**An Historical Comparison of Religious Revival**

Sandra Halperin

**Introduction**

The steady rise of radical Islamist movements in the Middle East came sharply into focus with the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979.[[1]](#footnote-1) This event accelerated the growth of Islamist movements and today they represent the best organized, wealthiest, and most powerful political movement in the region. The question of what this portends for the future has been addressed by a multitude of academics, policy analysts, journalists, and public intellectuals. However, thus far the predictions they have produced have offered few, if any, durable insights.

This article highlights the need for research that provides firmer grounding for predicting the outcome of current trends in the Middle East. Specifically, its aim is to show the value of comparative historical research for addressing predictive questions. Comparative insights drawn from cases for which we have a fuller, more complete record and a larger body of scholarly work can provide the analytic leverage needed to formulate and test predictive hypotheses. However, few researchers have sought comparative insights into the continuing growth of Islamist movements and the likely outcomes of this trend. This is particularly surprising as there is a fertile field for comparative-historical investigation of this phenomenon ready at hand. As a number of scholars have pointed out, the Middle East and Europe are the two regions that have more in common with each other, culturally and religiously, than do any other regions of the world,[[2]](#footnote-2) and both have a history of region-wide battles between religious and secular forces.

Researchers have failed to explore this comparison for two reasons. The first is that accounts of European historical development on which much social science research depends assume, erroneously, that Europe’s eighteenth century Enlightenment (1715-1774) and French Revolution (1789) accelerated a process of secularization that had been ongoing for at least a century and that, in the nineteenth century, technological progress and changing patterns of economic relationships effectively completed this process.[[3]](#footnote-3) What this assumption ignores is that, in the nineteenth century, a revival of militant, literal religion in Europe triggered a region-wide battle between religious and secular forces that was waged within the arenas of European domestic and regional politics up to and through the world wars of the twentieth century.

The French Revolution gave rise to a revitalized, more militant and monolithic ‘Ultramontane’ Catholicism that spread to all Catholic countries and Catholic communities within predominantly Protestant states.[[4]](#footnote-4) Its aim was to broaden the popular appeal of the Church and strengthen its defenses against hostile forces through revivalist meetings in public squares, imposing weekly attendance at mass on Catholics, building bigger and more richly decorated churches, and reviving or creating newcults (Heyer 1969, 178-83). Everywhere in Catholic Europe there was a phenomenal revival of missionary activities, pilgrimages, religious processions and venerations of saints, a steady increase in the number of churches, and the founding of new and counter-revolutionary religious orders, groups, and cults of various sorts than in any generation since the thirteenth century (Weiss 1977, 35; see also Hobsbawm 1962, chapter 12, McLeod 1981: 49, Boulger 1904: 167). There was an astonishing mass conversion to Protestantism,[[5]](#footnote-5) an explosion of Protestant missionary activity,[[6]](#footnote-6) and the emergence of movements whose “harsh and pristine puritanism” and literalist understanding of Scripture became the foundation of modern fundamentalism (Hunter 1976, 101).

This was a revival, Eric Hobsbawm (1962, 271) observed, of “religion in its most uncompromising, irrationalist, and emotionally compulsive forms”. The Roman Catholic Church, “the greatest international organization of that or any other day” (Petrie 1944, 165), provided this revival with a powerful ideology of uncompromising resistance to the modern world.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the course of the century, this uncompromising stand opened up a breach between the Church and the dominant secular forces of the time that “approached the dimensions of a schism in civilization” (Brinkley 1935, 67). As this breach widened, European societies became increasingly polarized and politically volatile.

