead the important role that revelation must play to compensate for this inadequacy. It also regards human free will as being incompatible with the omnipotence of God, and hence teaches metaphysical determinism. It was the school of thought that was favoured by traditionalists who were perturbed by the doctrines of the Mu’tazila school, which were more akin to rationalism.

¹¹ A school of theology that is no longer used by mainstream Sunni scholars. However, in the Shia sect, Mu’tazilite theology continues to be used to this day. Mu’tazilite theology is generally said to be rationalist in orientation because it claims that human reason has some capability of determining the will and nature of God. Therefore it does not regard sacred tradition and revelation as being superior to reason but, correctly understood, in accordance with it. This union of faith with reason or revelation with reason has led some to compare Mu’tazilite thought to that of the Scholastics. Moreover, the Mu’tazilite school taught that human free will exists and can be used to explain the existence of evil, as it would be an affront to God’s perfect justice to claim that He is responsible for evil instead of the free will of humans. The Mu’tazilah also rejected all hints of anthropocentrism in our understanding of God and in our interpretation of scripture; they therefore developed a hermeneutics that sought to interpret certain passages in the Qur’an symbolically.

¹² Martin Riexinger, ‘Nasserism Revitalized. A Critical Reading of Hasan Hanafi’s Projects “The Islamic Left” and “Occidentalism” (And Their Uncritical Reading)’ in *Die Welt des Islams* 1 (2007), p. 70

¹³ Farid Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression*, (Finland: Oneworld Publications, 1997), p. 11

¹⁴ The plural of ‘alim’ which means scholar. Ulama often refers to the entire body of legal scholars who have been taught the traditional curriculum of jurisprudence, theology, mysticism, and study of scripture and of the sacred tradition. They have the role of arbitrating legal disputes and providing legal advice for Muslims.

¹⁵ Farid Esack, ‘Three Islamic strands in the South African struggle for justice’ in *Third World Quarterly*, 2 (1988), p. 476

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 478

tation of the Qur'an that reveals its message of liberation for women, slaves and all those oppressed by the powerful.¹⁷

Ali Shariati divided Shia Islam between revolutionary Alid Shi'ism, as "identified with the authoritative figure of the first Shi'i Imam [i.e. Imam Ali]",¹⁸ and reactionary Safavi Shi'ism, as named after the dynasty which was the first to establish Shia Islam as a state religion. He claims that Alid Shi'ism is based on the revolutionary interpretation of Imamet which, along with the struggle for justice, is central to the true form of Islam:

"For the liberation of humankind, the elimination of class conflict and social division, and the eventual creation of equality and justice for the people and in communal life, this doctrine [of Imamet] seeks to strive for the attainment of true leadership".¹⁹

Imamet traditionally meant the divinely-ordained and hereditary leadership of twelve sinless, infallible individuals after the death of the Prophet. By contrast, Shariati interprets this doctrine to mean the necessity of a "committed and revolutionary leadership"²⁰ for the revolutionary struggle, which is not unlike the leadership of the proletariat by a revolutionary party, as required by Marxist-Leninism. In addition, the Imams are those exemplars of human excellence that are present in every context.²¹ However, in Safavi Shi'ism, this doctrine is distorted to become merely the worship of twelve quasi-deified figures²² who come to be seen as superhuman, angelic, otherworldly beings. This reactionary Safavi Shi'ism has distorted all other key doctrines and made Islam into an oppressive opium of the masses, instead of being on the side of "those who throughout history have been slaughtered and enslaved by . . . the ruling classes".²³

A key moment in the development of liberation theology in Latin America was the second general conference of bishops in 1968. The conference used the analyses of certain social scientists who argued that the church has supported the hegemony of an

"aristocratic white elite [who] has always controlled wealth and power in Latin America . . . excluding the vast majority from any real economic, political, or cultural development [. . .] [moreover] priests and

¹⁷ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, p.99

¹⁸ Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), p. 111.

¹⁹ Ali Şeriati, *Ali Şiası Safevî Şiası* (Ankara: Fecr Yayınları, 2009), p. 111.

²⁰ Ali Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam* (New Delhi: Crescent Publishing, 1979), p. 120.

²¹ Ali Şeriati, *Ali* (Ankara: Fecr Yayınları, 2011), p. 489.

