# Faith and Resistance

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## The Politics of Love and War in Lebanon

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# Introduction

*The rise of revolutionary religious activism*

The Islamic resistance movement and other theologies of liberation challenge Western secular modernity, which aims to marginalise the role of faith in contemporary political struggles. The common assumption among many in the West is that religion is a conservative force, and thus religious movements are viewed as either reactionary or fundamentalist. However, this view fails to recognise the revolutionary potential of religious activism – think of Malcolm X and the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr during the American civil rights movement, or the Christian church in South Africa, which played an essential role in ending apartheid by releasing the Kairos Document.[1] In 2009, Palestinian Christians revived this strategy by declaring that: 'the military occupation of Palestinian land constitutes a sin against God and humanity.'[2] Since the imperialist project is one of the foundations of Western secular modernity, this kind of radical religious activism is a form of resistance.

Nevertheless, some continue to distrust religion because Western conceptions of faith and rationality were transformed during the Age of Enlightenment, as I describe below, and then forcefully exported to the Global South through colonial systems like the bureaucratic state and capitalist free market, both of which privilege a very particular form of instrumental rationality, often at the expense of what it means to be human. Within the dominant Western secular framework, rationality is now narrowly defined and is almost always linked to science, economics and politics, while faith is relegated to superstation, emotion and the private realm.[3] According to this framework, religious belief is inherently outside of reason, while secular myths about ourselves and the world are incorrectly reified as neutral and universal truths. As a result, many of today's religious activist movements are framed as irrational, when what they are really reminding us about is the radical potential of faith and religious rationality as ways of knowing, relinking knowledge to our humanness.

Viewed accordingly, the persistence of religious activist movements across the Global South, in particular, should not come as a total surprise. As Kassab (2012) points out, when societies have been defined by the colonial other, this produces a certain kind of reaction. Although this reaction may look somewhat different according to which society is in question, the reaction is nevertheless still recognisable. The rise of the Islamic resistance movement and other religious activisms that deliberately incorporate faith into their ideas and practices is one of the many expressions of this post-colonial reaction. While religion has always framed social struggles in mythical terms, doing so today allows for the indigenisation of not only religion, but also of ideas and practices embraced by Marxism. As Lancaster (1988: xvii) observes, historicising religion and myth is a way to link the religious past to the present, so that historically oppressed peoples can achieve redemption in the present day. This process also uproots religious geographies, challenging secular conceptions of space and time.

Lancaster is writing about the experiences of Christian liberation theology in Nicaragua, which, like Islamic activism in the Middle East, is a counter-hegemonic force in dynamic negotiation with secular modernity. Marx argued that with the introduction of capitalism, 'Christianity as a developed religion had completed theoretically the estrangement of man from himself and from nature' (1844). Christian liberation theologians and Islamic activists are seeking to reconnect humans to the self and to nature, including the many structures of oppression in their daily lives. Faith, according to this understanding, is a commitment to God and all of God's creation. A similar perspective can be found in critical Marxists like Terry Eagleton, who describes faith as a set of commitments:

> What moves people to have faith in, say, the possibility of a nonracist society is a set of commitments, not in the first place a set of prepositions. They must already have some allegiance to an idea of justice, and to the possibility of its realisation, if they are to be stirred to action by the knowledge that men and women are being refused employment because of their skin colour. The knowledge in itself is not enough to do it.
>
> (Eagleton 2009: 119–120)

As Peruvian Christian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez also explains, 'theology is not a matter of my faith – it is a reflection of my

faith. Theology is an answer to the questions of those living their faith.'
Gutiérrez calls this approach, quite simply, 'doing theology' (1995a).

Liberation theologians in Latin America and Islamic activists in the
Middle East seek freedom and social redemption for their communities
by re-imagining the dominant ideas and practices of Western secular
liberalism through a religious or mythical lens. As a result, expressions
of faith are more deliberate and frequently framed vis-à-vis oppression.
Or as Christian liberation theologians put it, there must be 'a preferential
option for the poor'. In this way, these activists have actually transformed
the liberal framework by incorporating religion. While Löwy (1988)
demonstrates that neither Marx nor Engels were as anti-religion as is
often assumed, he singles out the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci as
being the leading thinker of the Communist movement who is most
engaged with religious issues. While Gramsci was quite critical of Cathol-
icism, he still recognised the utopian social elements of religious ideas
(Löwy 1988: 7). For example, Gramsci suggested that: 'religion is the
most gigantic utopia, that is the most gigantic "metaphysics" that history
has ever known, since it is the most grandiose attempt to reconcile in
mythical form, the real contradictions of historical life' (2005: 405).

