

Revolution and Liberation: A Call for Secular and Religious Argumentative Engagement

By David A. Frank

Review of *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions*, by Michael Walzer

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Alan Wolfe is right to call Michael Walzer “America’s greatest living political philosopher.” Walzer’s 27th book, *The Paradox of Liberation*, subtitled *Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions*, is a continuation of his enlightening struggles with pluralism, war, revolution, and liberation. The book advances a new and provocative agenda, one that turns on the need for a genuine engagement of secular and religious thought in contexts of revolution and liberation. He calls for this engagement as a “radical critic of the religious tradition,” speaking “from the side of secular rebellion” (126). Walzer would align with Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and other fundamentalist “new atheists” on their critique of religious zealotry, but pivots from them on the principle of pluralism to seek value in religious traditions, rather than summarily dismissing them as “the opium of the people” (Marx) and “mass delusions” (Freud).

Walzer’s call for an engagement of secular and religious thought results from the paradox he discovered in his study of liberation movements in India, Israel, and Algeria, three revolutions led by secularists proclaiming the birth of new secular societies that, in turn, gave birth to fundamentalist religious counterrevolutions: the Indian Hindutva, the Israeli Gush Emunim, and the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front. The secularists were unable to sustain their revolution, failing, in Walzer’s words, to “consolidate their achievement and reproduce themselves in successive generations” (104). The fault, Walzer writes, was due to the secularist’s ignorance of things religious: Jawaharlal Nehru, the leader of the Indian independence movement, “was mostly tone deaf” to the call of religion (122); Theodor Herzl, founder of the Zionist movement, “had not much of a Jewish education” (17); and the leaders of the FLN, the socialist nationalist movement in Algeria, “did not spend much time learning about the principles of Islam” (10). Secular revolutionaries sought to negate old identities and religious traditions in favor of a “new” Indian, Jew, and Algerian. Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam, the secular revolutionaries declared, would yield to societies founded on modern scientific rationality. In the imagination of the secularist revolutionary leaders, “decline was the destiny of all religions” (25); scientific rationality would triumph. Instead, a new

modern form of religious countermovements arose in the wake of the three revolutions that imagined a fundamentalist and resacrilized society.

The need for secular leaders of revolution to engage the religious is necessary, Walzer argues, if national liberations anchored in secular impulses are to avoid creating fundamentalist religious countermovements. Walzer outlines two reasons for secular-religious engagement -- the first is pragmatic, and the second is based on the principle of pluralism. The religious will always be with us, Walzer maintains; secularists will not extinguish religious energies, now or in the future -- attempts to do so will only lead to the "return of the negated" (56, 58). A more important reason Walzer offers for a secular-religious engagement is to fulfill his vision of pluralism; secularists need to appreciate the capacity of the religious to offer reason-based, humane, inclusive, and just action in the secular world.

Walzer can imagine this capacity, even though he is a "radical critic" of religion and sides with "secular rebellion" because of the political philosophy of pluralism he has developed in a host of books, including *Spheres of Justice* and *Pluralism, Justice, Equality*. In so doing, he makes careful distinctions between religious zealots and practitioners of faith traditions who seek out reasonable interpretations of religious texts and take actions to forgive, repair the world, and care for God's creation. It is at this point fundamentalist atheists part ways with Walzer, as they place the possibility of religion practicing reason, contributing to humane values, and engaging in just action beyond the pale of their imaginations. Walzer cites Narayan's recent claim that "many religious traditions are in fact more capacious than fundamentalists allow. Insisting on humane and inclusive interpretations might in many contexts be crucial components in countering the deployment of religious discourses to problematic nationalist ends" (119-120). That Walzer, through the prism of pluralism, seeks out the humane, inclusive, and the just in religion and religious texts that do not appeal to his secular soul is testament to the vitality of his pluralism.

Walzer surveys efforts made by secularists to engage the religious in the three cases he considered and found they were unsuccessful. His autopsy of these failures is revealing and offers an opportunity to engage his argument about the need for productive secular-religious exchanges in the context of national liberation. Walzer enlists Antonio Gramsci to call for a social "equilibrium" that "takes into account the interests and tendencies of the groups over which hegemony will be exercised." Gramsci's societal equilibrium is Walzer's anchor for his vision of a productive engagement between the secular and religious, one in which the interests and values of both would be honored. Gramsci, however, is a questionable

authority, as his call for a social equilibrium is a short-term tactical move designed to serve the ultimate goal of desacralizing society. As Walter Luiz Adamson has demonstrated, Gramsci was not a Walzerian pluralist seeking to align secular and religious values; he believed secular worldviews would eventually triumph. “Socialism is the religion that must kill Christianity,” Gramsci avowed and argued that material praxis should be the new religion. Gramsci sought to capture the advantages of the organizational structures of religion by declaring a secular equivalent, all the while negotiating with the spiritually religious in the short term. Unfortunately, Gramsci’s position undermines the authentic engagement and pluralism Walzer advocates by seeking the eventual decline and death of spiritually based religion.

