Gilles Dauvé & Karl Nesic
The Continuing Appeal of Religion
2006

Retrieved on 2016-04-13 from
www.prole.info/texts/continuingreligion.html

theanarchistlibrary.org

The Continuing Appeal of Religion

Gilles Dauvé & Karl Nesic

2006

but the Balkans aren't the only region where socio-economic globalization goes with political-cultural *balkanization*. The world's "global village" looks like a block of flats where languages and customs cohabit and keep communicating while remaining separate. What do a Flemish proletarian and a Walloon proletarian now experience together in Belgium ? For a community to start building up, sharing a condition is not enough: sharing has to materialize and take shape through common action and struggle. Between the individual (and family) concrete level and the general political or religious abstract level, nothing much is currently emerging in the absence of communist critique. The quest for the sacred is the inevitable result of mercantile desecration. Capitalist undifferentiation breeds closed-in identities, the excesses of which democracy comes to redress.

Up to now, communism has not managed to exist socially as a universal perspective that would supersede both consumer immanence and religious transcendence. There will be no revolution without these matters being dealt with, and that will not just depend on the world expansion of capitalism, which only provides the frame-work for the struggle to take place.

reasonably expect to survive him, whether or not posterity would remember the author's name. The appeal of belief is based upon a desire for the universal.

It's modern proletarians' incapacity to get rid of exploitation and misery, to prevent slaughter in Verdun and in the Somme trenches, in Auschwitz and Hiroshima, to understand how they got there, that fuels the interpretations of history as something inevitable and inaccessible. Religion is probably the best vehicle for such interpretations. As brilliant as it can be, social or natural science only suggests analyses that stay within the object they study: science provides us with an infinity of *hows*. Religion gives a definitive *why*, which in modern religions does not even contradict the hows and merely coexists with rational explanations. Religion relates the object (our lives, the misadventures of human history) to a cause that's beyond our reach. There lie its strength and purpose: it takes us outside the tangible world and evades refutation. Religious myth feeds on historical failure.

The persistence or recovery of religious differences, as well as the obligation to respect walled-in identities in Western democracies, are expressions of a deep phenomenon. At the time when it looks more unified than ever, capitalist civilization is fragmented. Another sign would be the paradoxical coexistence of proclaimed individualism with the obsession of permanent communication: everyone wants to be autonomous and decide of everything by himself, but needs to be always connected and instantly connectable to everything and everybody. The parallel growth of globalized economies and ethnic-religious cleavages indicate a stiffening of society. Social order is not questioned, but shattered by disorders and break-ups. In the old capitalist metropolises, it's often the immigrants' children who are seduced by a fundamentalism that their parents were drifting away from. It is equally significant that a society should shy away from the critique of archaic standards that condemn it. Since we started writing this essay, there's one more State in Europe: Montenegro,

Contents

rary capitalist critique, any revolutionary perspective is devoid of meaning.

Debunking "God" is only relevant if it includes the debunking of any god, of man as a godlike figure processing the universe, and of nature as a new god, whether man is its lord or its servant.

Which Universality?

Because it published anti-Church pamphlets and delivered atheist speeches, the labour movement considered itself liberated from religion, yet its behaviour was deeply religious. Social-democrats acted like revealers who would gradually shepherd their flock to a promised land of work based (i.e. capitalist) abundance. Stalinism more drastically forced the masses to sacrifice their present to a future heaven on Earth. The dedicated *militant* attitude required a party member, like a soldier monk, to alienate his self in exchange for a place in the proletarian communion. As for the revolutionaries, quite a few foretold the apocalypse of capitalism's final breakdown. Socialists (and later, communists) and (to a lesser extent) anarchists often were as "practically" religious as the rest of the population.

Capitalist evolution does not dissolve pre-capitalist realities such as family, religion, fatherland, sex roles, etc. The 19th century humanist frequently thought that intellectual and economic progress was about to make priests redundant. He misunderstood the fact that progress contains so many contradictions that they prevent it from fulfilling the basic need for fraternity, for the surpassing of oneself, for some absolute. Religion expresses the refusal of the individual to be just self-centred and to terminate his existence on the day of his death: "We can't be *only* that…" De Sade wished his body to be anonymously reabsorbed by the earth and all remembrance of him vanish from human memory, but he accumulated published works and manuscripts which he could

Against such industrial and consumerist excessiveness, and against the often deceptive expectations of scientific achievements, it is all too easy for religion to stress the vanity of human pride. Wasn't it Pandora (the first mortal female, according to Hesiod), Prometheus' sister-in-law, who opened the beautiful box that contained a multitude of evils and distempers which have never since ceased to afflict us ? (The Fall is not the only myth that puts the original blame on women.)

When it contends that human community is impossible on Earth, religion undoubtedly opposes our emancipation. But the religious mind is also present in the idea of an infinite expansion of human actions and capabilities, which is another way of believing in miracles, albeit scientific ones. The inability to truly change our condition has led to the dream to evade our condition, to escape by a miracle. In this case the miracle would be technical instead of divine, man-made instead of God-made, but it would be still a miracle, because it would come from outside our real social relationships, and only through science and knowledge-created artefacts. The underlying idea is the superiority of technical reason over the inevitably biased and faulty relations that humans entertain between themselves. When history seems impossible to be acted upon, it is tempting to wish for a way out of history. The religious mind imagines a hereafter totally out of this world. The scientific believer imagines an industrial, mechanical, biological or digital revolution that would replace the social revolution which he thinks is impossible, or, in a more "Marxist" version, which would create the conditions that make this revolution possible (or inevitable).

Social critique is only valid if it addresses at the same time the reactionary and the advanced aspects of this society.

We cannot draw our inspiration from Prometheus against Jesus. Stealing fire is not our programme if the flames set the world ablaze. Without a simultaneous critique of progress and of its contempo-

Introduction

This is a modified version of an essay published in French as the 7th *Lettre de Troploin*, June 2006, called *Le Présent d'une illusion*. The English title is inspired by Fredy Perlman's *The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*, which first came out as an article in *The Fifth Estate* in 1983 and then as a Black & Red (Detroit, USA) pamphlet the following year.

At the risk of passing for narrow minded Marxists, we recommend reading the first part of *The German Ideology*.

On the particular issue of Judaism and Jewish history, a stimulating essay: "The Perplexities of the Middle Eastern Conflict," was published in *The Communicating Vessels*, # 16, Spring 2005 (3527 NE 15th Avenue # 127, Portland, Oregon 97212, USA), and is also available on this site.

What's Wrong With Religion?

Not every believer is a social conformist. His independence of mind, his resistance (to war, for example) or rebellion can outdo those of many atheists. Yet religion is tantamount to social acceptation, because its very principle separates a *here below* from a *hereafter* which created the here below and is necessarily superior to it. Religious thought (and therefore behaviour) is dualist: it is based on the division between body and soul, matter and spirit, and this divide can only favour the latter over the former. Whatever the believer does to change this world, for him there will always be another world of a higher order. History, life as we daily experience it here and now matter less that what is beyond, outside the everyday world. Therefore, when he fights inequality, exploitation and oppression, the religious person deals with realities that belong to a minor level of reality. He can only (and indeed he must) treat the history of mankind as a subplot within a much larger story that ex-

ceeds men and women, because that story relates to and depends upon something outside all men and women of all times. A Christian cannot give the same importance to the history of, say, the Spanish civil war and to the Gospel. He will say the two are "different," but what ultimately matters to him is the Gospel. The absolute relativizes everything else, or it would stop being absolute.

Thus, inequality, exploitation and oppression are attributed to individual, moral, natural deep-rooted causes: whatever change we can achieve has to start within every human heart. Very few Jews, Christians or Muslims take Adam and Eve's Fall at face value, but such a tale reinforces the belief that "something" draws each of us to evil-doing, dominating and exploiting our fellow creatures, and that mankind's meandering course is based on a fundamental flaw, which no evolution nor revolution could redress. Historical examples of massacres and horrors only confirm what the original myth symbolizes.

Lots of civilizations have imagined a primeval harmony that was lost because of some ill-fated desire or deed, but few went as far as the Bible in putting the blame on the tree of *knowledge*. It's because they tried to sort out good from evil that the first couple unleashed the doom that is bound to repeat itself until the end of time. The message is : we should never try to understand what is essential to us, and we must leave the essential to divine or earthly mediators between us and the non-understandable.

Consequently, even when religion fuels revolt, as it often does, it's always with the assumption that exploitation and oppression can be alleviated, but not suppressed. No Church could be the Church of the poor and exploited, because it is the Church of *all*, rich and poor.

Of course, history provides us with myriads of religious doctrines and practices that aimed at overall historical change, from Taoists in China to Renaissance Anabaptists. But they were always heretics, and the religious institution sided with the rich and powerful to slander and crush the rebellious. When peasant armies

the ultimate responsible of waste, is none other than you and me. Repent !

To be truthful, in such an analysis, some are more equal than others, and two categories don't quite fit into this *you and me*. At the top, the obscenely rich, the selfish minority that drives Rolls Royces and cares neither about the misery of many, nor about the future of us all. And at the bottom, sadly enough, a large proportion of the Western working class which is said to remain addicted to TV, heavy smoking, red meat, cars and other symbols of consumer society, just as it reportedly sticks to sexist, homophobic and racist prejudices. The best thing would be to have society run by the enlightened educated middle class, teachers, social workers, artists, etc., aptly described by Philip Roth as "the limit loving class." Unfortunately, and in spite of a million statements that such a middle class would now be the sociological majority in Europe, Japan and North America, that middle remains desperately middleish, too small in number and social leverage.

