

THE PARADOX OF MICHAEL WALZER: 50 YEARS ON RADICAL RELIGION

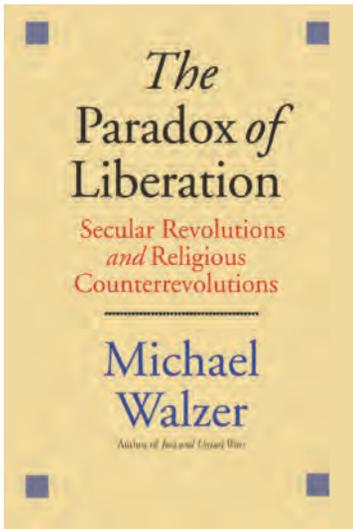
Review by Stephen Baskerville

THE PARADOX OF LIBERATION: SECULAR REVOLUTIONS AND RELIGIOUS COUNTERREVOLUTIONS

by MICHAEL WALZER – Yale University Press, 2015.

THE REVOLUTION OF THE SAINTS: A STUDY IN THE ORIGINS OF RADICAL POLITICS

by MICHAEL WALZER – Harvard University Press, 1966.



The cover of *The Paradox of Liberation* describes Michael Walzer as “America’s leading political thinker.” In this case the dust jacket hyperbole has some validity. While not today’s most famous philosopher, his work and its reception provides a commentary on liberal politics since the 1960s. His latest book follows a career that has explored enduring but often ignored themes, two are particularly critical now: religion and political radicalism.

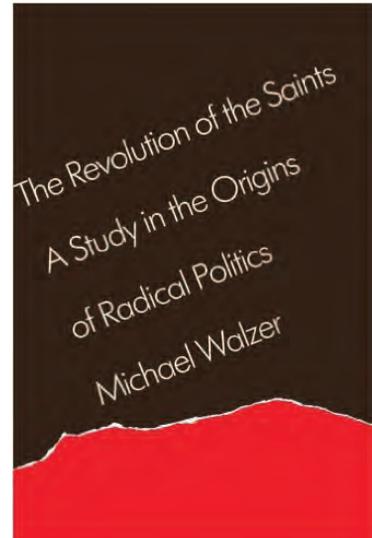
This year also marks the fiftieth anniversary of Walzer’s first

book, which combined similar themes: *The Revolution of the Saints*, the most provocative historical work ever produced by the New Left. The intellectual shortcomings of the left (and right) are attested by their failure to appreciate their greatest philosopher’s most stimulating work.

Revolution rejected standard Marxist historiography that imposed ideological dogma on history. From a more detached perspective, Walzer self-consciously used the emerging militancy of his own time to ask new questions about the roots of ideology itself.

Walzer argued that “the origins of radical politics” lay not in the republicanism of the eighteenth century but in the radical religion of the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries—an era historians of revolution had ignored precisely (and arbitrarily) because it was religious. Walzer saw radicalism emerging from Calvinism, which culminated in the English Revolution of the 1640s. The first great modern revolution was not Jacobin but Puritan.

Praised at its appearance, Walzer’s book had little long-term impact. Leftists could not reconcile it with Marxist dogma dismissing early modern revolutions as “bourgeois.” Scrutinizing radicalism as itself a subject of critical study and suggesting that the left’s pedigree could be traced back to religious zealots was ironically



threatening to those posturing as bearers of infallible truth.

But the right’s failure was more serious. By identifying radicalism as an historically specific innovation, Walzer offered the

possibility of approaching it critically, as a social pathology that entered with modernity and at some point might be discarded.

Conservative intellectuals dropped the ball. Conservative historiography responded to the earliest revolutions not with a cogent critique, but by belittling their importance. Rather than recognize that radicalism and revolution might be dangerous innovations, the safer ploy was to suggest that the English Revolution was not really very revolutionary or popular but instead an accident of circumstance perpetrated by unrepresentative elites. Conservative backlash against Marxist historiography of the English Revolution spent little effort describing its dangers and instead showed why it should not have happened.

Today, Walzer's contention that political radicalism originated in religious radicalism appears starkly vindicated by the new Islamist militancy.

But the larger implication is that "radical politics" constitutes a phenomenon in itself, larger than the tenets of any historical manifestation: religious, republican, nationalist, socialist, communist, Islamist. Each episode distances itself from and demonizes its predecessors while refusing to acknowledge any shared pedigree, being too intoxicated with its own righteousness to consider itself a product of history. Modern political discourse has thus become a dialogue among rival radicalisms, with few entertaining the possibility of non-ideological civic culture.