My point here is that when activists refuse to reconcile religion with
the unjust conditions of life, and instead use it to transform today's
world, religion can become a revolutionary force. For example, Enayat
(2011: 24) explains how Twelver Shi'is, citing several Qur'anic verses,
believe that the return of the Twelfth Imam, also known as the Hidden
Imam or Mahdi, will realise the ultimate victory over the 'forces of
injustice'. Throughout the greater part of Islamic history, this potential
was not seen as something that could happen in this world, only in the
next, sanctifying 'the submissive acceptance of the status quo', because
the realisation of this victory was 'beyond the reach of ordinary human
beings' (Enayat 2011: 25). However, when historicised by Islamic activists
in the twentieth century, 'this link between the return [of the Mahdi] and
the ultimate, global sovereignty of the righteous and the oppressed' in
the here and now becomes a potential tool of radical activism (Enayat
2011: 25).

Nevertheless, contemporary revolutionary projects also face contra-
dictions. Beyond the difficulties inherent within all utopian thinking,
including socialism, of becoming authoritarian and exclusionary
in practice (Bauman 1976), another problem for religious activist
movements today is that they must also contend with the hegemony

of neoliberal capitalism – a world where Western secular modernity pervades both the dominant systems of knowledge and the entrenched structures of economic and political oppression, rendering a theology of liberation practically impossible. Compromises will be made. And thus, as scholars, we must honestly assess their implications. Accordingly, what can we expect then from doing a theology of liberation in today's corrupted and corrupting world?

Scholars have increasingly turned their attention to how contemporary religious movements are interacting with local and global economies (Bompani and Frahm-Arp 2010; Deeb and Harb 2013; Daher 2016; Dreher and Smith 2016), showing how deliberately incorporating faith into everyday social practices is a complex and contradictory political project that can be expressed in multiple ways. My concern with some of these studies is that Western-based scholars are not always being honest about their own positionality – where a researcher stands in relation to the people she is researching (Rose 1997; Mullings 1999; and Haney 2002). Critical engagement with religious movements is often located from a position that is decidedly centred, where the contradictions of living in cosmopolitan Western capitals and railing against neoliberal capitalism, all the while enjoying its material benefits, is not properly acknowledged when criticising religious movements for doing the same. Furthermore, post-colonial activists today are struggling against many layers of oppression; this is especially true for Shi'is in the Middle East. As Augustus Norton points out:

> In order to understand the Arab Shi'i it is necessary to come to grips with the social, political and, often, economic marginality which reflects contemporary patterns of discrimination and alienation, and then to see how such realities resonate within the mystical and symbolic richness of Shi'ism.
>
> (Norton 2005: 185)

Referring to the ideas of Frantz Fanon, Hudis adds that: 'Exploitation involves being robbed of the fruit of our labour, whereas alienation involves being robbed of our very being' (2015: Kindle edn). Accordingly, adopting a lens that accounts for the intersectional forces of oppression provides a more realistic framework.[4]

Perhaps my concern is also emblematic of a wider dilemma: those opposing neoliberal capitalism are strong on critique, but weak on

offering any practical alternatives to it, all the while continuing to participate in this hegemonic system. The issue that we must all confront is this: if we are living in a historical moment where neoliberal capitalism is hegemonic, what form of engagement with this world system is acceptable for those committed to both a revolutionary politics and social justice? Especially when Albert Memni observed in his critical reflections on the effects of colonisation on the colonised that:

> The most serious blow suffered by the colonised is being removed from history and from the community. Colonisation usurps any free role in either war or peace, every decision contributing to his destiny and that of the world, and all cultural and social responsibility. The colonised … feels neither responsible nor guilty nor sceptical, for he is out of the game. He is in no way a subject of history any more. Of course, he carries its burden, often more cruelly than others, but always as an object.
>
> (Memni 1992: 91–92)

Commenting on Memni's work, Paolo Freire adds that: 'So often do [the oppressed] hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything – that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive – that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness' (2005: 63). Taking these words to heart, I do not believe it is fair to judge those who were formerly colonised merely for participating in 'the game' when it means that they are able to contribute to their own destinies. For me a more fruitful, and human, approach is to ask if there are any radical possibilities within such an engagement, and if so, what are the parameters for assessing these? Because this predicament exists across the Global South; during a meeting on decolonising knowledge at the University of Johannesburg in 2016, one audience member questioned the possibility of ever realising decolonial ways of knowing and being when we are all complicit in one way or another in the global neoliberal capitalist system.[5] This question is precisely what I hope to further interrogate in this book by examining the ideas and practices of the Islamic resistance movement in Lebanon.