So big business rules and, as it happens, capitalist logic is illimitation. It's not because some top executives want their own private islands in Dubai that this system overproduces and overconsumes. Overinvestment, overaccumulation, overproduction with a buyers' craze at the end of the line, come from the necessity for each firm to manufacture and sell at lower costs than its competitors. Any capital tends to be determined by its own interests against all others and cannot avoid excess production nor unsold stocks. Capitalism as a whole can finally regulate itself, but through a destructive crisis, a "creative destruction" in Schumpeter's famous phrase. The system regularly churns out too many factories, items, financial products, too many workers as well, in relation to their possible realization on the market, to creditworthy demand, to socially expected profits. This logic was at work when millions of T models came out of the Ford plants, and it still is in the age of millions of laptops. Capital overdoes it, and only crises and wars force it back to equilibrium.

The bourgeoisie criticized religion in the name of progress, and the labour movement followed suit. Even when they stood for a radical break and not gradual evolution, nearly all socialists and the majority of anarchists envisaged a revolution that would expand industry, master nature and produce always more in quantity and quality for the well being of all. No more palaces and luxury for a few, but cornucopias for the masses. Against Jesus as the prophet of universal love that could be completely lived only in spirit or out of this world, Prometheus stood as the true socialist hero: he outwitted the gods, stole fire from the chariot of the sun and brought it down upon the Earth. Mankind is also indebted to him for the invention of many arts: using plants, taming animals, cultivating the soil… Up to present days, many socialist and anarchist papers and publishers have called themselves by his name, to celebrate the figure that represents the possibility for man to become fully human, by turning our environment into something that could be processed.

Capital today cannot afford to treat nature as infinitely exploitable. Business has to care about renewable energy, biodiversity, climate change and the saving of resources. Nature is no longer regarded as an inexhaustible reserve, but as a common good to handle with care. What could stay out of the balance sheet in 1900 (the depletion of resources, global warming, the exhaustion of the workers, fresh water shortages, the destruction caused by sprawling cities, pollution-induced diseases, the drying up of rivers and seas, the transformation of fertile land into dust bowls…) must now be included in the costs, measured, managed and reduced, otherwise capital will kill the goose with the golden eggs and block its valorisation. Nobody now worships progress as they did in the 19th century.

Relentless technological pursuits, as in genetics, nanotechnology, universal digitalization, etc., go together with a call to *limits* : Let's be reasonable, let's have garbage selection, let's cycle to work, let's eat organic cereals instead of beef steaks, because the culprit,

threatened the domination of the landed classes, the founder of Protestantism had no qualms about it and called for the outright suppression of their revolt. Religion may dissent (and often does), but it ultimately superposes divine Law (as in the *Torah*) and the laws enforced by political powers.

Those who found a religion do not seek to radically change the existing world, but to live in it in the light of another world. So they make do with their time. In the 17th century, hardly any religious creed questioned slavery, and among Christian groups, at the beginning of the 18th century, only a few Protestant dissenters (the Quakers, for example) denounced the slave trade.

Not many people nowadays publicly state to what extent the three monotheisms set a stigma on half the human species. Instead of being created (like Adam) in God's image, Eve more plainly derived from a man's rib, and soon was the prime culprit in the Fall: hence the obligation to (hard) work and (painful) motherhood. She came second in the process of creation, but ranked first in destruction. Here again, the point is not that people "believe" in this myth as they have no doubt about the existence of the pyramids, but that the myth structures a world vision that helps keep women in a minor role. If we think that fairy tales contribute to building up a conscious and unconscious collective mind that plays a big part in our lives, then we must admit that a tale as far reaching and widely known as that of Genesis plays a much larger part, even for those who've never opened a Bible. The Vatican's adamant hostility to birth control is a side effect of a two thousand year old process of downplaying women.

It's quite logical that God should be mercilessly vindictive and punish not just the guilty couple, but their entire descent down to you and me : to hammer into our heads that we come under an incurable evil human nature, it is necessary that no generation should get away from the curse, even two thousand years after the event. There's no better evidence of an inescapable original "fault" than an utterly collective punishment: when only Noah and his

family are spared, human failure is proved by the mass drowning of thousands of innocents, babies included.

On such a cornerstone the three religions of the Book are built, and only a handful of heretical exegetists have questioned it. Even in the very patriarchal times when the Scriptures were composed, there were woman heads of State. But we hear of no woman catholic or orthodox priest, few female Protestant ministers, hardly any woman rabbi or imam.

The optimist will object that, at least in the West, sexism is on the wane. It all depends on what we choose to look at. In 2006, a "free abortion" woman campaigner of the early 1970s declared: "We fought for the right to be a woman without being a mother. And you can't say that today." True. Most of our contemporaries, in Berlin as in Los Angeles, including those who regard themselves as non-sexist, feel there is something missing in a woman that has no child, nor the desire to bear or raise one. And they would not react in the same way to a man with no wish of fatherhood. Judeo-Christianity is not the unique cause of that attitude, but it surely contributes to it, especially Catholicism with its cult of Mary that present the ideal woman both as a virgin and as a mother. The Pope was once accurately defined as the person who would like every woman to be pregnant without ever being penetrated by a penis.

Why Rationalism Won't Do

A characteristic of religious attitude is the privilege given to faith over rational thinking. The divine can be put into arguments, but is first meant to be believed in, and its presence felt more than understood. No theologian believes in God because he's read books about God : he reads and writes about God because he's a believer. So the critique of religion starts from the idea that there is no need for us to abdicate in front of the (inevitable) unknown and unknowable, separate them from our world and set them in another dimen-

of books that praise free enterprise, and stop short of disputing the validity of Islamic traditions.

Globalization does not automatically produce its ideology. Classes and individuals need time to find their bearings. 19th century industrialization was not the getting together of isolated individuals : the drift from the land went with an abundance of clubs, brotherhoods, associations and friendly societies. It took decades for the Bretons to see themselves as French. Destroying ancestral conditions without bringing in positive substitutes causes social disruption, and is detrimental also to the ruling class. Deconstructing former ideologies and only replacing them with the cult of novelty hardly consolidates a society.

It's that weakness that gave so much impact to the (otherwise relatively minor) shock of September 11, 2001. The US rules the world, comes under attack without realizing why, and thinks it will get rid of the enemy by hunting him in his den, but the den changes, so the target moves, yesterday Kabul, Baghdad today, some Teheran or other tomorrow: when proved wrong, shift ground.

Neither Jesus Nor Prometheus

When he announced "God is dead," Nietzsche hoped for a man that would believe in himself, — assuming "himself" would be above his own partial self. But the philosopher was aware of the possible coming of a society that would believe in nothing and adhere to anything. Despite a historical vision that was moral and poetic, and hardly political or social, the author of *Zarathustra* was perhaps more clear-sighted on this matter than most Marxists with their double equation:

> capitalist development = religious decline = emergence of a proletarian (thus, human) community

good," but "I am." But it's not enough for a social system (however extensive and intensive it can be) to merely exist. Self-perpetuation is not a historical perspective. Glorifying the immediate does not make a society, even if the immediate comes with promises of a radiant technological future.

Actually, the apologist of genetics or space exploration does not expect these wonders to better social conditions about which he is sceptical or pessimistic. The most enthusiastic believer in medical achievements cannot ignore how much the spread of AIDS, in Africa especially, depends on social causes which make the best therapies ineffective. He also knows the part played by improved sanitary conditions in the eradication of tuberculosis, and that the present decay of urban life contributes to the re-emergence of this disease among poor West Europeans.

The escapist addiction to new technologies and digitalized virtuality makes up for an inability to understand and act upon our real lives. Unlike 1850 or 1900 (or even 1950), there is a gap between scientific-technical expectations and historical hopes. Capitalism no longer has a unifying ideology.

Current appeasement politics in front of religious radicalism reveals how this capitalist society that is so strong, so established and so little questioned, feels helpless before groups for which the sacred is not an empty word. This system is ultra-powerful, its weaponry unrivalled, its State capitalist variant defeated, but it shrinks from a universal self-awareness and perspective. A loudly proclaimed *Christian* US administration fights the Iraqi insurgents with missiles and dollars, and leaves their faith alone, as if anti-Americanism had nothing to do with the fundamentals of Islam as they're now interpreted by many Muslims. Bush talks a lot about God, and respects the God that inspires the murderers of his soldiers. The invaders of Iraq insist on imposing parliamentary democracy and a market economy, both of which have little or no meaning in Baghdad at the moment, but they remain utterly unassertive as far as an overall ideology is concerned. They publish thousands

sion that we'll never be able to explore. There is no need to dissociate reason from feeling.

However, social critique has often harboured the illusion that it could radicalize the confrontation between bourgeois and priests, reason and faith, democracy and religion, and take the use of reason to the full logical conclusions which bourgeois thinkers would refuse to draw. In other words, the socialist (or communist) would be the only consistent rationalist.

Yet rationalism could only be a weapon in a democratic revolution. It does not consist in the (necessary) use of reason, but in the belief that all evil and misfortune arise from lack of knowledge or from faulty judgment. It opposes private thinking to authority: to overthrow oppression, we must start by dethroning the intellectual powers that be, and we have the means to do that: our own personal intellect, that everyone's been equally bestowed with. Mind comes first: hence the privilege given to education as the ultimate driving force of history.

As has been pointed out, the basic flaw of such a vision is to forget that any teacher must first be taught what he teaches. This logical flaw remains if the educational bias is understood as *self* education. The oppressed and exploited do not *first* understand they can change their situation, and then act upon the situation to change it. They only understand it as they try to act on it.

Rationalism may refute the "falseness" of religion, but it will never be able to understand the communal and social phenomenon that religion is.

Reason's call to the intellect forgets that the human condition is intellect *and* fantasy. The quest for the supernatural does not stem from an excessive but from a limited imagination built by millenniums of exploitation and oppression: the incapacity to be free on Earth incites humans to situate freedom out of this world. Dreams and desires are displaced persons. This is the stuff religion is made of.

