

Maxime Rodinson on Islamic “Fundamentalism”

An Unpublished Interview with Gilbert Achcar

With the death of Maxime Rodinson at the age of 89 on May 23, 2004, one of the last great figures disappeared in an exceptional lineage of Western scholars of Islam—including Régis Blachère, Claude Cahen and Jacques Berque, to mention only Rodinson’s fellow Frenchmen. Rodinson belonged to this group of writers who pioneered new approaches, reclaiming the field of Islamic studies and bringing it up to the level of other social sciences. These writers had largely freed themselves from the failings of colonial “Orientalism”; they sympathized with the cause of Muslim peoples struggling against Western domination.¹ They had not (yet) been corrupted by the shameless media circus that has enfolded the “experts” in its embrace. Now “experts” have become privileged actors in the society of the spectacle as Islam, in the form of fundamentalism and terrorism, regains its status as enemy of choice in the Western imagination.

Maxime Rodinson distinguished himself among his peers by applying a critical Marxian interpretive scheme to the Muslim world. His relationship to Marx is furthermore the source of the great variety of themes and focuses that characterize his writings. For this reason his work cannot be pigeonholed in the category of Islamic studies alone. His theoretical contributions, in permanent dialogue with a Marxian inspiration that he never renounced, in fact cover broader reaches of historical and sociological research than the Islamic world alone. The Arab-Israeli conflict was an equally important dimension of Rodinson’s work. His article “Israël, fait colonial?” (“Israel: a colonial reality?”), published in the special issue of *Les Temps Modernes* devoted to the debate sparked by the June 1967 war, was an essential contribution to defining a critique of Zionism from the left.²

This same Marxist inspiration colors Rodinson’s reflections on Islamic fundamentalism in their entirety: not only in his analytical approach, which is both fundamentally “materialist” and comparative, but also in his political attitude. His understanding (in the deepest sense of the word) of the sources of the resurgence of fundamentalism as a political-religious ideology did not lead him, thoroughly anti-clerical atheist that he was, to have the least sympathy for it.³

The following interview, which has never been published before, took place in 1986 (I no longer recall the exact date) in Maxime Rodinson’s Paris apartment, amidst the accumulation of books littered around the floor because there was no longer any room for them in the rows of shelves covering its walls. I have reconstructed his words from the notes, virtually in shorthand, that I took when I listened to my tape recording (now lost), leaving out my own questions and comments. I intended at the time to publish the interview in a then projected journal, which never saw the light of day. The death of this great thinker inspired me to return to this task and publish the interview as a kind of tribute. This is all the more appropriate inasmuch as Rodinson’s statements, as readers will see, are not only as timely as ever but also fairly original even in relation to his own work.

—Gilbert Achcar

The term “Islamic *intégrisme*”⁴ is not a good one, but “*fondamentalisme*” is even worse, while “Islamism” leads to confusion with Islam as such. “Radical Islam” is not too bad, but no term really corresponds entirely to the object under discussion. In any event, we can subsume under the term “Islamic fundamentalism” all those movements that think that an integral application of Islamic dogmas and practices, including in the realms of politics and society, would lead the Muslim community or even the whole world back to a harmonious, ideal state, a duplication of the first, idealized Muslim community in Medina between 622 and 632 of the Christian Era.

In this respect, Islamic fundamentalism shows a certain similarity with a secular political ideology like communism. Communists too think that an integral application of prescriptions laid down by their founder should bring about a harmonious society without exploitation or oppression. By contrast, there is no similar ideology in Christianity. Christian fundamentalists think that an integral application of Christ’s precepts would make everyone good and nice, but not that it would necessarily change the structure of society.

This has to do with the profound difference between the origins of Christianity and of Islam. The Christians began by forming a little “sect,” an ideological grouping around a charismatic leader. They emerged in a remote province of the vast Roman Empire, which was endowed with an impressive administrative apparatus. This little sect did not initially claim to put forward a political and social program. That was neither Jesus’ intention nor the intention of the early church fathers during the religion’s first two or three centuries.