Erroneous accounts of European historical development are one obstacle to comparative research on the current Islamic revival in the Middle East. A second obstacle is the assumption in much of the literature on this revival that comparisons cannot be drawn between the history of church-state relations in Europe and the interaction of politics and religion in the Middle East because there exists a unity of religion and politics in Islam that is not found in any other major religion. This is erroneous. While the unity of religion and politics that existed during the life of the Prophet has no parallel in the early years of Christianity, later in its history the ecclesiastical and political realms became closely associated.[[8]](#footnote-8) After the dissolution of the Carolingian Empire in the tenth century, the Church became the ultimate source of power in Europe. By the twelfth century, the Church had become an international state headed by Popes who claimed exclusive sovereignty in temporal affairs as God’s representative on earth and exercised direct authority over political and class struggles, economic life, education, and social welfare. They sent large armies into battle, organized crusades, dethroned monarchs, distributed kingdoms, and raised funds by direct taxation (see Mann 1988, 13-14, Hall 1985). The resurgence of Christianity in modern European history came after a decline in the power of the Church in temporal affairs. It became increasingly subordinated to state power during the seventeenth century and, by the end of the eighteenth century, religion (both Catholic and Protestant) had begun “a process of decay and even of destruction” (Troeltsch 1960, 1012). The French Revolution’s attempt to accelerate this process triggered a great war between religious and secular forces in Europe, one which dominated the history of nineteenth century Europe and was to be the final round in a centuries-long battle between religious and secular authority.

**The Politics of Religious Revival: A Comparison**

It is difficult to compare revivals within two whole spiritual traditions which are both internally so diverse. However, comparisons highlight similarities which can enable us to gain a fuller understanding of each. Here, the similarities that are highlighted concern the interests and aims of politico-religious movements and the means by which they seek to advance them. The two interests highlighted here are what might be called “corporate ‘church’ interests” and “class interests.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

***Corporate ‘Church’ Interests***

Both in Europe and in the Middle East, politico-religious movements sought to influence state policy or capture state power for broadly similar interests. In both regions, the pre-eminent ‘church’ interest was to preserve itself as the state religion and to defend its traditional role in society against secular laws, values, and ideologies.

In Europe, it was largely in defense of these interests that the clergy initiated a religious revival during the French Revolution (see, e.g., Tilly 1964, Heyer 1969, Cholvy 1978). Throughout the subsequent century, the church sought to defend these interests by supporting the development of religious-political parties and connections whose aim was to make the machinery of the state serve church interests. These parties and connections became powerful elements in national politics.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Everywhere they opposed the introduction of religious toleration which, in France, Britain, Germany, Scandinavia, and elsewhere, threatened the character of the church as the state religion. In France, the Catholic Ultramontane clergy condemned the state for allowing Protestants, Jews, and freethinkers to exercise equal rights with Catholics. The issues of Catholic emancipation and disestablishment occupied a large place in British politics throughout the century. An Evangelical League was formed in Germany after the government began to dismantle its anti-Catholic legislation in 1866 and thereafter took an active part in election campaigns and other aspects of public life, both under the Empire and in the Weimar Republic (Evans 1981: 93). The church also fiercely defended its corporate interests by contesting state measures to introduce civil marriage and divorce, as well as new systems of mass schooling. In England, vested religious interests in education were a constant obstacle to the development of general education throughout the century; England, in fact, was the last of the western European states to establish a national school system. Conflict over education remained a central issue in Belgian politics after 1847. Militant Calvinists and the large Roman Catholic minority in the Netherlands organized themselves politically in the 1870s to fight for state support for their own schools. In Austria, the Church fought against the introduction of civil marriage and state-controlled education (see, e.g. Thompson 1974, Evans 1981, Mallinson 1963, Moody *et al* 1953, Mol 1972).

. In the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood was the first politico-religious organization to enter the political arena with the goal of establishing an Islamic state. It was founded in Egypt in 1928 and by the late 1940s had become the most powerful Islamic movement in the world. Eventually, new groups emerged and developed networks that enabled them to operate throughout the region. These have demanded that state charters and constitutions proclaim Islam to be the religion of the state and have called for the expulsion of Christians and other infidels from the region. They have also opposed attempts to reform laws concerning polygamy; to introduce laws that would give women greater rights with respect to divorce, alimony, and custody of children; to expand educational opportunities for women; and to introduce secular educational and legal systems that would strip the *ulama* (the educated class of Muslim scholars and religious teachers) of many of their most important sources of income.