From Religion as a Total Social Act to Religion as a Private Matter

At rock bottom, the religious attitude consists in distinguishing two worlds. Beside (above, or under) the world as we know it, the natural, visible, transient and daily world that our senses can feel, religion supposes the existence of another one, a super-natural or extra-natural, invisible, permanent world that our senses cannot grasp, and which lies deeper than daily experienced realities. The first one is determined by the second and dependent upon it. The problem is to find ways and passages between the two, without becoming a prisoner of either: as Orpheus experienced it, you visit the netherworld at your own risk.

This definition has the merit to present religion in its generality, and the defect of pushing aside all its variations.

In the traditional societies of North American Indians, in Africa, in the Pacific islands, in the Asia of the shamans, the "other" world seems at one with ours. The two do not just communicate: they coincide. The "divine" is omnipresent, and active in a community where men, animals, trees, springs, rocks, the soil and the Earth combine. Man partakes of a togetherness of vital forces, and sees no split between the animate and the inanimate: everything has an *anima*, a "soul." Religion does not exist as such: it is an all embracing social phenomenon. It is hard to differentiate between a level of reality that would qualify as "transcendence" (what's beyond creatures and things) as opposed to "immanence" (what's inside them), because transcendence is so present and active in every single creature and thing that it seems to reside in every one of them.

At the other end of the religious spectrum, monotheism contains the possibility of a decisive rift between the transcendent and the immanent, the sacred and the profane. The divine is no longer present everywhere: it gets its autonomy and crystallizes itself in a god that is a being, a person distinct from all earthly realities.

This non-adversarial approach cannot only be explained by the need to placate "moderate" Muslims and defuse the opposition of the extremists. Bismark's Germany, the French Third Republic in its early years and the Italian monarchy after the unification of the country also needed allies: this did not stop them from getting into long confrontations with the Church, at the risk of alienating the Catholics. When religious freedom conflicted with political freedom that was necessary to economic freedom, bourgeois politicians cut into the flesh and put an end to the encroachments of the clergy.

If the present Western elites, especially in America, consider Judeo-Christianity definitely more compatible than Islam with economic liberalism and market forces, why not try to promote or at least defend Judeo-Christianity at the expense of a religion supposedly so ill-fit for modern times ? In Afghanistan, in Palestine, in Iraq, why put up with backward tenets that are described as obstacles to parliamentarianism and to a stabilization vital to Western interests ? It is contradictory to painfully install electoral procedures based on the principle of individual freedom, and to tolerate conceptions and institutions that openly deny free will. Imperialism no longer puts forward the bourgeois or "socialist" progressivism that went with it in the past.

An essential cause of present moderation in front of "archaic" pressures is that this society lives in doubt about itself. It gets carried away by a whirl of technical feats without believing in nothing but the inevitability of its own movement. The megamachine gets out of hand and nobody knows how to slow it down. Capitalism was thought of as beneficial : now it is said to be irreversible. The faith v. reason conflict, which contributed to the rise of the bourgeoisie and the dynamism of Europe from the Renaissance till the 19th century, has been degraded into a debilitating mix where reason acknowledges faith without first defining itself. We experience what Karl Kraus forecast in the 1930s: the age of the *fait accompli*, of a system which does not justify itself by saying "What I do is

against the modern world the argument that was formerly used against it. Materialists would say that in creating God, man had lost himself. Religion now declares that without God, man loses himself in the whirlwind of objects by which he thought to liberate himself : only through God can Mammon be kept in check. Faith was reproached with splitting the soul from the body: it retorts that it's modernity that divides the spiritual from the material, cuts off man from his fellow beings, and that only a spiritual approach can bring the individual back to his collective dimension. The collapse of emancipation efforts makes it easier for religion to denounce capitalist freedom, which religion presents as proof of the vanity of human endeavours to be free. In the West, the age of the parish priest preaching submission to the Lord and to the factory owner is gone. Religious resilience would be impossible without a pretension and some credibility to embody a community, on a much deeper level than what is given by family, work, neighbourhood, culture, sport or even politics. No Church develops without exploiting a lack of having and a lack of being. Religion is the idealism of a materialistic society.

When Capitalism No Longer Knows What It Is

The more capitalist civilization deepens its hold on the old industrial countries and spreads over the globe without its foundations coming under attack, the less it calls on the principles that helped it to assert itself. When King and Church stood in the way of bankers and businessmen, princes were beheaded and priests sent to jail in the name of democracy and freedom. Now that parts of the world oppose capitalist progress with religious traditions, the great bourgeois powers come to the imams bearing an olive branch.

In Europe (and its North American projection), which also happens to be the cradle of capitalism and parliamentary democracy, and unlike the traditional societies and the Muslim world, historical evolution has split religion from the rest of society, just as it has to a large extent unlinked the individual from birth ties. Little by little and through conflict and bloodshed, religion has separated itself from social and public practices, to become an individual and a private matter. Atheism had no meaning among the native Americans of the great plains, it was an oddity in Athens five centuries BC, it is forced to remain clandestine in Teheran today and discreet in a small US Midwest town, but in that town its status and function are different from all the other times and places we've mentioned. Religion may punctuate the life of the inhabitants of the Bible Belt, who attend church for Sunday service, baptism, confirmation, marriage and funerals, but it does not organize it. For example, no religious event has the social impact of the Ramadan.

At the same time, in the West, science emerged as abstract knowledge distinct from its mundane practical origin and its concrete uses (even if the two aspects got together, and their combination was a major asset in Europe's conquest of the world.)

In the 18^{th}-19^{th} centuries, the West European mind gradually distinguished the documented (or undocumented) historical person of Jesus, as debatable as Julius Cesar or Joan of Arc, from Jesus as a divine figure and the prophet of a revelation. Christian and atheist historians investigated the Bible which came to be regarded as human written (albeit, God inspired in the eyes of believers). Jewish scholars, a lot of them Germans, did the same for the Old Testament in the second half of the 19^{th} century. We now reach the point when a minority of open-minded Christians aren't shocked by the possibility of Jesus having had a wife and child, because to them that would not debase its divine origin and message. This could only happen in societies where religion is still influential but no longer shapes social life, where the public and private spheres are separated, where therefore there can also be a separation in the

believer's mind between the profane and the sacred, between facts and faith, history and myth.

"It is possible, therefore, for the State to have emancipated itself from religion even if the overwhelming majority is still religious. And the overwhelming majority does not cease to be religious through being religious in private. (…) Man emancipates himself politically from religion by banishing it from the sphere of public law to that of private law. (…) The endless fragmentation of religion in North America, for example, gives it even externally the form of a purely individual affair." (Marx, *The Jewish Question*, 1844)

Most of the East has not yet experienced this, especially in what we still call Muslim countries, and it has nothing to do with Islam's intrinsic nature : there are as many "reactionary" features in the Old Testament or Saint Paul as in the Koran, and in 1200 there were probably more critical minds in Damascus and Cordoba than in Bologna and Oxford. Western Europe's superiority was to be able to concentrate elements that were present in other civilizations, and fuse them together around rationality and money valorisation. This can only occur when industry and commodity are strong and integrative enough to hold the parts of society together and build up some stable nation-State that does not need religion as a binding force.

"The Perfect Christian State Is the Atheist State, the Democratic State"

After quoting G. de Beaumont who wrote in 1835 that "In the United States there is neither a State religion nor a religion declared to be that of the majority, nor the predominance of one cult over another. The State stands aloof from all cults," Marx comments that "Nevertheless, North America is pre-eminently the country of religiosity (..) [and] even in the country of complete political emanci-

status. Today, "the end of violence" in Palestine signifies the continuation of the Palestinians' dispossession. Civil peace as well as social peace inevitably benefit the stronger. Systematically avoiding confrontation leads to social acceptation. The real question is the nature of violence: killing Israelis as Israelis, or Jews as Jews, takes Palestinians and Israelis further away from a human (revolutionary) outcome of the conflict.

It's significant that the caricature that most incensed fundamentalists and embarrassed Western good-bad conscience was the one that alluded to naked violence and weapons, with Muhammad's turban becoming a bomb. There've been fewer comments on the caricature that staged man and woman's roles: the prophet asks dead martyrs to wait at the gate of paradise, because he's short of virgins. That depicts Muslim heaven as a brothel, Allah as its owner, Muhammad as the manager, women as sexual objects and men as the clientele. A reality probably so common that it went unnoticed. It's violence that scares and impresses.

Religion as a Critique of Capitalism

We do not live in the avowedly reactionary times when in 1864 (the year the First International was founded) Pius IX's *Syllabus* denounced socialism, rationalism and liberalism. A century and a half later, in Madrid as in Chicago (but not in Kuwait City or Singapore), ruling ideologies teach *autonomy* as well as submission. On the one hand, the opium of the consumers' temples is as much pervading as that of the church. On the other hand, dominant political ideology (we don't say: reality) calls for people's empowerment, self limitation, sustainable growth, renewable energies, the cautionary principle, fair trade, i.e. democracy.

In the West, religion carries on as social, not in the sense of the old "social Catholicism," but by presenting itself as a remedy against mercantile incompleteness and alienation. It turns back

is able to picture the attacked as a likely evil figure. Pacifism does not criticize the State for what a State is: it reproaches the State with aiming at the wrong target.

The modern Church is pacifist. True, there are *national* Churches, like the Russian or Greek orthodox hierarchies, closely tied to a specific country. But most Churches are trans- or multinational. Their perpetuation does not imply the domination of one country over others, but an international situation that allows Churches to develop world wide. Their objective and proclaimed ideal are the balance of forces. It's against the interest of the Vatican that one country (even a friendly Christian one like the US) should have hegemony. Pius XII had no liking for either the NSDAP or the Soviet Union CP, but he knew he had a lot more to lose from a conquest of Europe by the Red Army than the Wehrmacht : so it excommunicated in bulk all communists, and never thought of doing the same to the Nazis. The balance of forces has become the foreign policy of most Western political parties, and of all parties in Europe, as Europe lacks political unity and is therefore incapable of any hegemony.