### Re-Orienting 'the Orient'

Drawing upon the writings of Antonio Gramsci, Edward Said was the first to develop a sophisticated framework of Orientalism to analyse

and critique Western representations of Islam and the Middle East. Said applied Gramsci's notions of 'common sense', or the unstable repertoire of ideas in popular culture, and 'hegemony', or the rule of consent without brute force, to explain how certain ways of seeing 'the Orient' have come to dominate the Western academy, arts, culture, media and politics. In his book *Orientalism*, Said (1979) described the European post-Enlightenment project to transform the peoples of the Middle East into an object of study, using a scientific methodology to claim objectivity while distorting their social realities. Said explained that when Europeans were confronted with the Orient, the experience was always framed by comparisons vis-à-vis the West, as if (so-called) Orientals did not exist before this encounter in their own right, with their own histories and their own ways of knowing and being. Instead, colonial representations of Orientals speak on their behalf, revealing more about the West than the East: within this framework, the Orient becomes a mirror reflection of all that is contemptible about Western society.

As Gregory (2004: 42) points out, representations are constructive, not merely mimetic; thus, through the eyes of the Western 'explorer' constructing knowledge of the Orient, 'the native, the peasant is *part* of the landscape.' Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, Said argued that Orientalism had established a certain coherence that was mostly unchallenged, where 'the word *Oriental* was a reference for the reader sufficient to identify a specific body of information about the Orient. This information seemed to be morally neutral and objectively valid' (1979: 205). Not only does this assumed neutrality position the Westerner outside of the Orient, but as Gregory (2004: 26) points out, it also spatialises difference. Over there – Islam and the Middle East – is imagined as outside of the Western universal. And yet as Said repeatedly noted, social knowledge is neither universal nor neutral: 'the general consensus that "true" knowledge is non-political (and conversely that overtly political knowledge is not "true" knowledge) obscures the highly if obscurely organised political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced' (1979: 10).

During the twentieth century, these scientifically 'neutral' experiences of the Orientalist paradigm began to dominate the Western episteme. Subjectivity became associated with emotion, passion, religion and 'the Other', whereas objectivity was linked with the 'real' sciences and the Western secular liberal project. Note that this framework is also

decidedly gendered against women. Calling this positionality in the West that of the Default Man, the British artist Grayson Perry observes that:

> Women and 'exotic' minorities are framed as 'passionate' or 'emotional' as if they, the Default Men, had this unique ability to somehow look round the side of that most interior lens, the lens that is always distorted by our feelings. Default Man somehow had a dispassionate, empirical, objective vision of the world as a birthright, and everyone else was at the mercy of turbulent, uncontrolled feelings.
>
> (Grayson Perry 2014)

When Westerners scientifically evaluate themselves and others according to the position of the Default Man, it reinforces a notion of the West as technologically and culturally superior, in turn reproducing Orientalist industries of so-called expert knowledges of 'the Other'. Nevertheless, the West's process of understanding the Orient remains far removed from its own self-understanding. In his follow up book, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said adds that while,

> we assume that the better part of history in colonial territories was a function of the imperial intervention … there is an equally obstinate assumption that colonial undertakings were marginal and perhaps even eccentric to the central activities of the great metropolitan cultures.
>
> (Said 1994: 34)

This misunderstanding has long disfigured both Western self-awareness and its representations of 'the Other', with Said later arguing that: 'covering Islam [in the Western media] is a one-sided activity that obscures what "we" do, and highlights instead what Muslims and Arabs by their very flawed nature are' (1997: xxii).

And yet, as Asad (2003b) describes, Orientalism is only one of a series of interlinked projects that undergird Western modernity, the others being imperialism, secularism and liberalism. Together they forged a framework to help the powerful institutionalise principles based on Western Enlightenment and colonial experiences that create new formations of space and time. Indeed, it is only in the modern era that the division of West and East/the Rest began to conceptualise space, with the juxtaposition of modern/advanced (time) first justifying

colonialism and then authoritatively describing the stages of economic progress or 'development' under neoliberal capitalism.[6] Ultimately, this paradigm determines how many of us think about everything ranging from democracy and freedom to cruelty and health. Those societies that do not embody the project of Western secular modernity are subjected to Orientalist characterisations via new technologies that are imagined to measure the Western Enlightenment principles objectively (Gouldner 1970; Habermas 1970; and Lyotard 1984). For example, Asad (2003a and 2003b) points out how questions of effectiveness and efficiency are now seen to be normative standards when determining the benefit of certain behaviours, often superseding essential ethical and moral concerns.[7]

