

# Paul Berman's Archaeology of Islamic Fundamentalism

Reviewed By Paul Devlin

*Terror and Liberalism*

by Paul Berman

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I cannot imagine a more important, engaging, or lucid book for understanding the current world situation. But this is not a book about current events. It is almost like a previously unseen history of the twentieth century. Berman is a liberal journalist with outstanding credentials. He often writes for major newspapers and magazines such as *The New York Times* and *The Nation*. Here he has presented an analysis of Islamic fundamentalism and earlier fascist movements which may substantially adjust points of view towards both.

Berman names totalitarian ideologies of both right and left which emerged after World War I “pathological mass movements”. What is significant about this book is that Berman carefully demonstrates that both major Islamic movements of the right (fundamentalism) and left (Baathi socialism) are also “pathological mass movements” whose foundations are directly traceable to the first World War (and not because of Western colonialism, but because of the idea of the separation of church and state, which took hold in Turkey after the war). All pathological mass movements, Berman tells us, smile upon and encourage suicide and murder. And their roots are the 19<sup>th</sup> century European thought –Muslim fundamentalism is as well. To label pathological Islamic movements as “fascist” is not just to make a parallel, Berman shows, but to describe their traceable theoretical roots. Islamic fundamentalism and Baathi socialism are firmly in this tradition and their early theoreticians were deeply read in German Romantic anti-Semites, like Fichte for instance. Berman describes several concrete links from the reading lists of the Western-educated theoreticians of Islamism and Baathi socialism.

(Interestingly, this stream also worked in reverse, with Berman noting the case of Johann von Leers, Goebbels's right-hand man, who converted to Islam and worked for Nasser as a propagandist.) One time when he makes his point most concisely, Berman quotes

Algerian leader Ali Benhadj,

'If faith, a belief, is not watered and irrigated by blood, it does not grow. ...Principles are reinforced by sacrifices, suicide operations and martyrdom for Allah. Faith is propagated by counting up deaths every day, by adding up massacres and charnel houses. ' . . . Surely this, you will say, cannot be Western – surely this kind of talk, at last, is exotic! But this is how the leaders of Germany used to speak, sixty years ago. Bolsheviks were not afraid to speak like that. *Viva la muerte!* said Franco's general. This is not exotic. This is the totalitarian cult of death.

Islamic Fundamentalists and Baathists, Berman teaches us, want to re-create an imagined “golden age” (a completely Romantic project). They were each aiming for utopia. (Berman is also the author of *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968*.) But utopia, of course, is not what it seems. Murderous rage often lurks behind dreamings of utopias. He tells us how twentieth century pathological mass movements reject all the positive aspects of the enlightenment – reason, the idea universal rights, and so on. But Berman, who has an astute literary mind, could have made this point that I kept thinking of: two famous literary utopias, Voltaire's El Dorado and Swift's Land of the Houyhnhms, are societies *based on reason*. Pathological mass movements want(ed) utopias based on the absence of reason. Maybe someone could run with that somewhere, sometime.

Berman emphasizes the deep irrationality of pathological mass movements, and presents us, late in the book, with a devastating critique of Noam Chomsky, who, according to Berman, never stops trying to explain irrational people rationally. “Last of the 19<sup>th</sup> century rationalists” is the moniker Berman applies to him. Pathological mass movements all wanted to turn back the French Revolution (and the American one too, by extension, which was, in a way, another step in the English revolution against monarchy, which really means: they wanted to destroy Anglo-American liberalism).

Islamism did most especially, because it is absolutely incompatible with the separation of church and state. (Of course, disturbingly, the current President of the United States also seems uncomfortable with this separation.)

This book has (as Wallace Stevens said somewhere about something else) “an understanding beyond journalism”. But it does not incorporate any current fetishes of the academy; there is no jargon and it is highly readable. The argument is clear and the writing is pristine. I was also pleased to find that Berman is remarkably tuned to a literary frequency without getting too dreamy about the influence of literature or its analysis on world events. First he gives us a careful and absorbing reading of Camus’ *The Rebel*. There’s a brief discussion of, of all things, Victor Hugo’s prosody (in relation to “rebellion”). He criticizes Salman Rushdie and Jose Saramajo. And so on.