The non-violence principle also applies within each country, and combines with outright repression to neutralize rebellions. Calling for people to calm down when there's a violent demonstration is equating brick throwers with armed-to-the-teeth riot police. When strikers organize an inevitably illegal sit-down, with the obvious risk of clashing with the police (which the strikers are well aware of), asking them to revert to peaceful innocuous "industrial dispute" is inviting them to do away with one of their most efficient weapons : the occupation of the work place. Lots of things can be achieved with no or little violence, but non-violence as a *principle* blocks the way to autonomy and emancipation. In 1955, when the French army was occupying Algeria and the French government had no intention of granting any democracy or self-rule to the non-Europeans in that colony, "Peace in Algeria" could only have one meaning: the preservation of the colonial

pation, religion not only exists, but displays a fresh and vigorous vitality (..)" (*The Jewish Question*, 1844)

There is a deep correlation between Christianity and democracy. In the form of the free citizen, the a-religious State realizes the Christian ideal of the sovereignty of the soul. Jesus' message concerns every human being, whether Greek, Jewish or Roman, slave or patrician. Similarly, rich or poor, every citizen has the same rights as his neighbour. Social inequality stops at the doors of the political assembly, which is a supposedly company of equals : "one man, one vote." No one has to have property or pay a certain level of poll tax to be granted a say in the running of public affairs. Private property exists socially, not politically.

According to the Gospel, every individual receives a soul from God that puts him on equal footing with all others, with no special distinction for a particular people as in Judaism. He can become a Christian and be saved like all others. Christianity creates equality outside the realm of social relations : so does democracy that grants every citizen the same rights, but only as citizen. The most democratic State will not do away with class divisions, no more than the most fraternal Christian congregation. Needless to say, believers are called upon to help each other, but that does not and cannot suppress the roots of inequality. Christian communion is meant to be lived mainly in spirit, democratic fraternity meant to exist mainly in the political sphere.

> "The question of the relation of political emancipation to religion becomes for us the question of the relation of political emancipation to human emancipation. (…) by freeing himself politically, man frees himself in a roundabout way, through an intermediary, although an essential intermediary. (…) man, even if he proclaims himself an atheist through the medium of the State — that is, if he proclaims the State to be atheist — still remains in the grip of religion, precisely because

he acknowledges himself only by a roundabout route, only through an intermediary. Religion is precisely the recognition of man in a roundabout way, through an intermediary. The State is the intermediary between man and man's freedom. Just as Christ is the intermediary to whom man transfers the burden of all his divinity, all his religious constraint, so the State is the intermediary to whom man transfers all his non-divinity and all his human constraint. (…)

Where the political State has attained its true development, man — not only in thought, in consciousness, but in reality, in life — leads a twofold life, a heavenly and an earthly life: life in the political community, in which he considers himself a communal being, and life in civil society, in which he acts as a private individual, regards other men as a means, degrades himself into a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers. The relation of the political State to civil society is just as spiritual as the relations of heaven to earth. The political State stands in the same opposition to civil society, and it prevails over the latter in the same way as religion prevails over the narrowness of the secular world — i.e., by likewise having always to acknowledge it, to restore it, and allow itself to be dominated by it. In his most immediate reality, in civil society, man is a secular being. (…). In the State, on the other hand, where man is regarded as a species-being, he is the imaginary member of an illusory sovereignty, is deprived of his real individual life and endowed with an unreal universality. (…)

Of course, in periods when the political State as such is born violently out of civil society, when political liberation is the form in which men strive to achieve their

buzz word, and the far-left only asks for a more radical sharing out.

As it aims at softening what exists, reform is at one with a Christianity which no longer heralds a hereafter, merely a moralized here below. Few Christians today seriously believe in the delights of Paradise or the torments of Hell. Few left wingers believe in a decisive break with this world.

Peace!

Only *jihadists* now claim to have "God on our side." Western Churches are reluctant to throw in their lot with one particular belligerent, and prefer to campaign for peace. In the 1960s, New York Cardinal Spellman's loud support for the GIs in Vietnam was already a little out-of-date. The Pope knew better. So did most US Churches: they better served their own interests, as well as the long term interests of their country, by channelling protesters towards a mere anti-war issue. That helped diverting the movement from overall action against State and society, and contributed to its withering away with the opening of negociations.

The left and most anti-globalizers are now acting along the lines of religion-inspired pacifism. The idea that any State, however democratic, is driven to wage war, that basic idea has been buried with the rest of what is perceived as crude Marxism. Radicals now exert pressure on the State so it won't go to war, or will make peace. Pacifism only takes on States that attack, but it admits their right to defend themselves, or to attack in a "just cause." It justified the bombing of Serbia on the grounds that it prevented or stopped a genocide. It would have justified the invasion of Iraq if Saddam really had had "weapons of mass destruction" (which are plentiful in the arsenal of the two main invaders). Tomorrow, it might justify military action to deal with an Iranian nuclear threat, the North Korean regime, or anything else, providing the attacker

have him properly retrained). "Let's live together…" The religious theme of *sharing* has become secular. Nothing differentiates the social programme of a free-thinking socialist from that of a left-wing bishop. The wealthiest man in the world, B. Gates, is also the one that gives the most for charity, foundations, vaccination in poor countries, etc.: if all the rich could be that generous…

Logically, if share we must, and taking into account the destitution of most human beings, European or US style minimal wage and unemployment benefit are a fair wage and a decent income for Europeans and North Americans, in order to raise wages and incomes in La Paz or Peking. Out of the price of an Ecuadorian banana in a European supermarket, 1,5 to 2% go to the plantation worker, 10 to l5% to the owner of the plantation, and 40% to the supermarket. If we reduce economy to a system of communicating vessels, the only way to increase the pay of the Ecuadorian worker is to drastically lower the profit of the supermarket's shareholders **and the wages** of its personnel, who are swallowing an overgenerous slice of world's available wealth: Swedish cashiers are visibly grossly overpaid… In the same line of reasoning, unemployment is not caused by capital only hiring labour that is profitable to capital, but by excessive job protections that block the flow of labour and discourage bosses from hiring more workers. Therefore the only way to give jobs to young people is to dismantle these protections. Better be all a little precarious than for 10% of us to stay unemployed… Class conflicts are reinterpreted in terms of a conflict of generations: the young can't get jobs because the old are selfishly entrenched in secure positions. If we all agreed to earn a bit less and be more mobile, there'd be job opportunities for everyone…

Making inequality the Number One enemy means that there will only be a redistribution process. In the past, the right described the economy as a cake which (unfortunately) wouldn't get any bigger if the poor got larger slices, and the left promised to have more cakes baked in a totally rearranged kitchen. Now sharing is the

liberation, the State can and must go as far as the abolition of religion, the destruction of religion. But, it can do so only in the same way that it proceeds to the abolition of private property, to the maximum, to confiscation, to progressive taxation, just as it goes as far as the abolition of life, the guillotine. At times of special self-confidence, political life seeks to suppress its prerequisite, civil society and the elements composing this society, and to constitute itself as the real species-life of man, devoid of contradictions. But, it can achieve this only by coming into violent contradiction with its own conditions of life, only by declaring the revolution to be permanent, and, therefore, the political drama necessarily ends with the re-establishment of religion, private property, and all elements of civil society, just as war ends with peace.

Indeed, the perfect Christian State is not the so-called Christian State — which acknowledges Christianity as its basis, as the State religion, and, therefore, adopts an exclusive attitude towards other religions. On the contrary, the perfect Christian State is the atheistic State, the democratic State, the State which relegates religion to a place among the other elements of civil society. (…)

The democratic State, the real State, does not need religion for its political completion. On the contrary, it can disregard religion because in it the human basis of religion is realized in a secular form. (…) Not Christianity, but the human basis of Christianity is the basis of this State. (…)

Political democracy is Christian since in it man, not merely one man but everyman, ranks as sovereign, as the highest being, but it is man in his uncivilized,

unsocial form, man in his fortuitous existence, man just as he is, man as he has been corrupted by the whole organization of our society, who has lost himself, been alienated, and handed over to the rule of inhuman conditions and elements — in short, man who is not yet a real species-being. That which is a creation of fantasy, a dream, a postulate of Christianity, i.e., the sovereignty of man — but man as an alien being different from the real man — becomes, in democracy, tangible reality, present existence, and secular principle. (…) The religious consciousness revels in the wealth of religious contradictions and religious diversity.

We have, thus, shown that political emancipation from religion leaves religion in existence, although not a privileged religion. The contradiction in which the adherent of a particular religion finds himself involved in relation to his citizenship is only one aspect of the universal secular contradiction between the political state and civil society. The consummation of the Christian State is the State which acknowledges itself as a State and disregards the religion of its members. The emancipation of the State from religion is not the emancipation of the real man from religion.

Only when the real, individual man re-absorbs in himself the abstract citizen, and as an individual human being has become a species-being in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation, only when man has recognized and organized his "own powers" as social powers, and, consequently, no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of political power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished. (…)"

that can't be defeated but just put under control. *Struggle* is still talked of, but the word loses the antagonistic connotation it had in "class struggle," and only means gathering a multitude so vast it will triumph by the sheer virtue of number and legitimate right, certainly not through violence. *Sub-comandante* Marcos wants "a civic and pacific insurrection," i.e. non-violent violence.

People dreamt of changing the world. They now try to *save* it, with obvious strong religious undertones : man is basically tainted by his tendency to go over the top and destroy himself as well as the rest of creation, so his excesses must be kept in check. The original sin has been secularized. Repent !

The objective is no longer to create another society, but to enable everyone to live in the one that exists. The problem is to gather all the *have-nots*: the homeless, the moneyless, the ones without a legal ID, without access to further education, without a vote, without social recognition, the sexually or ethnically discriminated against, and to turn them into *haves*, to provide them with a council flat, a minimal social income, a job, a voter's card, a few years in college, a social visibility and the acceptation of their sexual inclination or ethnic origin. Nothing wrong with (part of) that : actually, in 1930, except for sexual matters which hardly any party cared about, this would have been a standard social-democratic election platform, logically denounced as "reformist" by the far left, and even by some Labour party backbenchers or fervent socialists in the US. It now is the programme of nearly all leftists and many anarchists. What used to be a minimum is today's maximum.