***Class Interests***

Though religious revivals in both regions were concerned largely with the defense of corporate church interests, they were subsequently sustained by a variety of groups who found in the symbolism, emotionalism, wealth, and organizational power of the ‘church’ an ideal instrument for pursuing political ends not solely or directly related to the ‘church’ or the defense of its corporate interests. These might be characterized as relating to ‘class interests’: principally those of traditional landowning and urban elites and, later, of middle class and professional classes. In Europe and in the Middle East, the pursuit of these interests, and the religious revivals associated with them, occurred in similar contexts.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the overall nature and pattern of socio-economic development throughout much of the world was far more similar than conventional narratives have led us to believe. In order to profit from expanding production without democratizing consumption at home, elites and ruling groups throughout the world expanded production largely for export rather than for local markets. Similar structures emerged as a result of trans-local relations, and the similarities and interdependencies that it created. The financial center of this order was the City of London, which like the advanced sector of a ‘dependent’ third world economy worked to build strong linkages between British export industries and foreign economies, rather than to integrate various parts of the domestic economy (see Halperin 2013, Chapters 3 and 5). By the last decades of the nineteenth century, a deterioration of agricultural conditions and slowdown in world production and trade was exacerbating economic imbalances throughout the world and fuelling the rise of a global ‘red tide’. In Europe and in the Middle East, World War I generated an explosive rise of radicals and socialists of various sorts, dissenters, trade unionists, and suppressed national minorities (see Halperin 2014, 178-84)., In both regions, there formed a counter-revolutionary coalition of all relatively privileged or well-to-do groups and elements. The "church," by enhancing the organizational capacities of conservative forces, and empowering their interests with its symbols and ideology, played a critical role in the struggle against the threat of socialism.

In Europe, the church was a natural ally of the traditional landowning elite since it was itself a major property-owner and the aristocracy as a class remained committed to the defense of the church as a social and political institution throughout the century (Thompson 1974, 198-207, Gerth and Mills 1946: 370-71; see also Geffe and Jossua 1989, Gilbert 1980). However, even where traditional elites and the church were at odds with one another – as, for instance, in Italy and in Spain – the nobility and the church eventually closed ranks as the threat of socialism increased (Kertzer 2014, Carr 1966). As was the case in Europe, the religious establishment in the Middle East is closely linked to the dominant traditional landowning and urban notability, sharing with it a common interest in preserving the structures of traditional life.[[11]](#footnote-11) And, as in Europe, with the rise of socialist and other leftist groups and movements, both have tried to press religion into the defense of private property and traditional power relations. They have remained unalterably opposed to land reform and other liberal and democratic reforms including legal and educational reform, the extension of labor and women’s rights, and national minority rights and religious toleration (see Halperin 2005).

In both regions, dissident, radical or ‘nonconformist’ religious movements emerged as the monopolization by traditional elites of gains from economic expansion increasingly frustrated the ambitions of middle and professional classes. These were largely middle class and essentially conservative groups which sought to challenge the power of traditional elites while preserving traditional structures that kept the lower classes in check. In Europe, new Protestant movements were largely middle class in character but were, like the established churches, hostile to religious minorities and sought to impose ‘totalitarian controls’ over those who they brought within their sphere (McLeod 1981, 36). In the Middle East, the new Islamic groups that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s opposed land and other reforms that would destroy the socio-economic basis of traditional society, opposed measures that would provide the masses with the type of education that they themselves received and extend to women the career opportunities that they themselves enjoyed, and preached and practiced intolerance of other religions and for minorities.[[12]](#footnote-12) Their fundamental aims were (and are) to make the machinery of government serve their interests, block far-reaching reforms in economic and social structures, and make participation in the economic and political life of their countries subject to religious sanction based on their own interpretation of Islam.