Walzer's own work addresses this in places, but now his purposes seem different. Moreover, radical politics today is taking

yet newer forms that even the left's greatest philosopher cannot confront.

Paradox recombines similar themes but now within the debate over "secularization." Yet I am not sure Walzer now honors the insights of his own work. The tensions of politicized secularization—the "paradox" of this book—reflect our civilization's central crisis today. If our most eminent philosophers cannot sort them out, they may be looking at optical illusions that deceive us all.

For Walzer, secularization is dynamic and political. It is inseparable from the post-war anti-colonial movements of "national liberation" exemplified in Algeria, India, and Israel. It is also open-ended; as he makes explicit, it has no real conclusion. It is itself ideological, therefore, and seems to be the exclusive property of the "secular democratic left."

The "paradox" is why the triumphant secular leftist "equilibrium" is then so frequently overturned by politicized religious militancy: Islamism, Hindutva, and Orthodox Judaism. But the beliefs themselves are ignored; unlike political ideas, which he dissects mercilessly, religion is a black box and unworthy of comparative treatment. No differences of importance distinguish the religions themselves (Islam, Hinduism, Judaism) or their transfiguration as political ideologies (Islamism, Hindutva, apparently Orthodox Judaism).

Also unclear is how far Walzer's "national liberation" struggles include the great revolutions which also presented themselves as anti-imperial revolts: China in 1949? Iran in 1979? These revolutions, like their European predecessors, generally do not

fit his pattern. While all contained secular-religious tension, the two "liberations" seemed largely either/or.

Indeed, the striking exception to Walzer's pattern of secular liberation followed by religious reaction is the England of *Revolution*. Here religious radicalism preceded secularization, and while secular radicalism also contributed ideas (later attractive to both left and right), Walzer himself insisted that religion overwhelmingly drove the revolution.

Moreover, this seminal revolution produced offspring, the Anglophone "dominions," with little need of subsequent "national liberation." The exception that proves the rule might be the United States (considered in a postscript), whose war of national liberation (of sorts) revived many principles from England (both religious and secular) and is often described as a second British civil war. Rebels' continued engagement with their own society is an important theme in Walzer. Here he recognizes the most successful "secularization," calling it "the first secular state in world history."

By contrast, later movements of "national liberation" are largely failures, which certainly explains the return to religion. The grim legacy of Marxist-dominated anti-colonial liberation makes it unsurprising if intellectuals throughout the global South look to religion as an alternative "liberation."

Indeed, wars of national liberation have not provided the modernization that Walzer himself saw as one purpose of revolutionary politics. Though Communists prioritized industrialization, the result was

ramshackle, even in Europe. Culturally, it was equally disastrous, producing dysfunctional societies of suspicion and apathy. In contrast to radical religion, he writes, “National liberation...is a secularizing, modernizing, and developmental creed.” Developmental? This is precisely what national liberation has not produced in the global South, resulting in little besides poverty, famine, displacement, conflict, stagnation, and incessant cycles of insurgency and counter-insurgency.

Now their replacement ideologies, Islamism and Hindutva, aside from terrorism, produce little economically besides stagnation. (I will not comment on the plausibility of comparing Orthodox Judaism.) So radical religion has proved no more successful than radical nationalism, socialism, and anti-colonialism.

Indeed, it is not clear that today’s radical religions are reactions or “counterrevolutions.” Islamism itself is a hodge-podge of ideas taken largely from the western left.

But the larger dilemma is that Islamism combines the resentments of the left (Western “imperialism,” “capitalism”) with those we might associate with the right (Western cultural-sexual decadence). How to respond thus divides both Western left and right.

Perhaps the important point transcending left and right is that this demonstrates what Islamism shares not only with other radical religions but also with secular ideologies: All thrive on resentment. This is clear from the logic of *Revolution*, and it is the only way religious and secular radicalism can be plausibly equated. Evaluating the social value

of any ideology or ideological religion (or even apolitical religion) may be a question of how constructively it processes the resentments endemic to all societies (intensified during rapid change, as *Revolution* argued) and to what ends the resentment is channeled.