²² Şeriati, *Ali Şiası Safevî Şiası*, p. 204.

²³ Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 108.

bishops find their natural associates in the upper classes; Catholic education serves primarily the same upper classes".²⁴

In a similar manner, the Dominican priest Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote that the church's supposed neutrality and silence on political affairs amounted to an implicit support of injustice and of ruling governments.²⁵ He writes elsewhere: "the Church contributes . . . to giving a kind of sacred character to a situation which is not only alienating but is the worst kind of violence – a situation which pits the powerful against the weak".²⁶ By "casting our lot with the oppressed and the exploited in the struggle for a more just society",²⁷ he argues that the Church must:

"make the prophetic *denunciation* of every dehumanizing situation, which is contrary to fellowship, justice and liberty. At the same time must criticize every sacralisation of oppressive structures to which the Church itself might have contributed".²⁸

It must, however, be stated that one can discern some distinctions between these approaches. The Latin American theologians cannot be accused of wanting to separate from the Church. This would be to "ignore the care with which liberation theologians have in the main sought to balance utopian enthusiasm with devotion to the Catholic Church".²⁹ Extremist views were almost expressed by the organisation called 'Christians for Socialism', which was created after the election of Salvador Allende in Chile by clergy and laity who wanted the Church to support the government instead of remaining neutral. They sharply criticised the Church's social teachings, they treated all opposing Christian views as mere bourgeois morality and, with a generally belligerent and Marxist style, urged for a more "radical, revolutionary Christianity".³⁰ In a similar vein, other Christian activists advocated violent struggle and denounced the hierarchy of the Church "as bourgeois enemies for not supporting revolution".³¹

However, these views are not representative "as a description or assessment of liberation theology itself".³² When the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff was silenced for two years by the Vatican, he accepted it by saying "I prefer to walk with the church rather than to

²⁴ McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, p. 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez 'The Church: Sacrament of History' in Curt Cadorette, Marie Giblin, Marilyn J. Legge, and Mary Hembrow Synder [eds] *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader* (Maryknoll, NY: Obis, 1992), p. 176.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, emphasis in the original.

²⁹ Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, p. 140.

³⁰ McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, p. 12.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³² *Ibid.*

work alone with my theology”.³³ It would be reasonable to conclude that the hierarchical and centralised structure of the Catholic Church has generally kept the theoretical expression of liberation theology within certain boundaries. The absence of such an authority in Islam means that there are fewer restrictions on how scripture can be interpreted and which spiritual authorities can be respected or otherwise.

Although it is difficult to say with great certainty, I shall tentatively posit the possibility that Islamic liberation theology may be more susceptible to creating the possibility of social upheaval; lay intellectuals have the freedom to interpret far more freely and there is no official clergy that can act as brake on ultra-leftist enthusiasm as priests sometimes can in Christianity. The closest thing to a clergy in Islam are the authority of the legal scholars (ulama) in Shia Islam; however, in the history of Iran, their financial independence from the state meant that, “on a comparative scale with other Muslim countries, one must note that there is no other country where the ulama have entered into nearly the amount of protest as one finds in Iranian history”³⁴; so even where there can be found something approaching a clergy, it has not had the same effect as the Church in Latin America. Therefore, where there may be sufficiently great grievances felt by the most oppressed strata in a society, an Islamic liberation discourse may be more likely to ally with these strata and mobilise them for political action.

5. Action, orthopraxy and the agency of the oppressed

The next mentality I shall examine is comprised of these three inter-related elements. The first is the emphasis on “enabling the poor to become agents of their own destiny”.³⁵ In Latin America, this often required the need to overturn the traditional treatment by the Church of the poor as merely objects of compassion, rather than political agents who deserved to act against injustice. For example, George Soares-Prabhu writes that in the Bible the victims of oppression are simultaneously those through whom history will be redeemed; it “presents the poor not as a group of passive victims who can only hope for deliverance . . . [but who are] bearers of salvation and hope”.³⁶

The official theology of liberation endorsed by the Vatican in the ‘Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation’ expresses that “the

³³ Ibid, p. 219.