In both regions, religious revivals have sought to attract mass support in similar ways: primarily through a vast network of charitable organizations which offer the poor social services not provided by the state. In Europe, the most successful of these was the *Société de Saint Paul*, which supplied the poor with soup kitchens, cheap food and housing, old clothes, help with rent, free medical and legal advice, catechist teaching, apprenticeships, adult classes, clubs, and libraries (Zeldin 1970: 108). In the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups attract supporters by providing many of these same services to the poor and have built schools, clinics, and housing for this purpose.

Additionally, in an era in which electoral systems severely restricted participation and barred effective participation by parties representing the political left, religious movements provide a means by which middle and professional classes can express opposition to the existing order and attract support from the multitude of urban poor. This was true in Europe before 1945, and it continues to be the case in the Middle East today where, in the absence of other avenues for political participation, hundreds of thousands of Arabs in various countries have voted for Islamist parties in order to register their rejection of their governments.

**What Changed and Why**

In both regions, the rise of socialism constituted a central threat to the traditional order and played a key role in the evolution of region-wide religious revivals.

***Europe***

On the eve of World War I, European industrialization was sectorally and geographically limited, largely carried out by low-wage and low-skilled labor forces, and based on production for export rather than local mass consumption. Politics were characterized by extra-legal patronage systems and corruption, instability, and authoritarianism (see Halperin 2004). It was the mass mobilizations for armies, and for industry to support them, in 1914 that began a process of social transforrmation that ultimately culminated in a social revolution throughout Europe. After the war, socialist activity became more violent, frequent, and widespread (see Halperin 2004, chapter 6). As pressures for democracy and the threat of socialism increased the church, in lockstep with other elements of traditional society, moved further and further to the right. Corporatist regimes or structures were established in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany, France, Austria, Poland, Belgium, Holland, Norway, and Sweden, whose organizational basis was the clerico-corporatist social order defined by the Church in *Rerum Novarum* and which reflected themes that the Church had used throughout the centuries to oppose the breakdown of traditional society (see, for example, Elbow 1953 and Berghahn 1988). The Church formalized its support of Italian fascism in the Lateran Treaty in 1929. Most Catholics regarded the victory of fascism in the Spanish Civil War as a Christian triumph (Carr 1966). In 1933, the Church helped to bring about the establishment of an authoritarian regime under Salazar. Germany’s Catholic Center Party voted for the Enabling Act, granting Hitler dictatorial powers and many Catholic organizations later merged with Nazi organizations (Evans 1981: 395). In France, the Church supported authoritarian movements like the *Action Française* (Soucy 1972) and, in the 1940s, supported the Vichy regime.

As Europe's ruling classes became increasingly preoccupied with the threat of socialism at home and Bolshevism abroad, the concern with stopping the spread of Communism became inextricably bound up with the preservation and defense of the traditional structures of European society. British and French ‘appeasement policies’ were a reflection of this preoccupation, and led to World War II (see Halperin 2004, Chapters 6 and 7).

Despite the profound dislocations that had resulted from World War I, leaders and ruling classes in all western European countries had succeeded in re-establishing and maintaining the pre-war *status quo*. However, mass mobilisation for war and industrial expansion, again, for a massively destructive second European war, as well as the need for working-class cooperation in resuming the fight against socialism following that war, forced governments into a political accommodation of working-class demands that made a restoration of the pre-war system impossible. As a result, the region was wholly transformed. The resumption by European states of the welfare and regulatory functions that they had relinquished in the nineteenth century (see Halperin 2004) and their pursuit of policies designed to increase domestic investment and spread growth “as evenly as possible across the entire surface of each national territory” (Brenner 2004, 51) produced a more equitable distribution of income and expanded domestic markets. This relatively broad-based development brought about unprecedented growth and prosperity and an end to the intense social conflicts that had characterized Europe throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century (see Halperin 2004). For the first time, parties representing labor became legitimate participants in the political process in Europe. The alliance of the church and the old right was discredited because of its association with autocracy and fascism and, with its role in the provision of charity largely usurped by the welfare state, its political influence declined. The Catholic Church withdrew from explicit politics and moved to the center politically and generally became an advocate of the welfare state (Kertzer 2014, Gilbert 1980).