Paradox criticizes leftists for dismissing religion in liberation, but then he appears to dismiss it himself: “Revivalist and millenarian movements... are sometimes tumultuous but always ineffective.” Ineffective in what sense? Has he read *The Revolution of the Saints*? “Neither millenarian nor traditional politics invites ideological commitment or long-term activism,” he adds. “Nor does either politics promise individual freedom, political independence, citizenship, democratic government, scientific education, or economic advance.” The assumption that secular political radicalism is a virtue for its own sake characterizes Walzer’s understanding of both secularization and (another major theme) citizenship.

As for individual freedom and the rest, this is precisely what Walzer’s own account of radical religion in England did produce. Here Walzer seems to be at odds with the author of a half-century ago. More than an historical effort to pinpoint radicalism’s chronological origins, *Revolution* explored the political sociology of modernization. For Walzer, the revolution creates the national civic maturity, the trial by which the nation collectively acquires the habits of self-government. Functional reasons therefore explain why religious radicalism preceded secularization and stability, which the religion still undergirds and from which it could still resurface. This was

his complex argument connecting religious radicalism with secular “equilibrium” climaxing *Revolution*:

...the Puritans knew about human sinfulness and...Locke did not need to know. ... The triumph of Lockeian ideas...suggests...the appearance of saints and citizens for whom sin is no longer a problem. ... Lockeian liberals found it possible to dispense with religious... controls in human society...but...only because the controls had already been implanted in men. ... Liberalism was dependent upon the existence of “saints”...persons whose good behavior could be relied upon.

Walzer believes this is achieved by political ideologies. He makes a powerful case that Puritanism achieved it. His suggestion that it applies to Jacobins, Bolsheviks, and others looks less plausible.

For all his commitment to secularization, he is asking politics to achieve what only religion can. Not a religion that is also a political ideology, but one that, if not apolitical, recognizes legitimate spheres for Caesar and God. The latest book appears to make national liberation the continued vehicle for modernization by renewal through “engagement” with the religious culture that, he recognizes, commands far more popular allegiance.

But I am not sure the chosen religions can help. Both secular and quasi-secular radicalisms have become ever-more terrifying—their terror directly connected to their aspiration to control the state. “They aim in each of my three cases to

create a state that is entirely their own.” But that is because he has chosen religions (certainly Islamism and Hindutva) that are also political ideologies. He ignores the religion of *Revolution* that created “the first secular state in world history.”

Walzer’s Puritans also aspired to state power, and their brief endeavor to create theocracies in England and New England attests to their ideological nature. Moreover, revolutionary Puritanism was not without its own circumstantial involvement with terror, as the Irish know.

But it is also clear that the politically aggressive phase of Protestant Christianity, notwithstanding some polemicists’ current efforts, cannot remotely be compared to the Islamist terrorism that now shocks the world. Walzer himself insisted that the Puritans never advocated or engaged in assassination or terror. And their theology alone provided for precisely the “secularism” that he now sees slipping through our fingers.

Despite his effort to appropriate secularism for the left, most of us in the liberal West today—left and right, believers or not—share his desire to preserve the secular state, however we might disagree on the details. The devil in those details was (until recently) fairly well harnessed: sacramental drugs, school prayer, flag salutes.

In the West, this equilibrium is now being upset not by religious zealots but by new radicals armed with new ideologies, demanding changes in the name of ever-expanding secularization. Indeed, it is Walzer’s central “paradox” that the “equilibrium” he values upsets itself: “The old ways must be repudiated and

overcome—totally,” he quotes the liberationists. “But the old ways are cherished by many of the men and women whose ways they are. This is the paradox of liberation.”

Walzer wants the liberators to be better connected to the values cherished by the people they are liberating. But most people do not want liberation on the left’s terms. If we all need permanent liberation, most people seek it in religion, not politics.

Walzer’s liberators are ideologues in that their agenda is open-ended. This distinguishes them from non-ideological liberators with limited goals whom the left despises: Gandhi’s passive resistance (whom Walzer calls “the odd man out” for “turning traditionalist passivity into a modern political weapon”); Martin Luther King; the “anti-politics” of Communist-era dissidents and their “velvet” revolutions.

Why are these not valid models of “national liberation”? Because they do not involve “ideological commitment or long-term activism”? They freed specific people from specific injustices, all state-imposed. Moreover, they used the regimes’ own principles against them (another Walzerian theme). And when the limited liberation was accomplished, those remaining returned to the private apolitical lives that (Walzer himself complains) the left holds in contempt.