³⁴ Nikki R. Keddie and Juan R.I. Cole (1986) ‘Introduction’ in Nikki R. Keddie and Juan R.I. Cole [eds] *Shi'ism and Social Protest* (USA: Yale University Press, 1986) p. 10.

³⁵ McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, p. 224.

³⁶ Ibid, pp. 71–72.

little ones”³⁷ are the “object of a love of preference on the part of the Church”³⁸ because of “the poverty, injustice and affliction [that] they endure”.³⁹ Despite this, the instruction nevertheless recognises “the need for unjust structures to be changed”⁴⁰ and goes on to acknowledge the legitimacy of action taken by the oppressed to improve their situation, even if it requires armed struggle as a final resort.⁴¹ Similarly, Pope John II’s encyclicals express the legitimacy of “struggle for social justice”⁴² by “workers as ‘subjects’ of their own destiny”,⁴³ and exhorts the faithful to struggle against “evil mechanisms and structures of sin”.⁴⁴ For the Vatican itself to approve of such sentiments (albeit with some ambivalence) is indicative of how the Latin American theologians have been able to change the attitude of the Church towards the poor: to recognise them as agents and not merely as objects of compassion.

Muslims have also needed to face traditionalist attitudes when affirming the agency of the oppressed. Rahman describes an argument used by “the vast majority of Muslims, and indeed primarily by the majority of Muslim religious leaders”,⁴⁵ wherein the obligatory duty of alms-giving for the rich (zakat⁴⁶) necessitates that “some people must remain poor in order for the rich to earn merit in the sight of God”.⁴⁷ It was for the purpose of rejecting such beliefs that Shariati used Sartrean existentialism to argue for the absolute and

³⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1986), §46 [by Cardinal Ratzinger on behalf of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith].

³⁸ Ibid, §68.

³⁹ Ibid, §47.

⁴⁰ Ibid, §75.

⁴¹ Ibid, §79.

⁴² Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work), Available at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html (accessed: 26/04/2014), §20.

⁴³ McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, p. 17.

⁴⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (The Social Concern), Available at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html (accessed: 26/04/2014), §40.

⁴⁵ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 19.

⁴⁶ One of the five obligatory duties (or ‘pillars’) of Islam. Zakat is the duty of alms-giving which must be carried out by all Muslims who are financially capable. Its purpose is to alleviate the poverty of the most deprived members of the Muslim community. The typical minimum donation is one-fortieth (2.5%) of the value of one’s yearly capital assets. In some Muslim countries the states themselves collect and distribute this tax, whereas other Muslim countries rely on voluntary donations to be made to charitable organisations.

⁴⁷ Ibid, emphasis removed.

unqualified responsibility of every person for his or her own fate.⁴⁸ With reference to the Qur'an (which for all Muslims writers is the most authoritative means to verify the authenticity of one's beliefs), Shariati writes that it "holds men responsible for their histories, for their collective destinies and lifestyles, and for the system by which they are governed".⁴⁹

To this end he reinterprets the traditional Shia doctrines of Intizar and Gaybet. Traditionally they meant that, due to the occultation (Gaybet) of the twelfth Imam Mahdi in 941AD, we must anticipate (Intizar) for his messianic return or parousia at the end of the world, whereupon he will establish perfect peace and justice in the world.⁵⁰ While implicitly rendering all extant governments illegitimate, it generally had the effect of "removing any strong motivations for political activism".⁵¹ However, Shariati's interpretation was that these doctrines radically restore agency to humanity; they mean that, in the absence of the twelfth Imam, the people must now bear the responsibility of choosing their own leaders and of controlling their own destiny; they must prepare themselves whilst anticipating the arrival of the opportune moment to enact their inevitably-victorious revolution.⁵²

Alongside the desire to restore agency to the oppressed, the second element is the greater importance given to orthopraxis (correct action or practice) over orthodoxy (correct belief). As Dominique Barbé writes, "only action can verify whether or not prayer is authentic".⁵³ For the Latin American theologians, this can be seen in their interpretations of Christology. Instead of a soteriological focus on how to achieve salvation through correct belief,⁵⁴ they focus more on the establishment of the reign of God by Jesus and its message of hope for the poor and marginalised.⁵⁵ Leonardo Boff claims that the

⁴⁸ Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, p. 115; p. 120; also cf. Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest (USA)*: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 269.