***The Middle East***

While the end of empire and the establishment of independent states after World War I changed the political structure of the region, it left social structures essentially the same. As in Europe, in the Middle East, there was an explosive rise of communist, socialist, and other leftist political organizations following World War I. These parties and movements of the Left (in Iran, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and elsewhere) were suppressed by local security forces with the help of Britain and France. However, with the resurgence of these groups following World War II, regional elites seeking to monopolise access to new sources and means of producing wealth, and foreign powers determined to make the world safe for capitalist producers and investors, closed ranks in a campaign to eradicate, not only Communists and Socialists, but *any* element calling for democracy and land reform, including liberal, left-of-center, and other reformist groups and movements (Halperin 2005: 1135-1136). With the suppression of liberal, reformist, and progressive elements and currents that, in Europe, had supported and encouraged broad-based development and the democratisation of national politics, traditional landowning and urban notabilities, new ‘nationalist’ elites, and politico-religious movements have been able, despite coups, revolutions, and other political changes, to prevent changes that would in some fundamental way break down existing structures.

The implications of this generally underemphasized chapter in contemporary Middle East history have not been fully drawn for the current religious revival in the region. In Europe, when governments were forced to raise mass armies for World War I and undertake the industrial expansion needed to support the war, this produced, out of labor organisations and leftist, liberal, and progressive elements, a more compact and radicalized mass and unleashed a social revolution that, along with the human and material destruction wrought by the war, shifted the balance of class power in Europe. It was the breakdown of traditional class structures and increase in the power of working classes relative to that of other classes that made possible the changes that transformed European societies after World War II.

In the Middle East, there were no region-wide wars and mass mobilizations during the period when the global rising ‘red tide’ was felt with increasing force, there and throughout the rest of the world. Consequently, instead of a social revolution, the crises of the Great Depression and world wars led to a retrenchment of traditional structures in the Middle East.

Traditional elites sought to restrict the power of working classes by limiting industrialisation and promoting the revival of ultra-right religious movements as a bulwark against pressures for reform. The bureaucratic and military elites who came to power in nationalist ‘revolutions’ and coups suppressed movements and groups calling for leftist, liberal, or progressive politics, institutionalized a corporatist, ethnic- and religious-based nationalist politics that brought labor organization under state control, and targeted the minorities and foreign elements that had previously played a key role in economic expansion (Halperin 2005). By suppressing the elements that had supported and encouraged broad-based development and the democratization of national politics in Europe, they succeeded in maintaining the structures that had characterized both regions prior to World War II. Consequently, today, there is no class with enough strength to effectively challenge the power of traditional notabilities, and their religious and bureaucratic-military allies.

In sum, in Europe, the mobilization of mass armies to fight two hugely destructive wars, and the enormous industrial expansion to support them, triggered a social revolution that transformed social structures and put economies on a fundamentally different footing. While previous regional conflagrations had been followed by restorations, a shift in the balance of social power and, after 1945, consequent changes throughout the class structure, made restoration impossible. In areas of Europe, states adopted social democratic and Keynesian goals and policy instruments that, before the war, would never have been accepted by the wealthy classes. Broadly similar changes occurred in European countries that became part of the communist sphere so that, though their autocratic structures of power remained they eventually were able to achieve the political changes that had occurred in the first world by means of a ‘velvet revolution’ in the 1980s. But in the Middle East, and nearly all of the rest of the world, the crises of the Great Depression and the world wars led, not to a social revolution, but to a retrenchment of traditional structures and the reproduction of features of development that had characterized Europe before 1945.