The paradox Walzer considers suggests that Gramsci’s theoretical efforts and the secular movement leaders’ ignorance and complete rejection of the religious traditions led to a much harsher and more fundamentalist version of traditional religion, a backlash of consequence for post-revolutionary societies. Walzer notes that the fundamentalist expressions of Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam unleashed in Israel, India, and Algeria after secular revolutions were represented by the leaders of these movements as a rescue of the ancient and essential root meanings of their faith traditions in response to secular attacks. This “return to the tradition,” according to Walzer, mimics the form taken by secular movement leaders to desacralize the world with a modern version of religious fundamentalism that seeks to resacralize society. Walzer, Karen Armstrong, and others note that contemporary fundamentalist religious movements are creatures of and responses to secular modernity, having little resemblance to traditional religion.

Premodern or “traditional” religion, Walzer recognizes, was tolerant, embracing reason as one way of knowing. The God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in the premodern understanding, gave humans the gift of reason expressed through argument. In the Jewish tradition, God and humans argued, with God conceding after one exchange that “My Children have defeated me, My Children have defeated me.” The rabbis declared that after the full revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai, humans would make decisions bridging the Torah to the secular world with dialogue and argument rather than expecting divine revelation. These arguments are captured in the Talmud. Walzer is collaborating on a four-volume collaborative work on the Jewish political tradition, and is fully aware of this expression of Judaism. Jesus, using reason, argued with God, his disciples, and the Pharisees. In turn, Christians developed the art of casuistry, the application of general theological principles to particular problems and cases, which requires a flexible understanding of reason. Walzer advances casuistry as the method of

reasoning in his *Just and Unjust Wars*. Disputation and debate were dominant practices in the application of Islamic scripture, which was intended to unleash the power of reason on the problems Muslims faced. Walzer, in the *Paradox of Liberation*, highlights women, working within the Islamic tradition, who marshal verses from the Qur'an to make the case for the equal treatment of women. Premodern Hinduism, Walzer observes, citing the scholarship of Ashis Nandy and Aramya Sen, was religiously tolerant, and religion in the Indian tradition celebrated reason, dialogue, and debate.

Placing religion's capacity to reason and sponsor tolerance in the foreground, as Walzer does, complements his efforts to condemn interpretations of religion doctrines that justify totalitarianism and beheadings. Religious doctrine and that of the Enlightenment have both been mined for the purposes of exclusion, scapegoating, and mass atrocity. The "traditional" religious doctrines Walzer compares to the modern fundamentalism did host groups that cited sacred scripture to justify violent acts. In a recent *Dissent* article, Walzer extends the themes he develops in *The Paradox of Liberation* by criticizing leftists who defend Islamic zealots because they contest Western imperial powers, observing that they fail to "distinguish between Islamist zealotry and Islam itself." Walzer's pluralism is clear eyed and empirical, allowing him to part ways with leftist partners if necessary to condemn right-wing religious movements who abuse universal human rights in the name of resisting Western imperialism. His pluralism allows him to appreciate the humane impulses of religion but to criticize religious zealots who distort religious traditions because they reproduce the approach taken by fundamentalist secularists, or they cherry-pick passages from their sacred scripture to justify violent action

The secular-religious binary might be better viewed as a spectrum; many humans trespass over the boundaries between the two. Walzer recognizes the permeability of the border between the religious and secular in Israel, writing, "They are certainly contradictory, but they haven't been brought into dialectical relation, in which each influences the other and the two are transformed in some interactive way" (66). The religious and secular are often in contradiction, but they need not be mutually exclusive. Witness, for example, the secular-religious divide in Israel. The Guttman Reports on Israeli religiosity describe many Israelis as holding simultaneously to both religious and secular values in which they are placed in a dialectical relation, although one that often sponsors tension. Bringing the secular and religious into dialectical relation requires an engagement of "logos" and "mythos."