Before the emperor Constantine declared in 325 that this Church (*ecclesia* in Latin, which means “assembly”) should be a state religion, it had had time to build an autonomous ideological machine whose wheels were turning nicely. This meant that the tradition of two distinct apparatuses, a state apparatus and a church apparatus, would be maintained even after Constantine. The two apparatuses could be symbiotic or allied, as was often the case (monarchs anointed by prelates, “Cesaro-Papism,” etc.), but they could also come into conflict (as in the medieval clashes between popes and emperors or the excommunication of Louis XIV and Philippe Auguste). There have been some Protestant examples of church-state fusion (sixteenth-century Geneva and seventeenth-century Massachusetts, for example), but these have been exceptions in the history of Christianity.

Islam was born in the vast Arabian Peninsula, outside the territory of Roman civilization. Several dozen completely independent Arab tribes lived there with only a few common institutions: a common language, some religious practices, a calendar, markets and poetry competitions. In his period in Medina (from 622 until his death in 632), Muhammad was

considered their supreme political and religious leader at the same time. He was the religious authority, in contact with God, but also head of the community, not subject to Roman law. He settled conflicts, won the allegiance of the tribes, and dealt with the necessities of defense or in other cases of attack, in accordance with the prevailing way of life in the stateless Arabian world of his time. Thus we see at the origins of Islam a fusion of politics and religion and a single apparatus—at least in theory, since functional specialization inevitably took place once a vast Islamic empire was created.

Separation of religion and state is contrary to the Islamic ideal but not to Islamic practice; there have always been specialized bodies of *‘ulama*. In Islam judges are part of the religious apparatus, with different prerogatives from those of judges under Western, Roman law. There is a very great similarity here with Judaism, by the way; in Judaism as in Islam, men of God (rabbis) do not form a sacred clergy but are rather experts like the *‘ulama*. (The synagogue and *beit midrash* are places of study.)

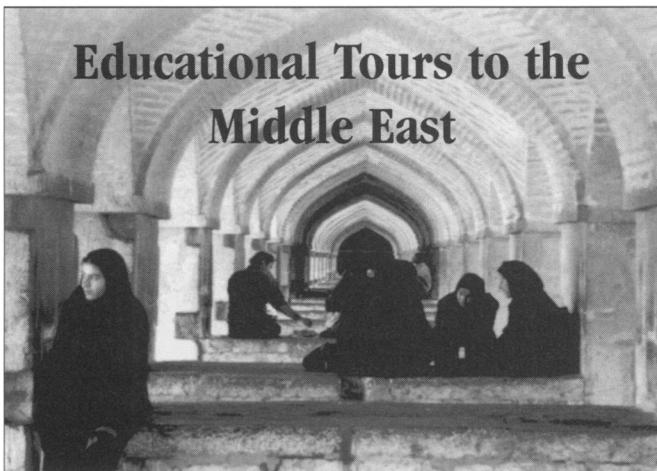
The Median ideal of a single political and religious authority nonetheless persists today. In fact, one rarely finds such a pure case of a political-ideological community as Islam—except post-1917 communism, which like Islam has experienced schisms and under which the political authorities lay down the law on theoretical problems as well as on basic ideology and on what people are supposed to think. But while communism is a model projected into the future, Islamic fundamentalism upholds a real model, albeit one that is 14 centuries old. It’s a hazy ideal. When you ask Islamic fundamentalists, “You say that you have answers that transcend socialism and capitalism—what are they?” they always respond with the same very vague exhortations, which can be based on two or three verses of the Qur’an or *hadith*—poorly interpreted in general.

The problem simply did not arise in the Prophet’s day, because no one thought about changing the social structure. Things were taken for granted as they were. Muhammad never said anything against slavery (just as Jesus never said anything against wage labor). Admittedly, the idea of an organized social community with hierarchies can be found in the Qur’an, but it was a completely normal idea at the time. Muhammad placed himself inside society, while Jesus placed himself outside it. Islam like Confucianism takes an interest in the state, while the doctrines of Jesus and Buddha are moral doctrines focused on the search for personal salvation.

Islamic fundamentalism is a backward-looking ideology. Islamic fundamentalist movements do not seek to overturn the social order, or only seek to do so as a wholly secondary concern. They have not modified the basis of society in either Saudi Arabia or Iran. The “new” society that “Islamic revolutions” set up bear a striking resemblance to the societies that they have just overthrown. I brought a reprimand down on my head in 1978 when I asserted, in a very moderate way, that Iranian clericalism would lead to no good. I said that Khomeini would be “Dupanloup⁵ at the best, Torquemada at the worst.” Unfortunately the worst is what happened.