⁴⁹ Ali Şeriati, *Dine Karşı Din* [Religion against Religion] (Ankara: Fecr Yayınları, 2012), p. 149; also cf. Şeriati, *İnsan* [Man/The Human Being] (Ankara: Fecr Yayınları, 2012), *passim*.

⁵⁰ Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), pp. 24–27.

⁵¹ Keddie and Cole, 'Introduction', p. 6.

⁵² Şeriati, *Ali*, pp. 208–214; *Dine Karşı Din*, pp. 156–160; *Adem'in Vârisi Hüseyin* [Hussein: The Inheritor of Adam] (Ankara: Fecr Yayınları, 2010), *passim*; Ali Shariati, *Hossein: Vares-e Adam* [Hussein: The Inheritor of Adam] (Tehran: Qalam Publications, 1988), pp. 253–304.

⁵³ Dominique Barbé, 'Church Base Communities' in Curt Cadorette, Marie Giblin, Marilyn J. Legge, and Mary Hembrow Synder [eds] *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), p. 188.

⁵⁴ Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, p. 134.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 129.

church has concentrated on the “theological-philosophical systematization . . . correct thinking . . . [and] intellectual comprehension”⁵⁶ of Christ or about Christ. Instead, we must emphasise:

“an ethic . . . correct acting . . . [and] in creating new habits of acting and living in the world. This praxiological moment of the message of Christ is especially perceptible in Latin American theological reflection”.⁵⁷

Similar sentiments are expressed by Muslims writers, although often with the intention of reducing the importance of rituals and ritualistic thinking. This is probably indicative of the difference between Christianity, as a religion that places greater importance on correct beliefs as they are expressed in a creed, whereas Islam places greater importance on correct actions as performed in accordance with a sacred Law.⁵⁸

Eliaçık writes that “it does not matter what religion you may be from, you can be a Christian, or Buddhist, or Jewish, or Zoroastrian, or Muslim, or you can even worship an onion [sic]”⁵⁹ because: “I believe that this measure [of piety and religiosity] emerges not from beliefs or the performance of those rituals particular to a religion, but from actions”.⁶⁰ Elsewhere he claims that an aphorism often-attributed to the Prophet (‘Ritual worship [namaz] is the pillar of religion’) is fabricated; instead he argues “the pillar of religion is *dürüstlük*”⁶¹ which can be translated as honesty, righteousness, integrity, upright-conduct, etc. He claims that Islam is not “a monastery or temple religion; it’s a religion of real life!”⁶² On the basis of different words being used for each in the Qur’an, he distinguishes between ritual (nusuk) and worship (ibadet); the five daily prayers, pilgrimage to Mecca, fasting during the month of Ramadan, etc. are all rituals; many of them were already practised by the pre-Islamic Arab pagans.⁶³ The word for worship, however, encompasses many different kinds of actions that are performed in the midst of life and

⁵⁶ Leonardo Boff, ‘How Can We Know Christ?’ in Curt Cadorette, Marie Giblin, Marilyn J. Legge, and Mary Hembrow Synder [eds] *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), p. 90.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Reza Aslan, *No God But God* (UK: Arrow Books, 2011), p. 146.

⁵⁹ Recep İhsan Eliaçık, *Devrimci İslâm* [Revolutionary Islam] (Istanbul: Doğu Kitabevi, 2013), p. 35.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Recep İhsan Eliaçık, *Kur’an’a Giriş* [Introduction to the Qur’an] (Istanbul: İnşa Yayınları, 2011), p. 102.

⁶² Ibid, p. 103.

⁶³ Recep İhsan Eliaçık; Eren Erdem; Hakkı Yılmaz; and Yılmaz Yunak, *İslam ve Kapitalizm: Medine’den İnsanlığa* [Islam and Capitalism: From Medina to Humanity] (Istanbul: Doğu Kitabevi, 2011), pp. 27–28.

which are most importance for the religious life⁶⁴; he gives the examples of the struggle for justice on behalf of the oppressed, the keeping of promises, creating reconciliation where there is dispute, helping neighbours, etc.⁶⁵