Karen Armstrong has identified “logos” as secular thinking, which stresses the rational, scientific, and pragmatic. “Mythos” identifies the eternal meaning and the transcendent, often expressed through religion. In premodern thought, logos and mythos were, to borrow Jack Balkin’s wonderful phrase, in “nested opposition.” They coexisted as two interlocking anchors necessary for human meaning and judgment. In the modern period, fundamentalist atheists advocate a secular logos to desacralize the world, rinsing it of mythos with scientific rationality. No longer are the secular and religious in nested opposition, as mythos seeks total dominance over logos and vice versa.

The alternative, one that Walzer sketches, is an engagement that recognizes the differences between the secular and the sacred but sees them as expressions of pluralism that reason-based argument that is not reduced to scientific rationality can sort out when they are in conflict. The next step, if Walzer’s vision of an authentic engagement between the secular and religious is to be realized, would be to develop how argument between the two would proceed. To reach the engagement between the religious and secular, Walzer insists they must be in a dialectical relationship, and both must be open to influence and transformation. *The Paradox of Liberation* touches lightly on, but does not develop, how the secular and religious get to a dialectical, influential, and transformative engagement, a challenge that remains with us. Walzer identifies what he believes to be the essential characteristic of the engagement he seeks: “It is argument itself, with varying outcomes, that constitutes the Gramscian equilibrium, not any single or final balance of acceptance and rejection” (126). Argument, or reason-giving engagement between those who may disagree, is what Walzer offers as the alternative to mutual negation.

Walzer errs in enlisting the secular fundamentalist Gramsci, who sought a secular victory over religion, as the linchpin of his reform of liberation; the rhetorical theories of Kenneth Burke and Chaïm Perelman would better serve as authorities for the argument equilibrium Walzer seeks. Burke and Perelman are the best-known modern scholars of argumentative engagement of the 20th century and join Walzer in tethering reason to an embodied pluralism that includes science and sacred scripture rather than to secular or religious fundamentalism. True argumentative engagement, Burke and Perelman maintain, asks the participants in argument to honor the plurality of human values, both secular and religious, and to learn about and then adapt arguments to the values held by the audiences with whom they argue. Adaptation does not require a capitulation to the values of the audience, but it does require an

understanding of the audience's preferences and a genuine effort to discover or create principles that, in moments of revolution and liberation, the secular and religious might share.

Burke and Perelman stress the need for those in disagreement to share some common ground, if productive argumentative engagement is to take place. An understanding of the sacred scriptures and religious traditions of their respective audiences would have allowed Ben-Gurion, Nehru, and the leaders of the FLN to discover values their secular and religious compatriots shared. In addition, argumentative engagement opens up the possibility of creating common ground and value change, modification, and transformation because the process of argumentation will place pressure on preexisting beliefs that may not survive interrogation. Those who are secular may discover that the religious appreciate scientific rationality, apodictic logic, secular reason, and science. The religious may come to realize that the irreligious can be deeply moral. Argumentative encounters between the secular and religious could lead to the secular using the sacred scripture of their religion brethren in order to persuade them, doing so with genuine respect rather than as a purely tactical move. Similarly, religious advocates could call on scientific reasoning in alignment with sacred scripture to influence their secular audiences, lines of argument beginning in different value sources but converging on the same truth.

Separately, those who are secular or religious might not find the value premises of their opposites persuasive, but they may agree on what actions should be taken during and in the aftermath of liberation. In seeking a common basis for human rights, Richard McKeon, Jacques Maritain, and a group of philosophers gathered by the UN to seek the foundation for universal human rights concluded that they could not do so easily in the realm of values and principles. They did find that representatives from different cultures could agree on points of action. An argumentative engagement between the religious and secular on questions of liberation might feature what should be done rather than the specific religious or secular values informing these actions. The National Conciliation Document of Prisoners (May 11, 2006) is an illustration of an effort by secular and religious Palestinians to agree on action steps the Palestinian leadership should take against the Israeli occupation rather than on underlying value differences. Although it did not earn an official status, it did identify 18 actions Palestinians could affirm that didn't depend exclusively on either religious or secular doctrine.

Walzer has established a research agenda for what he calls the "reform of liberation" (125). Such reform is needed because the secular and religious wings of liberation movements need to be in alignment

to achieve and sustain humane revolution and liberation. Walzer's reform agenda resolves the paradox at the center of his study by offering an alternative to fundamentalism and zealotry, both in its secular and religious expressions. To reform liberation, a Walzerian pluralism is needed to ground an ongoing rhetorical and argumentative relationship between the secular and religious in the human space where earth meets heaven.

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