This distinction is connected to major themes in Walzer’s work: citizenship and community. But Walzer’s citizens are mostly activists. He extolls “amateurism,” but the activist is a professional or aspiring professional. His citizenship is not sacrificial because he works at it full-time,

seeking power or remuneration. If not a professional revolutionary, he is a potential policymaker or implementer.

Unlike the citizen, the activist does not return home when liberation is achieved, because it is never achieved; his entire life is absorbed by politics and ideology. Stable liberal democracy is never enough; he (or nowadays she) always demands more. And now the agenda extends into the most intimate corners of private life: family and sexuality.

Here is the book’s most revealing feature, the one most illustrative of our emerging crisis. Throughout the book, without elaboration, Walzer crowns his points with examples from a new radicalism that he does not scrutinize with his characteristic nuance: not national but sexual liberation. And as for following the liberators to their latest barricades—homosexual liberation—this is a “no-go zone.”

If the result is less elegant than expected from Walzer, we should be asking why. Uncharacteristically, he enters sectarian casuistry reconciling feminism with Islam. But to do this without descending into precisely the tedious ideological correctness that we all read Michael Walzer to avoid requires recognizing parallels and alliances that embarrass both sides. Here again, Walzer does not “go there,” and this tells us something about where we all may be going without much guidance from our best minds.

All Walzer’s examples delineating the boundaries of religion and politics directly involve sexual politics and women, whom he calls “the true heirs of national liberation.” One quality distinguishing Walzer’s leftism is his refusal to equate disparate

claims to “oppression.” But here he sounds like the leftists he criticizes: “If you are in favor of this kind of liberation—of peoples or nations or religious groups—you must be in favor of its repetitions,” even if they are not apparently comparable. Liberation becomes a virtue for its own sake, and apparently self-justifying.

Nor does he explore the huge can-of-worms he opens. “I suspect that the differences [between secular liberation and both traditional and revivalist religion] are clearest with regard to the subordination of women,” he suggests. “The demand for gender equality poses the greatest challenge to traditional religion and is probably the most important cause of revivalist zealotry in all three of my cases.” Indeed, his suspicion’s huge implications are relentlessly pushed by sexual liberationists, which is why secularist ideology and religious faith now stand eyeball-to-eyeball worldwide.

This is the point where, once again, liberation confronts freedom. But Walzer is not going there, and neither is anyone else, left or right. It is today’s gender ideology that is aggressively upending Walzer’s “equilibrium,” demanding state controls on religious and other freedoms: litigating against bakers and prosecuting unorthodox views as “crimes against humanity”; arresting preachers and civil servants for their sexual morality; patently false rape accusations against students and soldiers; mass incarcerations of divorced fathers without trial.

Today’s minefield in the church-state borderland is marriage, for centuries a DMZ and now an open battlefield. And not only in the West: divorce and family law come up repeatedly in his examples, without elaboration.

Here we may indeed have reached “the end of ideology,” not in the sense of writers in the 1950s and 1990s prematurely declaring it obsolete, but because we have pursued the logic of radical politics to its conclusion. We seek not only political redemption but also social, spiritual, and even sexual fulfillment from something that can never satisfy it: political ideology. Indeed, this latest book is the logical culmination of the recognition—begun with *Revolution*—that radical ideology is itself a secularized religion whose hope for redemption from irrelevance is to reconnect with its origins.

It is a religious cliché that people are searching for something that secular politics cannot provide. That some are searching for it in violent politicized religions that resemble secular ideologies indicates that we have not reconnected enough.

We cannot extricate ourselves from this crisis without recognizing that religious ideas, like political ones, are not all the same; they can be good and bad and demand extended debate not limited to seminaries. That debate must return to the center of our political culture, which for most people globally it never left. We must scrutinize each specific religion as an

alternative response to the same resentments and injustices—demands for ethical government, economic development, and functional family structure—that have been monopolized by discredited radicalisms. This would have been helpful when the discontents were economic and social; it is critical now that they are sexual.

For this was the achievement of *Revolution*: to show that religion also processes resentments and other responses to dislocation, injustice, inequality, poverty, ignorance, superstition, and corruption and aspires to build a stable, prosperous, and free society. Whether it channels the rage constructively or destructively is the debate that *Revolution* should have started. We must demand substantive, even theological dialogues between Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and liberal democracy, in preference to insurgencies by Puritanism, Islamism, Hindutva, and the open-ended sexual radicalism that is now served up as the successor to socialism and communism by the puerile left whose best alternative was the work of Michael Walzer. [P](#)

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