The criterion is that no one should be rejected, apart from a bunch of financiers and warmongers whose greed and hate (mortal sins, as we know) are supposed to be the cause of our misery. Providing he does his shopping on a bike, abstains from switching on the air conditioning in his car or buying strawberries in winter, and has no racist or homophobic prejudice, the company's executive has his place in society as much as the operative (nobody's a "worker" anymore) he may have to make redundant (but he will

the US and Europe, and realize that religious peace is a condition of social peace.

The Priest's New Clothes

In most old capitalist countries, religion has obviously declined as an institution and as a social habit: fewer students in the seminary, less audience at Sunday mass. But it flourishes as an attitude and a vision of the world. Stalinism and fascism (both secularized millenarianisms) promised paradise on earth for later. Since the end of "great ideologies," it's democracy that is permeated with religiousness. We're told to forget about an impossible revolution: the only way to a better world is to give everyone a fair part in the existing one. Communism can't be forced to have a human face, but capitalism can, providing we have reforms for ever.

Confrontation didn't work: compassion will. This is the age of the righteous. If we can't prevent genocides, at least we'll bring genociders to court, that is, those genociders the great powers decide to define and treat as such. Moralised politics adds hypocrisy to cynicism. In 1996, when R. Prodi (left of centre) and W. Veltroni (PDS, ex-CP) were in office, people coined the phrase *buonista* for politics based on the image of goodness, as opposed to Berlusconi's vulgar ruthlessness. This Mr Nice policy had the Coliseum lit up every time a death sentence was pardoned in the world. Meanwhile, Italian jails housed (as of course they still do) political prisoners and treated the underclass ruthlessly, including clandestine immigrants who've had the misfortune of being caught.

In the past, the difference between the religious left and the socialist left was that the former would merely defend the poor, and the latter (verbally) incite the poor to attack this world. Attack is no longer on the agenda, neither the effort to have the world "turned upside down": self-defence is the order of the day. This does not rule out militant action… if it aims at protecting the weak against forces

Voltaire Goes New Age

Neither the bourgeoisie as a class nor capitalism as a system are hostile to religion, or even to the Church. The bourgeoisie opposed religion inasmuch as religion stood in its way. Contrary to previous systems, capitalism does not embrace any set of values that it would depend upon and defend. It's only concerned with the freedom to buy, sell and manufacture, which entails a minimum of public freedom, otherwise the system malfunctions (bearing in mind that the USSR malfunctioned for decades before falling apart). Technical and productive efficiency implies some free flow of ideas: the racial prejudices of the Nazis forced eminent scientists to emigrate to Britain and the US, where they strengthened Germany's economic and military rivals. The foremost capitalist ideology, shared by the elite as well as by labour, is pragmatism.

In France, in Italy and in Spain, as Catholicism was a longstanding staunch opponent of merchant and industrial modernity, the bourgeoisie was forced to go against the Church. In Northern Europe and the US, Protestantism was and is still influential without aspiring to temporal power.

The difference does not lie in the "bourgeois" nature of Luther's and Calvin's doctrines, which favour interest lending, saving, the work ethic, individual initiative and free will, and oppose spending, luxury and the profusion of holidays which characterized daily life before the industrial revolution. The essential difference is historical. The English democratic revolution of the 17th century was made on behalf of a Protestant version (Puritanism) against another (Anglicanism), and ended in a compromise between the rising merchant class and the landed gentry. In spite of strong interference on the part of the masses, and the energetic endeavours of the Levellers and Diggers, Cromwell kept control of the whole process.

On the contrary, the unrelenting pressure and the outbursts of the common people during the French revolution periodically

forced its promoters to go beyond their initial aims and limits, and drove them in an anti-religious and anti-clerical direction. Twice the bourgeoisie lost its political leadership, first to a *sans-culottes* lower middle class dictatorship in 1793–94, then to an authoritarian regime after 1799. All along the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, political struggle took the form and the mask of a contest between the republic supported by the bourgeoisie and the lower classes, and pre- or anti-capitalist classes allied with the clergy. It took a century for Catholicism to come to terms with bourgeois society and parliamentary democracy. As shown by the Vichy reactionary backlash, the conflict was not even solved in 1940.

Still, even in France, the Enlightenment was far from being a-religious, let alone anti-religious. Rousseau and Voltaire were deists, Diderot was only a materialist in part of his writings (his 1749 *Letter on the Blind*, which led him to jail for four months), only a small minority of the better known philosophers (Helvetius, d'Holbach) came close to a rejection of all divinity, and Robespierre later declared atheism "aristocratic." The Jacobin Terror hunted and decapitated those priests who refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the new regime, but it set up a short-lived official cult of the Supreme Being.

De Sade's determined anti-God attitude was an exception. So was Jean Meslier, a parish priest in the Ardennes (a few miles from where Rimbaud was later to be born), who until his death was only known for his disrespect for the local squire. When he died in 1729, he left a "Testament" which remains one of the most forceful atheist and communistic statements ever written, with the often adapted phrase that mankind will only be free when "all the great ones of the earth, all the nobles, shall be hanged and strangled with the guts of the priests." The infamous marquis and the solitary *curé* were similar in anger and outrage, lone writers cut off from mainstream society. De Sade spent one third of his life in jail. Meslier led a clandestine life, a prisoner of a social function he had long ceased to believe in.

mentals. Not serving pork to a practising Muslim implies an order of things that's totally different from not offering roast chicken to a vegan. Contrary to the arguable and debatable choice of the vegan, a food interdict (even if it's open to compromise) draws its importance from the fact that it exceeds reason, manifests the superiority of the sacred over the profane, confirms the obedience to God, henceforth God's existence. A vegan can argue with a non-vegan. A Muslim's refusal do eat pork is not to be argued with. If we treat his refusal as an expression of personal freedom, we deny the significance of his act, which does not stem from any personal (changeable) choice, but from his belonging to a fundamental reality that's above the believer.

The United Church is bound to remain as disunited as the United Nations. Still, we are witnessing joint efforts by Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders to get and act together, especially in the Middle East. It's not because new theological studies have shown the three monotheisms have more in common than was previously thought. Nor are they driven by the welfare of their flock. Their tentative collaboration has to do with profane interests: the down-to-earth need to maintain a social peace that is necessary to them as institutions. Israel may be winning wars, but no army is victorious for ever, as shown by the difficulty of Tsahal to get rid of a few thousand Hezbollah fighters. International money may be (conditionally) pouring in to subsidize a hardly existing Palestinian mini-State, but the situation remains highly volatile because of the constant pressure of the impoverished masses. The proletarians of the region are now (and possibly, for a while) unable to come forward with a proletarian programme, but they're able to create enough turmoil to threaten established political and religious positions. Part of the Muslim religious elite opts for hard line confrontation, with quite a large popular support. But other Muslim leaders know they have much to lose from warring with Israel and the West, and from civil war within the Arabs, so they look for some compromise with Israel, the neighbouring countries,

other truths are partial truths, i.e. mistakes or even frauds. Absolutes are mutually exclusive. When religious leaders say they share the same basic faith because they all believe in "God," and that this common belief outweighs the particular way each of them believes in it, this lowest common denominator is no more than a defensive position against political and social pressures, and against the opposition of heretics and atheists. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of those who adopt ecumenism. But a Jew will no more acknowledge the divinity of Jesus than a Christian will accept Judaism as the religion of a special people selected by God. Without the divine nature of the redeemer, Christianity is meaningless, as is Judaism without the divine election of one people above others. To a Muslim, Muhammad is not a prophet, he is *the* prophet. It's **how** one believes in God that matters…

…and even more how one worships it. Leaving the rites aside, having a public inter-denominational service, forgetting what divides to keep only what brings together, is tantamount to deprive every religion of its essence. Each performer reduces his gestures to the "minimum" acceptable by the representatives of the other creeds: what they all share is not a faith, only a will to share, a good intention and, when the service is over, each one will go back to *the real thing*: Friday at the mosque, Saturday at the synagogue, Sunday mass, mantra repetition… For the Taoist as well as the Lutheran, it's the ritual, the pious peculiarities that constitute his own religion as they differentiate it from all others. Surely worship based on the distinction between pure and impure goes much further along that road, but even the freemason deist wants his "initiation," and needs the punctual observance of special rites to celebrate the Great Architect of the Universe.

It's not the Devil that "lies in the details," it's God. No religion exists without an absolute which itself does not exist in a vacuum, only through a set of often tiny gestures to accomplish or to avoid, and logically there is something absolute in those gestures too. Acting as if they could be dispensed with is to do away with the funda-

Unlike mavericks like Sade and Meslier, nearly all philosophers and political leaders who fought superstition and the temporal power of Rome also thought that a fair amount of credulity wasn't all that bad for the people : belief in a supra-human being would induce the masses to obey human bosses and rulers. The Republic fought the Church as an obstacle to bourgeois democracy, but was later all too happy to promote it as a stabilizing factor. Freemason politicians enrolled Saint-Michel as a patron of French soldiers (similar to Saint George in England).

The part now played in world affairs by Muslim fundamentalism leads us to forget that a vast array of countries suffer from religion in politics as well as in daily life. A free thinker would have trouble making his way to the top in Poland, Bosnia, Croatia or Serbia. The traditional alliance between State and clergy is still functioning in Greece and Russia. A region as rich and modern as Bombay is currently ruled by Hindu fundamentalists. In the Israeli 1999 general elections, the Labour Party (renamed *Israel One* to do away with any socialist connotation) got 26 MPs, the Likud 19 and the three religious parties 27 (17 for the biggest of the three). In most US states, an agnostic person has the same rights as everybody providing he keeps his mouth shut, and an overtly non-believer would have little chance of getting into Congress, and none of being elected President. The Italians has to wait until 1974 to be legally able to get a divorce. In Denmark, Lutheranism has official status, its priests are paid by the State and religious classes compulsory in schools : the same magazine that created a scandal by publishing caricatures of Islam had refused a few years before a drawing where the thorns of Jesus' crown became bombs about to be dropped on an abortion clinic.