**Conclusions**

The aim of this discussion has been neither to re-describe nor to interpret (in terms of European history), the current Islamic revival in the Middle East, but rather to confront claims which bar comparative analysis as a basis for predicting the future of the Middle East. The comparative perspective presented here, while limited in scope, also highlights a chapter in European history that scholars often overlook and that challenges prevailing notions of secularism as a natural outcome of historical evolutionary processes. It also challenges the exceptionalism surrounding the study of Islam and suggests that insights into the Islamic Revival may be found, not only within the narrow terrain marked out for us by its architects, but also within the broader arena of human experience and history.

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1. In scholarly as well as ordinary usage, the term ‘Islamist’ has come to refer to groups which seek to make all aspects of life conform to a set of sacred scriptures believed to be inerrant and immutable. Not all Islamic revivalists are Islamists, not all Islamists are political activists, and not all Islamic political activists are radical and prone to violence. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, e.g. Bernard Lewis, “The Tanner Lectures on Human Values.” Delivered at Brasenose College, Oxford University February 26, March 5 and 12, 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Secularization is a “process whereby religious thinking, practice, and institutions lose social significance” and are increasingly restricted to the domain of private faith (Krausz 1971-2, 212). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Its re-Catholicization of Ireland was considered to be among its greatest triumphs (Gilley 1988, 238). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For example, the Methodist movement in England, which had less than 60,000 adherents before the French Revolution, grew to 600,000 in 1850 (Hobsbawm 1959, 129). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Including the Baptist Missionary Society (1792), the Netherlands Missionary Society (1797), the interdenominational London Society (1799), the British and Foreign Bible Society (1804), Wesleyans (1813-1818), the Basel Missionaries, the Berlin and Rhenish societies (1820s), the Church of Scotland (1824), the United Presbyterians (1835), the Swedish, Leipzig, and Bremen societies (1830s), and the Norwegian society (1842). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gregory XVI’s *Mirari Vos* (1832) condemned freedom of conscience, freedom of books, the Revolutions, and the separation of Church and State. Pope Pius IX’s *Quanta Cura and the Syllabus of Errors* (1864), and Pope Leo XIII’s *Immortale Dei* (1878) expressed opposition to liberalism and the liberal state. Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (1891) called for a return to medieval Christian principles. Pope Pius XI’s *Quadrigesimo Anno* (1931) and *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) condemned industrialization, capitalism, republicanism, democracy, and socialism. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Moreover, a unity between religious and political domains has *not* characterized much of the subsequent history of Islam. The notion that Islam does not distinguish between religious and political spheres of social life was, from the start, actively promoted by ideologues of the Islamic revival (e.g., Khomeini 1981, Qutb 1981, Khalid 1981, al-Rayyis 1972) and widely accepted by Western scholars and journalists (e.g., Black 1993, Lewis 1985: 24; Pipes 1982: 4-5, 10-13). However, this view is sharply at odds with the history of Islam.. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Three forms of the word 'church' will be used in what follows: ‘church’ is used in statements meant to apply to both Christian and Islamic religious establishments; Church (uppercase) refers to the Catholic Church in Europe; church (lowercase) refers to both the Protestant and Catholic churches in Europe. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Britain’s Conservative Party remained committed to the interests of the Anglican Church; Germany's Catholic Center Party, which became almost totally identified with the defense of Church interests, became the largest party in the national and Prussian legislatures in the 1870s; the Eastern Church in Russia remained an extension and branch of state power, and its clergy took an active part in party, electoral, and parliamentary politics (Mazour 1951: 44-74); the Catholic Party in Belgium was asked to form a government in 1878; the Calvinist Anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands became an important source of support for forces on the right; and the Catholic Church in Austria directly involved itself in national politics through its Social Christian Party. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Islamic revival has taken place within both *Sunni* and *Shia* Islam. While it is often noted that the link between religion and state is closer in *Sunni* countries than in *Shia* Iran, where the financial independence of the clergy gives it relatively more autonomy from the state, anti-reform pressures from both have been a key factor in the inability of governments to effect meaningful economic and political reform. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Halperin 2005. See for a discussion of these groups, Ayubi 1991,

    . [↑](#footnote-ref-12)