Eren Erdem writes that “A worship that does not frighten capitalism and imperialism is not the worship of God’s Messenger”.⁶⁶ He interprets the gestures and prayers that constitute the ritual worship (namaz) to be declarations of war against oppression and exploitation.⁶⁷ In a similar manner, Hanafi “brands all forms of outward, ritualistic . . . religion as ‘capitalist religion’”⁶⁸ and “redefines the pillars of Islam with an activist meaning”.⁶⁹

The third element of this mentality, which is intimately linked to the previous two elements, is the latent or explicit millenarian demand for immediate action. Millenarianism (or utopianism, as I shall use the two as synonyms) is the type of outlook which sees the present as “one of critical significance . . . in which action is necessary, as it is . . . pregnant with opportunity for fulfilling the destiny of humankind”.⁷⁰ The Kairos has arrived and hence the millenarian “is not preoccupied . . . with optimistic hopes for the future or romantic reminiscences”,⁷¹ because “absolute perfection . . . ceases to be a matter of speculation and becomes a pressing necessity for active implementation”.⁷² Ernst Bloch claims that this outlook imagines a utopia which is neither wholly present, nor wholly in the distant future: its fragmentary but palpable presence gives a sense that its complete achievement is close at hand and gives encouragement to action; but equally the lack of its full presence reveals the inadequacy of the present state of affairs, and how its limitations must be overcome for the utopia to be fully realised.⁷³

Utopianism for Mannheim is something that “breaks the bonds of the existing order”⁷⁴ because it inevitably involves the recognition that it cannot be achieved within the existing order. For this reason Rowland claims that Latin American liberation theology also fits into

⁶⁴ Recep İhsan Eliaçık, *Kur’an’a Giriş*, pp. 101ff.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Eren Erdem, *Devrim Ayetleri: Egemenlerin İslam’ı Değil Ezilenlerin İslam’ı* [Verses of Revolution: The Islam of the Oppressed, Not of the Oppressors] (Istanbul: Kırmızı Kedi Yayınevi, 2013), p. 80.

⁶⁷ Ibid, pp. 74–80.

⁶⁸ Riexinger, ‘Nasserism Revitalized. A Critical Reading of Hasan Hanafi’s Projects “The Islamic Left” and “Occidentalism” (And Their Uncritical Reading)’, p. 76.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 75.

⁷⁰ Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, p. 3.

⁷¹ Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 195.

⁷² Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, p. 3.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 7.

⁷⁴ Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 173.

this definition of utopianism because, through its notion of praxis, it is “engaged in change in the present [sic] and is not merely dreaming about a better world”.⁷⁵ As Araujo writes, “liberation theologians hope not only in a future of salvation”⁷⁶ but strive for “the fashioning or the realizing of the values of the reign of God here and now in this world”.⁷⁷ Jon Sobrino writes that in the “*praxis* of love and justice one knows that the kingdom is at hand, is becoming present”.⁷⁸

Erdem writes that there is an other-worldly and this-worldly conception of heaven in the Qur’an; the former is a matter of belief, whereas the latter is something that must immediately be established by political struggle: wherever on earth there is peace, security, food and drink, then heaven has been established thereat.⁷⁹ Shariati was similarly convinced of the crucial need for immediate action. His propagation of a revolutionary interpretation of Islam had “a sense of urgency because he believed his was the last generation with any hope of salvation. ‘If this generation is lost,’ Shari’ati feared, ‘then all [the rest] would be type-cast and [brain]washed’”.⁸⁰ This sense that now was the time for vital action no doubt gave him the impetus to write and teach with “such forceful determination, such unparalleled conviction and drive”⁸¹ that it is unsurprising that he “did the most to prepare the Iranian youth for revolutionary upheaval”.⁸² His interpretation of Intizar during the period of Gaybet, as explained above, corresponds with the millenarian attitude of “expectantly awaiting the propitious moment . . . the critical juncture of events”⁸³ which could arrive “at any moment”.⁸⁴

The Iranian revolution is the only example from modern history of the complete manifestation of this millenarian mentality, which has elsewhere remained latent and implicit. A symbolic sign of this can be seen by the fact that, at the very height of the revolutionary fervour, some people addressed Ayatullah Khomeini (the only Shia

⁷⁵ Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, p. 140.

⁷⁶ Araujo, ‘Political Theory and Liberation Theology: The Intersection of Unger and Gutiérrez’, p. 69.