According to common wisdom, in educated open-minded countries (the opposite, for example, of Saudi Arabia), Churches retain some spiritual power but leave temporal power to elected governments. The last fifty years do not confirm this rosy picture. In Japan, the Buddhist group Soka Gakkai launched a party in

1964, the Komeito, which has done fairly well in general elections and been a partner in governing coalitions, including recently. Christian lobbies already weighed heavily on Eisenhower and Kennedy, who thought it wise to explain himself on television about his Catholicism in the 1960 presidential campaign. Some US states make it compulsory to teach both evolutionism and creationism (in the more acceptable form of the *intelligent design* theory). In 1988, not only Islam-inspired governments banned *The Satanic Verses*, but those of India and South Africa. Every day, millions of Poles listen to Radio Marya, a clerical station that broadcasts anti-freemason and anti-Semitic speeches which we've been told disappeared in 1945, and a close friend of Radio Marya's is now Minister of Education. The Vatican is still able to have crowds marching the streets in Italy to protest against homosexual marriage, and in Spain against the secularization of schools (with religious classes becoming optional). In the name of anti-racism and the integration of people from North or Black Africa (all of whom are far from being or wishing to be Muslims), French schools are quite open to the Ramadan: they treat it as just an opportunity to party and have a good time, and not as a tradition that implants a religion and all its consequences. The well-intentioned teacher loves home-made Ramadan pastry baked for him by his Algerian schoolgirls, and bemoans their inferior status, without seeing any connection between the two.

Voltaire opposed tolerance to Christianity. Today, it's in the name of tolerance that religion is accepted, and it's fashionable to emphasize the ecological virtues of Buddhism, the spirituality of Sufism or the utopian merits of Jewish mystique. Not many 21st century free-thinkers believe in the superiority of science over faith. Instead of sticking to the rational mind, they stress the (all too real) weakness of reason. When faced with the statement that *death is eternal dreamless sleep*, they don't bother to refute it, they merely quote half a dozen Nobel Prize winners who aren't so sure about it. A couple of centuries ago, lessons in relativity (as in

the fierce competition of TV evangelists, and Protestant missions deplore the dominance of Rome over Latin American crowds.

Like democracy, the various Churches claim majority rule or minority rights, according to what suits them. Whenever there are few Muslims or Christians, they ask for freedom of worship. Where there are millions of them, they think it quite normal that no behaviour, speech, book or film should offend their faith. Needless to say, neither small nor great numbers are proof of anything: millions cried the day Stalin died. We will not bemoan the selectivity of a respect that "naturally" applies to religion and not to revolution: every day, hundreds of thousands of articles, statements, and school lessons keep lumping together communism and fascism under the common denomination of "totalitarianism," and describe the project of human emancipation as a hollow dream or a murderous nightmare. We'd be naïve to expect any better. The ideas of the oppressed are oppressed ideas.

The United Church

Moses was a political as well as a spiritual leader, and not averse to spilling the blood of the unworthy. Muhammad won over Arabia to the Koran through a combination of preaching, diplomacy, war and murder. Christian missionaries went with the European armies that conquered half of the world. Buddhism's reputation for peace has never prevented Buddhist societies from waging war or being ruled by tyrants. What great religion ever spread in peace ?

Unless it gives up its substance, a religious creed cannot coexist on equal terms with another, let alone with non-believers. Each religion derives its true self from the fact that is presents itself as the privileged relationship with a world beyond the here and now, a world its doctrine is the only one to fully understand, and to which its own rites give access. It alone holds the key to this door between two worlds. It is the unique mediator : compared to a revealed truth,

ing value is not a value any more, just the tolerance of values that are tolerant. Nothing seems to be sacred, and the limits of privacy have been swept away : millions of TV viewers share family and sex secrets that were formerly whispered or told in confession. But religion is exempt from desecration. It is set apart, sheltered from criticism and mockery, treated as it wants to be: not a doctrine and attitude as debatable as others, but a reality of a different nature, above the profane.

Tolerance used to be an anti-religious weapon or protection. It now turns into an instrument of the priests against those who reject their moral authority. The non-religious person is regarded as narrow-minded. The numerous talk shows about the infamous caricatures let a multitude of priests express their opinions, but we heard few non-believers. It's the atheist who has to explain and justify himself.

Some readers might think we're overstating our case. Well, nobody would regard Canada as a hotbed of obscurantism, but it took international pressure to stop Ontario from making the sharia legal reference in family (and business, to some extent) matters for those Ontarians defined as Muslims. What's interesting is that the people who tried to introduce such a measure were not inspired by obscurantism, merely by the wish to protect a minority. The Saudis that force the sharia upon women are looked down as oppressors, and indeed they are. The Canadians who wanted to impose it upon (some) women considered themselves (and were considered by many observers) as liberators.

Tolerance loves to present itself as the protector of the weak, and usually defends the vested interests of the strong. As long as it has political power on its side, as in France before 1789, or has a foothold in the corridors of power, as in the US or (differently) in Russia today, religion does not care much for tolerance. When it is questioned by strong rivals or by atheists, it calls for freedom of conscience. Catholics in the US protest against the excesses and

Gulliver's Travels) undermined prejudice and authority : they now help discredit reality. Reason sorted out proven facts from illusion: now reason and illusion are fused, and the (quite valid) idea that there is no ultimate truth serves to deconstruct the very notion of truth. New Age has the advantage of integrating any doctrine or data or idea and rejecting none, which makes arguing painless and pointless.

Do It Yourself Religion

Contemporary cultual consuming has much in common with cultural consuming. Modern man does not stick to one brand : so, away with rigid doctrines. Who cares if it's not really Jesus' flesh and blood that's present at Sunday service, as long as it creates a communal feeling ? Modern man loves combination: Purcell is better as punk rock opera, — so, why not mix Christianity with a few tantric spices ? Just as he listens to "world music," he goes for multi-belief, and rearranges his abode according to Chinese *feng shui* cosmic flows and telluric forces. He actually nurtures no true belief in a Christian-style God, tantra or *feng shui*: he picks out whatever he feels comfortable with, whatever is soothing and reassuring. He doesn't care whether "bio-rythms" are a scientific (therefore acceptable) form of superstition. He doesn't mind as long as he can treat religion as a self-service. He's moved from Bible rule into a Babel of mixed gods.

Hence the popularity of Zen, which appears devoid of any positive creed and based upon the principle of non-contradiction: matter is nothingness, master is servant, belief is unbelief, knowledge is ignorance, wealth is poverty… You can't contradict shifting paradoxes. No need to discuss history with a doctrine that denies history.

Soft and Hard Religion

Human beings only share what is both experienced by them and beyond their here-and-now experience. Now they only seem to go for a community of the immediate where speed is a substitute for content. The struggle against time has always been at the heart of capitalism, which tries to have commodities produced, circulated and sold — i.e. to have workers work and consumers consume — in the shortest possible time. But that tendency is exacerbated when lack of profit forces capital to speed up its rotation. The faster and faster circulation of everything (products, money, labour, information, ideas, beliefs, political platforms, etc.) causes the obsolescence of everything. "Real time" kills the time necessary to pause and think. The remote control and mouse click go together with an endless flow that blurs landmarks and reference points. The irresistible desire for quick information already pushed people into buying a daily paper, the information of which became obsolescent by midnight and led to buying that paper six days a week, plus a Sunday paper. When ideas and data are manufactured like everything else, overproduction and obsolescence also apply to ideas and data. But the process goes much deeper with digitalized information, cell phone immediacy, etc., that create a perpetual present. What sort of past, present *and future remain*, when any item, data or person can spring up any time and interrupt my life before disappearing just as fast ? We're given slices of time so narrow that we can hardly inhabit them, and we're cornered in tighter and tighter space-time slots. The Tokyo commuter who's missed the last train can go to a hotel and sleep on a closed-in individual bunk bed in a coffin-like recess in a wall, no doubt germ-free and soon WI-FI connected.

So, after an overload of downloaded CDs and DVDs, our contemporary longs for a moment of meditation to make his mind a blank before filling himself up again. When "money degrades all the gods of man — and turns them into commodities" (Marx), man either tries to overturn the commodity world… or goes looking for

There now exists a consensus on the necessity to avoid provocation and to respect people's faith, — "respect" meaning a non-critical approach. As we would expect, the right-wing stands for traditional values which include religion. But the left opposes anything that it feels would trigger hostility towards immigrants, Arabs, Pakistanis, Hindus, Muslims, Blacks, or non-"white" minorities in general, as if anyone from these minorities defined himself by belonging to a religion. Any radical critique of Judaism is now treated as an anti-Semite act, and any complete rejection of Islam as a symptom of white arrogance or supremacy. Real, supposed or imposed religious adherence is equated with identity. The individual is no longer considered in the light of his personal choices, of his free will (which at the same time is constantly praised as the democratic principle): he is marked out and walled in a group.

All political forces nowadays, including those on the extreme-left, agree that freedom of speech is absolutely necessary, **but** implies the obligation not to misuse it. Like alcohol, it should be consumed with moderation. Otherwise, like tobacco, it can kill. Actually, this is what bourgeois democracy has always said. But in the past, there were anarchist, freethinking or satirical pamphlets and papers that would do the exact opposite, and show disrespect for the most respectable values, institutions and persons, usually with the support of the left of the left. Now, in the West, only a handful of extremists openly attack religion. The anti-religious drawings and articles that were widely circulated in 1900 would not even be banned today, because no one would think to draw or write them. There used to be right-wing and left-wing caricatures: they're all middle of the road now. This is not to say that the press was free: it never was, and can't be. The papers of 1900 or today's media are a social resonance chamber which reflects the contradictions and emotions of society. But in 1900, whenever censorship put a gag on critiques of bourgeois morality, of the army and the fatherland, it caused debate and uproar. Now self-censorship reigns. The prevail-

convinced of the existence of God in the Biblical sense, or of the divinity of Jesus. Believing matters more than what one believes in: *I want to believe*, as *The X Files* TV series said.