The villain of *Terror and Liberalism*, Berman’s man who is the metaphor for and prime mover of pathological mass movements, is Charles Baudelaire. The book’s hero is Walt Whitman, whom Berman calls “the anti-Baudelaire”. For Berman, Baudelaire = death, tyranny. Whitman = life, democracy. Maybe Berman could have put a note here referring the reader to the first chapter of Kenneth Burke’s *Attitudes Toward History*, which describes the frames of acceptance and rejection. (Whitman, who Burke discusses would be “acceptance”; Baudelaire, “rejection” – and thus totalitarianism.)

The 19<sup>th</sup> century literary roots of 20<sup>th</sup> century political catastrophe are much more thoroughly and interestingly treated in George Steiner’s *In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (Yale UP, 1971), but Berman does a great job for his purposes. His purpose is not to update *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, but to riff on it (although this is my own comparison, Berman does not mention Steiner).

But now for how all this happened. Once upon a time, according to Islamism’s major theoretician, Sayyid Qutb, everything in the world was just great. People were not alienated and life was perfect. When was this? During the first Caliphate of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Why were things so great? There was no separation of church and state. The will of Allah was supreme upon the

earth. The Islamic world was a Garden of Eden which had not tasted the fruit of secularism. Europe's rise, and England's in particular, is the culprit here. Qutb, who earned an MS in education at a teacher's college in Colorado in the 1940s, lived deep in the heart of secular America and apparently could not stand it. So he dreamed up this golden age of intolerance. The last straw, for Qutb, was when Attaturk formally abolished the old Caliphate (whose home had been the Ottoman Empire) in 1924. (This is how World War I was a cause of Islamism.) (Now, Berman does not say this explicitly, but I have a feeling that dating the end of the Caliphate to 1924 is something like dating the end of the Byzantine Empire to 1917.)

The centerpiece of this book is Berman's discussion of Sayyid Qutb's thirty-volume (yes, three-zero) "exegetical extravaganza", *In The Shade of the Koran*, which appeared in the 1960s. Qutb is the intellectual father of Al-Qaeda. Berman draws all the connecting lines. Surprisingly, and Berman shows this, *In the Shade of the Koran* is not simply a thirty-volume pamphlet for hatred but at times a very sophisticated work. Berman calls *In the Shade of the Koran*:

a vast and elegantly constructed architecture of thought and imagination, a work of true profundity, vividly written, wise, broad, indignant, sometimes demented, bristly with hatred, medieval, modern, tolerant, intolerant, cruel, urgent, cranky, tranquil, grave, poetic, learned, analytic, moving in some passages, a work large enough to create its own shade

(Berman notes that he has only been able to locate volumes 1, 4, and 30 of this massively influential work in English translation.) Qutb's major theory, according to Berman, is "Islam as totality". (Incidentally, his emphasis on truth and totality, Berman notes, Qutb is not so very different from two of his Western contemporaries, Sidney Hook and Georg Lukacs.)

As for *Terror and Liberalism's* drawbacks, which do not abound but are still there, Berman's somewhat blind support of Israel is glaring. Of course everyone is against the Palestinian suicide bombers killing Israeli civilians during the morning commute. But maybe there would be no suicide bombers

if Israel would just pull those settlements back. Ah, well. That conflict is far beyond the scope of this review.

Berman does not note the following, but to close, I would like to point it out. In his journal of his travels through India, private diaries kept while doing research in India during the 1950s (published as *Baksheesh and Brahman* by HarperCollins in 1995), Joseph Campbell makes the suggestion that the West's "dialogue with Islam" was, eventually, and through twists and turns, responsible for democracy – due to Islam's radical egalitarianism (one of traditional Islam's best features, in my opinion). Ironically, after the West developed democracy through its ancient "dialogue", the politically immature "critique" of democracy which followed likewise polluted Islamic thought. Careful demonstration of this development this is Berman's great achievement.