Asad argues that, over time, many of us have socially internalised these principles, ultimately coming to believe that our modern experiences 'constitute "disenchantment" – implying a direct access to reality, a stripping away of myth, magic and the sacred;' this 'is a salient feature of the modern epoch' (2003a: 13). As Koshul (2005: 2) further explains, disenchantment signifies the rupture between religious rationalism and scientific rationalism. Up until the modern era, as is discussed below, there were intimate relations between faith and science. But under the projects interlinked with Western secular modernity, mythology and the sacred became conceptually isolated and assigned to inferiority or otherness, while faith developed into a way of knowing the supernatural only in parallel to knowledge about 'the *real* world' (Asad 2003a: 39). As Chakrabarty describes, secular history's time is godless, continuous, empty and homogenous. In other words, 'Gods, spirits and other "supernatural" forces can claim no agency in our narratives' (Chakrabarty, quoted in Deeb 2009: 244). However, as Whimster and Lash (2006: 6) correctly point out, 'science is singularly ill-suited to explaining the ultimate questions,' especially what it means to be human.

Within this conceptual framework, the hegemonic Western social forces are construed to appear as objective truths, not culturally contingent constructions.[8] And one of the most dangerous myths is that Western secular ideals are universal. Asad argues that when we ideologically disenchant liberalism by claiming that it is natural or neutral, it results in a translucent violence that is difficult for liberals to see, explaining that in order 'to make an enlightened space, the liberal must continually attack the darkness of the outside world that threatens to overwhelm that space' (2003a: 59). In other words, the Western

liberal must always conquer the illiberal, even justifying violence as a means-ends calculation. As Asad also puts it,

> liberal politics is based on cultural consensus and aims at human progress. It is the product of rational discourse as well as its precondition. It must dominate the unredeemed world – if not by reason then, alas, by force – in order to survive.
>
> (Asad 2003a: 61)

At the same time, the staunch belief in the neutrality of Western liberal principles and technologies eclipses this violence and the resulting pain that is inflicted in the liberalising mission.

Needless to say, as Freire pointed out, the imperialist project is intrinsically violent simply by establishing 'a relationship of oppression' (2005: 55). And because imperialism is foundational to Western secular modernity, this oppressive relation (the coloniality of power) continues. Deconstructing the phenomenon of violence today, Žižek argues that it falls into two distinct categories: subjective or objective. The latter type of violence is the systemic violence that is inherent in the normal everyday state of affairs:

> Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent. Systemic violence is thus something like the notorious 'dark matter' of physics, the counterpart to an all-too-visible subjective violence. It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be 'irrational' explosions of subjective violence.
>
> (Žižek 2008: 2)

Žižek's point is that by focusing only on the subjective violence of individuals and groups, we are ignoring the everyday violence created by the system (the rules and knowledges created by the Western coloniser, imperialist, capitalist and secular liberal). As a result, we fail to appreciate how the subjective violence of certain individuals and groups – many of whom the West designates as 'terrorist', including Hizbullah – is a response to already existing violence, or a form of resistance. By failing to recognise it as such, we propagate the very system that is producing and reproducing the objective violence.

Furthermore, when Western secular liberalism claims universality, it renders subjects with different frameworks based on other cultures and histories as darkness (Said 1994). According to Western Enlightenment principles, only particular understandings of religion are compatible with this project. Sayyid (2014b: 43) argues that secularism 'generates Muslims as permanently transgressive subjects, whose religious essence is constantly being undermined by the temptations of the political'. Here, the political is anything that challenges Western secular liberalism. As Brown adds, 'today the secular derives much of its meaning from an imagined opposite in Islam, and, as such, veils the religious shape and content of Western public life and its imperial designs' (2009: 10). Asad further explains that:

> when it is proposed that religion can play a positive political role in modern society, it is not intended that this apply to *any* religion whatever, but only those religions that are able and willing to enter the public sphere for the purpose of rational debate with opponents who are to be persuaded rather than coerced.
>
> (Asad 2003b: 183)

In order to be able to be persuasive, however, one's argument must be seen as rational according to a very particular understanding of rationality that is now dominant in the West today. Of course, this conception is also widely contested. The next section explains how Western ideas of rationality are historically determined and have a direct relationship with their accompanying conceptions of faith.

### The transformation of faith and rationality

Looking back to origins of Christian thought in Europe, faith is defined as that which God requires of humans in their relationship with God. According to Wolterstorff, the root meaning of the word faith in classical and Hellenistic Greek, or *pistis*, is 'trust, reliance, belief in, or confidence', and in certain nuances faith even means 'to obey' (1983: 11). In the Old and New Testaments, faithfulness means 'fidelity, endurance and hope', both in the hearts and on the lips of the faithful (Wolterstorff 1983: 12). But as Wolterstorff also clarifies, faith is not just belief, because belief also requires faith in the one who is trusted (Wolterstorff 1983: 13). Plantinga elaborates on this point by explaining that: 'belief in God means trusting