Western democracy used to be tolerant towards religion: it now views and treats it favourably, as is shown by the turmoil stirred up by a few caricatures that made fun of Islam. Free criticism was regarded as an essential prerequisite and component of democracy: it is now supposed to stop when blasphemy would begin. Whereas slander and libel are dealt with by laws and courts that are at least accessible to logic and debate, "blasphemy" can only have a religious meaning, and its definition be left to priests and believers. In plain words, religion is granted the extraordinary (extrajudicial) privilege of being judged and to judge others on its own terms. Just imagine Marxism-Leninism (in Stalin's and Zhdanov's version) becoming a legal standard in 1950 whenever the French or Italian CP sued anyone for slander.

When S. Rushdie's life was threatened by a Shiite *fatwa* for his *Satanic Verses*, he got protection from the British secret service because Britain was in conflict with Iran, and the West was all too happy to use this *cause célèbre* as a symbol of democratic resistance to intolerance. Yet most European and American religious spokesmen took great care to point out that Rushdie's book was offensive to Muslims: it was wrong to call for his killing, but nothing would have happened if the novelist hadn't gone too far.

Years later, the general in charge of Guantanamo's detention and torture centre does not speak of the Koran, only of the *holy* Koran. The US government is occupying and oppressing the Iraqis, but it grants them the right to be angered by caricatures about Islam. Washington distanced itself from Copenhagen, which is one of the few European capitals to support American intervention in Iraq. As he was visiting Saudi Arabia, the European "Foreign Affairs minister" felt obliged to provide his hosts with excuses for the regrettable and indeed unacceptable behaviour of the Danish magazine.

new *softer* gods than the old fashioned merciless bogeyman of the Old Testament. The pixel kid is the ideal candidate for Zen.

In abruptly de-structured parts of the planet, in the Middle East for instance, others resort to *hard* religion, which Europe and the US are at a loss to understand. The "civilized" man does not recognize realities that were crucial to Christianity a few centuries ago, like martyrdom and sacrifice. The September 11 suicide attackers had to take *innocent* lives in the Twin Towers. For a fundamental wrong to be put right, they had to shed blood, their own, but also the blood of people who could not be held responsible for the running of US policy, but who served as the lambs of that macabre ceremony. There is a connection between the ritual slaughtering of thousands of sheep in a couple of hours by pilgrims on the hills around Mecca, and the doom brought upon New York. The 3.000 dead were a rough-cross section of American society, from WASP bankers to illegal immigrant dishwashers (some of whom certainly Muslims), but the innocent and the guilty all had to die for the sacrifice to be performed. The Old Testament reminds us of how deeply rooted in sacrifice the three monotheisms are. A couple of billion people on Earth are Abraham's children. The Hebrew patriarch did not abstain from killing his son because he realized it was wrong, but because God provided him with another victim. The morality of the tale is highly ambiguous: what if a believer thinks God insists on a human sacrifice ?

Religion As Community

The loss of religion's former leading spiritual role in the modern world has not caused its disappearance. Far from it: capitalism creates more scope for religion.

"Religious misery is at the same time the expression of real misery and the protest against real misery." (Marx, *Contribution to a critique of Hegel's philosophy of Law*, 1844)

Neither poverty nor impoverishment automatically send people kneeling in church pews. In mid-19th century France, dechristianization prevailed in the growing urban slums, and it's only later that "social Catholicism" made up for lost ground and started building churches in the workers' districts. People can live in misery without going to mass, and lots of those who attend mass are quite well-off. It's the uncertainty, the feeling of historical breakdown, the in-between, the ruining of some stability (however oppressive it was) without the coming of a new one, that are favourable to religious revival, as in Russia since the demise of the bureaucratic system.

Religion was no more defunct in the 19th and 20th centuries than the nation or democracy in 1914. History falls into no obvious patterns, and nothing is for certain or for ever in capitalist evolution. So-called secondary contradictions are not gradually cleared to pave the way for the final showdown between capital and proletariat. Otto Rühle observed that men in general and proletarians in particular do not keep a social memory of their acts: in non-revolutionary times (i.e., most of the time), this memory breaks up and turns individual. Proletarians only recover their memory when they re-enact collective deeds which produce a new period that makes their past meaningful again and helps questioning conservative institutions and values, including religion.

In 2006 as in 1848, the religious appeal does not derive from misery, but from its ability to offer a community. No Church establishes itself without a social function.

M. Davies has described Pentecostalism in the last pages of *Planet of Slums*. Many variants of Christianity play a socializing role in Latin America, and Muslim brotherhoods compete with Catholic and Protestant missions in Africa. In so-called rich countries, Christian middle classes are active in numerous societies. US social life remains incomprehensible if one forgets the local community, often based on dissident Churches, especially but not only among (petty bourgeois and poor) Blacks. This sociability

work (even if he is out of a job), of consumer society, of leisure. Half of the world population will soon live in (often huge) cities, and about a billion people without the minimal public amenities necessary to urban life. The inhabitant of a Cairo or Beirut poor district (that is, of most districts of Cairo or Beirut) is deprived of the social and mental structures that were familiar to his parents' and grand-parents' rural environment. He is driven to recreate these structures by forcing upon himself (and his family) a complex set of rules that ordain how to eat, sleep, blow one's nose, what to wear, what to say, where to have a drink, who to befriend, who to marry, etc. The frequent shopper at Virgin Megastore is caught in a web of obligations (at the heart of which is money, the universal mediator) which seem self-evident, and he has trouble understanding how the Muslim fundamentalist can follow absurd rules : it is precisely their absurdity that makes them so simple and total. Against the fanatic, the humanist's appeal to reason is completely off the mark: fanaticism draws its strength from its ability to free its followers from reason, and indeed to free them from freedom when freedom has little content. The Western shopping mall visitor chooses between dozens of soft drinks and thousands of films. In most African or Middle East countries, buying in shopping malls is a luxury reserved to the affluent minority. It is therefore not illogical for a member of the unprivileged majority to forcibly "choose" not to have to choose any more. *Islam* literally means "submission." But aren't all believers supposed to submit to the will of God?

The West Is Pale

Not only do "rich" countries undergo a religious revival, but they experience a religiousness disconnected from or loosely connected to established doctrines or Churches. Just as some people now call themselves non-Marxist Trotskysts or non-revolutionary Marxists, it's quite common to be a Christian without being fully

regime installed by Russia, and bin Laden used to be an ally of Washington. Nearly everywhere in what was known as the third world, the West played the sorcerer's apprentice…

…while Muslim rulers did the same and thought it wise to use religious passions as an outlet. Egypt was not the only country that contributed to the rise of militant Muslims to counterbalance nationalists and "communist" atheists. After the outcry created by the anti-Islam caricatures, the same regimes that do not hesitate to quench strikes in blood allowed crowds of demonstrators to occupy the capital's centre and set fire to foreign embassies or consulates. In Yemen, more than 100.000 women burnt quite a lot of Danish flags. As it's doubtful such an item would be on sale in Sanaa's haberdasheries, unless protesters sewed them the night before, it is likely that some people in a position of power gave the outraged Muslims hundreds of red flags with the white cross.

Religion advocates order and disorder. It calls for calm and it calls to arms. It extols an absolute that is hardly compatible with half-measures and respect for the powers that be, while at the same time it requires men to make peace, and the poor to reconcile with the rich and obey the law. Like Christianity, Islam is a conqueror turned into an establishment. It thrives on war and appeasement, it unsettles and it stabilizes. Iran has been described as a theocracy: yet the prime concern of its leadership is not to put the Middle East to fire and the sword, but to perpetuate itself. The ayatollahs manage their oil revenues with sound capitalist sense, and the archaism they wish to impose in the streets of Teheran does not apply to balance sheets. The so-called moderate Islamist government of Turkey is tough on the dress code, but does not carry archaism into the running of the industry, and there's not much difference between its economic policy and that of its predecessors.

Religious fundamentalism succeeds by demanding the utmost pernickety peculiarity in the name of the universal. The average Londoner or Milanese does not have to ask himself how to organize a daily life that is determined by the multiple constraints of

frequently extends to politics, as is proved by Catholic parties in Belgium, in Germany, in France and in Italy, the influence of Churches in the US civil rights movement, the Christian connections within the French "Second Left," etc.

Christian trade-unions would not have developed if they'd just had the support of bosses too happy to deal with partners that openly practised class collaboration. The question is why Catholic inspired organizations have had grassroots in the workplace. Their growth occurred at a time when the socialist labour bureaucracy was still able to improve the lot of the masses, but was giving up the promise of a community that would transcend the immediate.

Religion is of this world and out of this world, institution *and* insubordination. It socializes the wealthy as well as the dispossessed. Though it never is only the Church of the poor, it works as a living collective body because it gets together the oppressed and shapes (some of) their hopes in its own way. Religion does not ignore social conflicts and aspirations : it reinterprets and restructures them.

The Spanish clergy sided with the most reactionary sectors of society and openly supported the outright suppression of elementary worker and peasant demands. That attitude was logical as long as the Church remained one of the biggest landowners, and it gradually but decisively changed with the changes in land property from the 1950s onwards. In Latin America, part of the Catholic hierarchy allied itself with dictators like Pinochet, but other parts adapted themselves to the 1960–80 upheavals and developed the *theology of liberation*, before reversing (in tune with the rest of society) to more appeased visions and politics: bending to the winds of change, they are now active in micro-credit, local community projects, *fair trade* and social forums.