⁷⁷ Roger S. Haight S.J., *An Alternative: An Interpretation of Liberation Theology*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 255.

⁷⁸ Jon Sobrino, ‘Jesus and the Kingdom of God’ in Curt Cadorette, Marie Giblin, Marilyn J. Legge, and Mary Hembrow Synder [eds] *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), p. 118, emphasis in the original.

⁷⁹ Erdem, *Devrim Ayetleri: Egemenlerin İslam’ı Değil Ezilenlerin İslam’ı*, pp. 237–238.

⁸⁰ Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, p. 131.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁸² Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretative History of Modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 215.

⁸³ Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 196.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

cleric to receive this title) as the ‘Imam’⁸⁵; this is a title ordinarily reserved only for the twelve infallible Imams, including the hidden twelfth Imam, whose return was believed to herald the eschaton and “the reign of prophetic justice and everlasting peace”⁸⁶ on behalf of the oppressed. Thus the use of a title charged with such an apocalyptic and eschatological meaning is an index of how the Iranian revolution fully manifested the agency of the oppressed, the importance of political action and the millenarian demand for immediate action. I shall conclude this section by arguing that what this event made manifest is also latent in the other liberation theologies. It is my hypothesis that it requires a particular concurrence or concatenation of critical factors in a conjuncture to render active and operative these latent tendencies. As for what these critical factors may be, a social, political and economic analysis of the Iranian revolution would be necessary which is evidently outside of this project’s scope.

6. Rejection of excessive other-worldliness

The final mentality that I will examine is orientated by the rejection of an excessive emphasis on other-worldliness.

Latin American theologians have exhibited this tendency in their emphasis on the humanity of the historical Jesus. While maintaining a belief in his divinity, they tend to view him as “a lot less self-consciously messianic”⁸⁷ and instead regard “Jesus’ consciousness of his mission and of his person as developing gradually and humanly”.⁸⁸ This is part of a trend in modern Christology to reinterpret Christ’s consciousness and foreknowledge,⁸⁹ in which his perfection does not consist in knowing everything, but rather in perfect fidelity and devotion to his mission.⁹⁰ This “human dimension of Jesus’ faith comes as truly good news for the poor”⁹¹ because they are able to identify fully with his suffering and his struggles to maintain hope. Moreover, they argue that “Christianity is not simply a religion of otherworldly salvation”⁹² but they instead draw attention to the

⁸⁵ Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, p. 385; cf. pp. 482–483; also cf. Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999), pp. 200–201.

⁸⁶ Dabashi, *Shi’ism: A Religion of Protest*, p. 64.

⁸⁷ Herbert McCabe O.P. and Maurice Wiles, ‘The Incarnation: An Exchange’ in *New Blackfriars* 691 (1977), p. 553.

⁸⁸ McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, p. 73; cf. Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 1987), p. 73.

⁸⁹ McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, p. 75.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

“material, this-worldly character”⁹³ of the kingdom of God as a “historical reality”⁹⁴ rather than being a “heaven beyond”⁹⁵ time and space.

By comparison, the growing Protestant churches in Latin America show the politically problematic consequences of an excessively other-worldly understanding. Rowland writes that Pentecostalism gives “hope to those who are otherwise without hope”⁹⁶ but “[m]iraculous interventions and escapism offered by tongues of ecstasy cannot change the social fabric which is so deleterious to the poor”.⁹⁷ Research into Pentecostalism by Margaret Poloma has led to the conclusion that its conception of God “ultimately fosters privatization and political passivity”.⁹⁸ Also, the various fundamentalist Protestant churches that have begun to grow in Nicaragua all tend to express “strongly anti-Marxist [sentiments] . . . in the form of otherworldly religious indoctrination”.⁹⁹

A similar disdain for other-worldliness can be seen in the Muslims writers. At the end of his four-volume thematic study of the Qur’an, Ghulam Parwez does not discuss eschatology, as would be expected:

“This is a highly typical trait of Muslim modernity. Instead of it comes as closing chapter – and that is equally significant – an excursus on the New World, to be brought about by the revolutionary views of the Koran. So the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ is not be regarded as a divine surprise at the end of time, but it is a mission to men, capable of realization if only the Koranic principles are carried out in full”.¹⁰⁰

Inayatullah Khan ridicules the idea that the heaven presented in the Qur’an is a celestial pleasure-garden; the heaven that is described, and for which we must strive, “is world-dominion and is unrelated to a hereafter!”¹⁰¹ Hanafi regards “the message of Islam as thoroughly belonging to this world”¹⁰² and believes in worldly salvation: the only possible afterlife is “the effects of one’s actions and the memory one leaves in the collective mind of fellow men”.¹⁰³ Mazhar

⁹³ Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, p. 138.