Gilbert Achcar teaches politics and sociology at the University of Paris-VIII. His most recent book is *Eastern Cauldron: Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq in a Marxist Mirror* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004).

Educational Tours to the Middle East



Women's Delegations:

Palestine/Israel, March 6-16

Afghanistan, March 6-15

History, Culture and Architecture:

Iran, March 7-20

For more information and additional tour dates, visit our website.

GLOBAL  EXCHANGE

Reality Tours

800-497-1994 ext. 221 | www.globalexchange.org

When you get caught up in history, you have to make decisions. Once that happens political currents emerge, left, right and center. Under European influence the Islamic world has borrowed many political formulas from the West, whether they be liberal and parliamentary or Marxist-leaning and socialist. Its inhabitants have ended up getting a bit sick of them all. Parliamentarianism put big landowners in power, while socialism put military bureaucratic layers and others in power. So people wanted to go back to “our own good old” ideology, Islam. But European influence has made a profound mark, particularly the idea that governments should derive their authority from the consent of the governed, in general through elections. This is a new idea in the Muslim world. Thus the first thing that Khomeini did was hold elections and adopt a new constitution.

On the question of women, one could find a whole traditional arsenal of tools in Islam to uphold male supremacy and sexual segregation. One reason why Islamic fundamen-

talism has had a seductive appeal almost everywhere is that men are being stripped of their traditional privileges by modernist ideologies. They know that in the Muslim society that the fundamentalists are advocating they could rely on holy arguments in favor of male supremacy. This is one reason—very often concealed, but a deeply rooted reason, even if incidentally it is sometimes unconscious—why Islamic fundamentalism is in fashion. Modernizing experiences tended to give women more rights, and this has exasperated a fair number of men.

In 1965, I went to Algiers, at a time when Ben Bella was making cautious attempts to foster women's equality. An official women's organization—not the fake organization they have today—was holding a congress in the capital. As the congress was closing, Ben Bella came to march at the head of a procession of women through the streets of Algiers. From the sidewalks on both sides disgusted men were whistling and jeering. I'm sure that this played a role in Boumedienne's coup [later that year] and made many people more sympathetic to it.

Islamic fundamentalism is a temporary, transitory movement, but it could last another 30 or 50 years—I don't know how long. Where fundamentalism isn't in power it will continue to be an ideal, as long as the basic frustration and discontent persist that lead people to take extreme positions. You need long experience with clericalism to finally get fed up with it—look how much time it took in Europe! Islamic fundamentalists will continue to dominate the period for a long time to come.

If an Islamic fundamentalist regime failed very visibly and ushered in an obvious tyranny, an abjectly hierarchical society, and also experienced setbacks in nationalist terms, that could lead many people to turn to an alternative that denounces these failings. But that would require a credible alternative that enthruses and mobilizes people. It won't be easy. ■

—Translated from French by Peter Drucker

Endnotes

1 See Rodinson's own description of the development of Islamic studies in *Europe and the Mystique of Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988).

2 The article was later published in English as *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* (New York: Monad Press, 1973).

3 Maxime Rodinson's thinking on contemporary Islamic fundamentalism is mainly to be found in his *L'Islam: politique et croyance* (1993), which should be supplemented by reading the first chapter of his *De Pythagore à Lénine: des activistes idéologiques* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

4 “*Intégrisme*,” implying an attachment to the whole of a body of religious doctrines and scriptures, is a more common term in French than “*fondamentalisme*” for what is called “fundamentalism” in English. The word “fundamentalism” in the rest of this interview is an English translation of the French *intégrisme*.

5 A nineteenth-century French conservative Catholic bishop, who championed religious education and fought bitterly against “agnostics.”

NEED TO RENEW? YOUR LABEL TELLS YOU WHEN.

You can find out when your subscription ends—look at the label on the latest issue you received. Just above your name is a letter followed by the number of the *last issue* in your subscription: **R240/MER Reader**

Don't miss an issue. Renew now!