(Much of) The East Is Green

Religion comes or comes back to the fore when money and commodity de-structure traditional relations without restructuring them. Although the attention is now focused on the Middle East, this trend is also at work in Africa, in Latin America and in Asia. If the Falun Gong followers once outnumbered the Chinese CP members, it's because they add Buddha to Confucius, and advocate the return to a balanced ancestral society, supposedly more respectful of human dignity than the true or false modernity that now rattles China.

Pan-Arabism, Indonesian national socialism, but also Peronist populism, were built on social struggles where labour (often via bureaucratic trade unions) was a key figure, and they were inseparable from heavy industry, large agricultural or mining concerns, and a sprawling public sector, which controlled the population and provided the educated and non-educated with bureaucratic jobs. From Guinea to Tunisia and India, national liberation fronts fed on proletarian demands and actions which they channelled… and suppressed once they got into power. As they took up the task of the primitive accumulation of capital that a failing bourgeoisie could not undertake, they tried to mould a national feeling and reality, usually more mythical than effective, and sometimes bordering on the farcical, but with the general effect of pushing religion to the sidelines. While not antagonizing Islam, Mossadegh in Iran (1951–53), the Iraqi and Syrian Baath parties, Nasser and the Algerian FLN presented themselves as secular.

1979 coincides with a historical landmark. The Russian invasion of Afghanistan created a resistance which massively (this was a novelty at the time) claimed to fight for Islam and intended to reinstate the *sharia* and abolish the modernizing measures of the puppet regime. (As an example of its progressive nature, the pro-Russian government prided itself on the liberation of women, for instance its banning of the *droit du seigneur*, which granted the feu-

liable to be trodden upon by incontrollable men with guns, their modest belongings plundered, and their family displaced or decimated. In many African countries, there is little difference between armed gangs and government troops, especially when the government proves unable to pay its soldiers. The local people suffer both from dictatorship and from its breakdown. Wherever the national State is a bloody farce, one is inclined to look for shelter in a transnational community : the *umma* of the faithful. Islam remains the only force that is able to offer some paradise and to claim to realize it on Earth. If "revolution" means the disruption of the existing order to restore some more orderly order (and not, as we would have it, human emancipation), then Islam is indeed a revolutionary promise, the coming of a revolution which is not postponed till an indefinite time, as with social-democracy in its early days, and later Stalinism.

The paradox is, Islam fundamentalists lack a seemingly effective programme comparable to the industrialism and the land reform of the progressives in 1950 or 1970. What's typical of the present situation is their ability to organize masses *without* offering realizable historical solutions. Boumedienne claimed he would industrialize Algeria: Ali Benhadj promises to purify ways and mores. The former relied on economic experts from Comecon, the latter would have the vice squad police the streets. This does not mean that religious ideology and leaders would be short lived. If the mullahs have ruled Iran for over twenty-five years, it's not just because they're sitting on oil barrels : they've outlived many setbacks and a long costly war because the impetus of the 1979 popular movement went deeper than politics and a "return for a service" logic: it reflected a community that was more than material.

This is precisely why those in power have tried to make use of the religious forms of social and political frustrations. Modernity and archaism function as a constantly torn-away couple that never splits. Israel once promoted Hamas as an antidote to Fatah, the US gave missiles and money to the Muslim Afghans against the secular

and originating in the working class, gave these cleavages trade union and party forms. Then, the failure of the national way to growth and the weakness of a worker bureaucracy unable to lead it, gave back a structuring role to traditional divisions. That failure and that weakness revealed the disunity of the country, split it down in two, caused a forty year civil war and helped religious (re)identifications. Political leaders yielded more and more to Islam, until an openly Islamist regime came to power in 1985. Social contradictions are dominant as always but they can't encompass the other contradictions and propose solutions for the whole of Sudan and all Sudanese, so they get structured (fractured, rather) along the narrower mental and political forms that are available: the clan, the tribal group, the area, religion…

Christian canon law only concerns doctrine and religious service. *Sharia* deals with the whole of daily life in the patriarchal society that dominated Arabs for centuries. There's nothing in the history of Europe comparable to the four main jurisprudence schools that used to shape the Muslim world, and still partly do. One of the four usually prevailed in each country (*hanafi* in Turkey, etc.), and many religious rulings were enforced as public laws. Although the foundations of patriarchal order have been dislocated everywhere, including in the Arab peninsula, it is tempting to try and find in religious guidelines a remedy to that dislocation, when no better solution appears at hand.

Islam has the huge advantage of offering an immediate community, manifest in some intra-Muslim solidarity it organizes, and to present itself as opposed to money and *frontiers*. That last aspect is a lot more meaningful in Khartum than in Rome. For a (Muslim, Christian or atheist) Italian citizen, borders don't matter much: he is free to live, work and travel within the limits of a national territory where, as long as he abides by the law, he gets a minimum of protection and welfare: he belongs, he has a State. Half of the Africans and many Asians do not benefit from this "vast comfortable prison" (Max Weber). The territory where they live is

dal lord sexual rights over the bride of his peasant.) 1979 was also the year when the Shah was overthrown by a popular wave that undoubtedly had proletarian roots and elements, but which was controlled by the clerics.

The Afghan and Iranian situations were part of a wider context. The failure of Stalinist style State industrialism (led by national socialist regimes) and the failure of oil wealth induced industrialization (as in the Shah's "White Revolution"), the defeats of workers' struggles throughout the world, the exhaustion of the Fordist compromise, all converged in the mid-1970s crisis and shattered development models. The collapse of these models brought down the secular visions they carried.

As socialist or pan-Arab paradises proved frauds, and their political and mental frameworks proved unable to explain history and give reasons for hope, the masses went for out-of-this-world hereafters. The Iranian dispossessed did not identify with a socialist ideology: they interpreted their own condition and action in religious terms and gave themselves a clerical leadership. They turned to the ayatollahs, not the Tudeh, the local once powerful CP. Twenty-five years later, Iraq (formerly one of the most secular countries in the area) is torn apart by a combination of national liberation and civil war (about one thousand corpses a month) and fractured along religious lines. The fall of Saddam's dictatorship in 2003 went along with struggles on the workplace and attempts at workers' self-organization: their subsequent failure caused their disintegration, or their reintegration in the form of the Sunni v. Shiite opposition, with the Kurds as a third partner. In today's Iraq, industrialization from above has failed, what development there is comes from private firms, and the *rentier* economy financed by the oil revenues had been replaced by neo-colonialism, or even by barter. Because of the disappearance of the collectivity forcibly knitted together by the oppressive State, the only tangible collective reality is provided by (also oppressive) smaller scale "ethnic" and religious identifica-

tions. But here ethnic and religious ties come down to the same thing: being Sunni or Shiite is a matter of birth, not choice.

The Arab and Muslim regions play a leading part in this religious revival because they've borne the brunt of Western secularism more than other parts of the globe. Modernity has disrupted them without fulfilling much of its historical promises. Those countries are caught out between a merchant class that's been doing trade for thousands of years but is unable to promote an industry that could compete on the world market, and impoverished masses with little prospect of entering modern wage labour. They are nostalgic of their long-gone grandeur, managed by corrupted despots more concerned by their clan than by national interest, prey to a military elite more familiar with defeat than victory, held in check by Israel, and both armed and destabilized by great powers, the USA and the USSR in the past, only the USA now. The constant repression of labour demands and trade union life, and the precariousness or non-existence of political parties and parliamentary democracy, breed a justified feeling of being looked down by the rest of the world, and (mis)treated according to double standards.

For example, Iran gets universal blame for its nuclear policy, although it has signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and at least formally abides by its rulings. On the contrary, India has not signed it, has the bomb plus the necessary missiles (and possibly the motives and the target, because of the India-Pakistan feud), and it is updating its nuclear industry: yet the West casts a benevolent eye on India, and France competes with the US to modernize Indian nuclear power stations. Actually, the US and Europe are banking on India's possible future alliance against China. What's more, unlike India, Iran happens to be at the heart of the region with half the world's oil resources. Western hostility to Iran becoming a nuclear power does not come from the fear that some fanatic Teheran mullahs would wipe Israel off the face of the Earth, but that the mere possession of such a weapon would be detrimental to a century old

control of the West (formerly Britain, now mainly the US) over a vital strategic zone.

Therefore, all conditions combine to draw back populations of Muslim tradition to Islam as a source of self-understanding and communion : longstanding implantation of the Hezbollah in South Lebanon, success of Hamas in the Palestinian general elections, division of the Iraqis along religious lines, electoral breakthrough of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, fundamentalist rise in Algeria, Morocco, in the Comoro Islands, in Somalia… and the Taliban are regaining strength.

Sudan has been seen for twenty years through ethno-religious glasses : Muslim North v. Christian or animist South, Arab stockbreeders v. Black African farmers. Even with the addition of the geopolitical touch of the oil factor, this is turning historical realities into eternal categories. A few decades ago, Sudan was rife with "modern" conflicts, as at the time of the 1964 general strike. A large Stalinist CP controlled a union movement with roots in railway workers and tenant farmers, played a prominent political role, took part (as other CPs in other third world countries) in the dictatorship of colonel Nimeiry from 1966, and supported his putsch in 1969. Nimeiry overthrew Islam influenced rulers and led a "left wing" policy: nationalizations, industrialization, and reliance on the Eastern bloc. After a failed CP coup in 1971, the military ruthlessly decapitated the labour bureaucracy, turned liberal and allied with the West, at the same time as Sudan became an oil and gas producer. The masses' disillusionment with "socialism" helped a Muslim rebound, and Nimeiry relied more and more on the support of militant Islamists, introduced sharia in 1984, only to be ousted from power in 1985.

Of course, ethnic and religious rifts existed as much in 1966 as in 2006. Hassan al-Turani, the main Islamic figure, made his first public appearance as a student leader in the 1964 protests. A "North v. South" war had already broken out in 1955 and lasted until 1972. But in the 1960s, social conflicts, particularly those related to work