⁹⁴ Sobrino, ‘*Jesus and the Kingdom of God*’, p. 109.

⁹⁵ Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, p. 152.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁹⁸ Thomas Robbins [reviewer], ‘Prophetic Religions and Politics: Religion and the Political Order by Jeffrey K. Haddan; Anson Shupe’ in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 4 (1987), p. 563.

⁹⁹ McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, p. 208.

¹⁰⁰ J.M.S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation (1880–1960)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), p. 15.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁰² Riexinger, ‘Nasserism Revitalized. A Critical Reading of Ḥasan Ḥanafī’s Projects “The Islamic Left” and “Occidentalism” (And Their Uncritical Reading)’, p. 76.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Siddiqi argues that there is a hereafter in this world also and it is the legacy bequeathed to history by those who “work and live for higher things and disregard immediate difficulties”.¹⁰⁴ Rahman has a similarly ethical interpretation when he argues that “the essence of the ‘hereafter’ consists in the ‘ends’ of life ... or the long-range results of man’s endeavors on earth”.¹⁰⁵

Morteza Motahhari reinterprets Islamic asceticism away from its traditional attitude of antisocial and quietist detachment from worldly affairs, on the basis that “this world is merely a vale of tears and all is to be expected from the hereafter”.¹⁰⁶ Instead, to change asceticism into an attitude that encourages political activism, he interprets it as a way of freeing oneself from slavery to one’s passions for the purposes of thereby being able to participate more vigorously in political struggle; to do this, he distinguished between the activist asceticism of Imam Ali and the quietist other-worldly asceticism of Christian monasticism.¹⁰⁷

Shariati similarly criticises an attitude of turning away from this world in the hope of the hereafter; instead, he argues that an authentic understanding would see the afterlife as the reward of active engagement in this world.¹⁰⁸ Erdem interprets the day of judgement and resurrection to be both something for the afterlife, which is a matter of faith, but also a symbolic picture of political revolution, for which we must strive in this world to accomplish¹⁰⁹; “The Qur’an is comprised of both [i.e. worldly and other-worldly conceptions]. But the Kıyam [i.e. the day of judgement] of this world is seen as absolutely indispensable”.¹¹⁰

One can see that the reaction against other-worldliness can have the tendency with Muslim writers to result in the full subordination of religion to politics, and can lead to such a one-sided interpretation that all sense of the supernatural and transcendental can become lost. Hanafi’s blunt denial of the afterlife is the point that is reached when this logic is carried to its very end. It cannot be said that all radical Muslim writers have, to some extent, this disdain for

¹⁰⁴ Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation* (1880–1960), p. 100.

¹⁰⁵ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’an: Second Edition* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 108.

¹⁰⁶ Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation* (1880–1960), p. 100.

¹⁰⁷ Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, pp. 192–193; cf. Morteza Motahhari, *Seyri Dar Nahj al-Balagha* [Journey through the ‘Peak of Eloquence’] (Qom: Sadra, 1975), pp. 214ff.

¹⁰⁸ Ali Şeriati, *Dine Karşı Din*, pp. 140–142

¹⁰⁹ Erdem, *Devrim Ayetleri: Egemenlerin İslam’ı Değil Ezilenlerin İslam’ı*, pp. 223–226.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

other-worldliness.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, I conclude that, because the Latin American theologians are subject to the doctrinal authority of the Church, on the whole they maintain a union between their political commitments and their faith, without the one eliminating the other,¹¹² despite what some of their critics have claimed.¹¹³

7. Conclusion

To summarise my analysis: the liberation theologies of both religious traditions seek firstly to reinterpret their traditions from the perspective of the oppressed or poor, and they hence divide their own religions into that which does the same and that which instead stands on the side of the oppressors or the rich; secondly they seek to affirm the agency of the oppressed, to give greater importance to action over faith or rituals and to demand (often only implicitly or latently) immediate millenarian action to achieve utopia in the present; and thirdly they both manifest a disdain for excessively other-worldly ways of thinking.

To summarise my synthetic conclusions: firstly, without the structure of the Church to maintain certain boundaries, I put forward the hypothesis that Islamic liberation discourses may be more potent than Christian discourses for creating social upheaval; this is because intellectuals are more free to develop their ideas in ways that can galvanise a situation by expressing sentiments that become conjoined with the demands of the most oppressed strata; due once again to the lack of the Church's authority, I put forth the hypothesis that the attenuation of religious feeling by the needs of more worldly political demands is more likely to occur with Islamic thinkers than with Christians. Lastly, I claimed that all theologies of liberation contain in latent form a millenarianism which only became fully apparent in the Iranian revolution, due to the unique and critical set of circumstances present in that country at that particular time.

Finally I wish to make a point about how we ought to understand these explicitly-political forms of theology. I reject firmly the view

¹¹¹ The orthodox metaphysical world-view of Islam is maintained by the Egyptian revolutionary Islamist Sayyid Qutb (cf. Sayed Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The Theory of Jahiliyyah*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006) and the Turkish nationalist and Islamic socialist Nurettin Topçu (cf. *Ahlâk Nizamı* [The Order of Morality], Istanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 1961; *Var Olmak* [To Be], Istanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 1965; *Sıyan Ahlâkı* [The Morality of Rebellion], Istanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 1995).

¹¹² McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, pp. 83–91; and Mary Hembrow Snyder, 'Introduction to Spirituality and Liberation' in Curt Cadorette, Marie Giblin, Marilyn J. Legge, and Mary Hembrow Synder [eds] *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), pp. 221–229.

¹¹³ McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, pp. 47–61.

that sees these as merely fanatical threats to secularism and democracy, and which regards the intersection of politics and religion as being inherently pre-modern and undesirable. Our understanding of the recent revival of religious politics (to which this project is a meagre contribution) should not be pursued out of fear of the object of study. On the contrary. After the collapse of Marxist-Leninism, as Roberts writes, “is the only effective source for structural critiques of the unchallenged (and seemingly unchallengeable) power of global capitalism to be found in the discourses of theology and religion[?]”.¹¹⁴ I would answer in the affirmative. But, as Doja writes, religions can be either “a justification for liberationist movements or as an ideology justifying domination”.¹¹⁵ An examination of Islam alone will suffice. As Binder writes, “the resurgence of Islam is both a threat and a promise”.¹¹⁶ He is correct, although he and Hakan Yavuz see it as an opportunity to be seized by the bourgeoisie.¹¹⁷ But as Doja writes¹¹⁸ (2000, pp678–679), Engels perceived better than Marx that all secular ideologies of revolution, including scientific socialism, relied on a utopian impulse inherited from millenarian and apocalyptic religious movements, an impulse which it had negated and yet preserved in a dialectical movement of sublation.¹¹⁹ This utopian impulse could once again be mobilised in the future. Thus I argue that this religious revival is an opportunity for the oppressed, not the oppressors.

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¹¹⁴ Richard H. Roberts, ‘Introduction: Religion and Capitalism – a new convergence?’ in Richard H. Roberts [ed] *Religion and the Transformations of Capitalism: Comparative Approaches* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 8.

¹¹⁵ Albert Doja, ‘Spiritual Surrender: From Companionship to Hierarchy in the History of Bektashism’ in *Numen 4* (2006), p. 504.

¹¹⁶ Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 17.

¹¹⁷ Ibid ; M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 204.

¹¹⁸ Albert Doja, ‘Histoire et dialectique des idéologies et significations religieuses’ in *European Legacy: Journal of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas 5* (2000), pp. 678–679.

¹¹⁹ “[O]n pourrait volontiers qualifier plutôt de “lien dialectique,” entre [les mouvements religieux et les mouvements révolutionnaires], le socialisme étant obtenu par dépassement (Aufhebung) de la religion” (Doja 2000, p679) – i.e. one could readily posit a dialectical link between revolutionary and religious movements, socialism being obtained by the sublation of religion”.