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Religious Utopianism: From Othering Reality to Othering People

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Abstract: This paper intends to make an important contribution to the studies of religious utopianism by considering religions as comprehensive utopian systems which have an ontological and a social utopian mode. It argues that the ontological mode/utopia is related to human finality and that its fantastical content, abstractness and ontological Othering undermine the transformative powers of left religious social utopianism, while it encourages pernicious social Othering in religious fundamentalism. The article has four sections. In Section 1, it clarifies the definition of utopia on which the paper relies and the reasons for this particular choice. Section 2 discusses the religious ontological utopia and religions as utopian systems and utopian programs. Section 3 utilises E. Bloch's considerations about concrete and abstract utopias to explain the reasons for the incapacity of politically left orientated religious utopianism to function as a revolutionary force. Finally, the Section 4 discusses the way religious fundamentalism employs social Othering as a way of defending the universality of its ontological vision against competing religious and pseudo-religious universals.

Keywords: utopianism; religious utopianism; ontology; religious fundamentalism; othering

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1. Definition of Utopia

The word "utopia" is a witty neologism which first appeared in 1516 with the publication of Thomas More's novel *Utopia*, which describes a fictional island with an ideal social organisation.[1] It phonetically blends the Greek words "good/well" (*eu*), "not/no" (*ou*) and "place" (*topos*), ultimately rendering its meaning as "good place which is no place".[2] Explicitly about a fictional place, More's *Utopia* was implicitly a critique of the main political and social ills of sixteenth-century England. The idyllic life of the Utopians, based on absence of private property, egalitarianism, communitarianism and tolerance, was a *camera obscura* image of Tudor England's problems arising from its property relations, social hierarchies, religious intolerance and concepts and practices of justice. The inverted social image in More's *Utopia*, jokingly yet seriously, invited readers to compare the happy life of the inhabitants of this "good place/no place" with the conditions of the existing yet deeply problematic life in England.

Since then, utopia (and utopianism) has become part of the vernacular and an important concept utilised by a growing number of scholarly disciplines.[3] In everyday parlance, the meaning of utopia has not moved far from More's and is tied to generally benevolent yet impossible to realise ideas. In theoretical approaches, its semantic universe is more nuanced but therefore also more diversified and more contested; the aporetic ambiguities of More's "good place/no place" continue to haunt its understanding and definitions. What constitutes a utopia is defined according to different parameters and questions that authors want to answer. For some, utopias are exclusively about imagined good societies (Davis 1981; Sargent 1994; Claeys and Sargent 1999; Kumar 1987, 1991). For this group of scholars, utopia also has limited forms of expressions. A few claim that it is a specific literary genre (Davis 1981; Kumar 1987), while Sargent argues that utopianism has three "faces", namely "the literary utopia, utopian practice and utopian social theory" (Sargent 2010, p. 5; 1994). For others, utopia is a particular mode of thinking, an impulse, a mentality, a desire, whose traces can be found across the whole spectrum of collective and individual

creations and activities, from leisurely daydreaming, music, literature, eroticism to political theories, various communities and revolutionary activities (Bloch 1995; Geoghegan 1987; Levitas 2010).

Opinions also vary as to whether there should be a conceptual distinction between utopia and utopianism. For L. Sargisson, the former is a "meta-concept" indicative of a "human impulse/tendency", while the latter refers to various "manifestations or expressions of utopianism" (Sargisson 2012, pp. 8–9). Sargent, however, views utopianism as a "general phenomenon" of "social dreaming", while he reserves utopia for a specific "literary genre" (Sargent 1994). For Bloch and Levitas, on the other hand, utopia and utopianism are synonymous (Bloch 1995; Levitas 2010).

It has also been argued that utopia is either a typically western (Kumar 1987) or conversely universal phenomenon (Sargent 1994, 2010). Where there seems to be an agreement is that utopia performs many functions, with the main ones being compensation, criticism and change (Levitas 2010).

When facing such diversity, one has to make a choice about a suitable definition based on considerations as to which one provides the best analytical lens for the task at hand. For the purposes of analysing specifically religious utopianism, such a definition comes from R. Levitas, who defines utopia as "the expression of the desire for a better way of being" which "involves imagining of a state of being in which the problems which actually confront us are removed or resolved, often, but not necessarily, through the imagining of a state of the world in which the scarcity gap is closed or the 'collective problem' solved" (Levitas 2010, p. 221). This definition is conceptually broad enough to accommodate various contents, forms and functions of religious utopianism, but most importantly, it utilises the syntagm "way of being", which avoids invoking social categories and ideas as the exclusive content of utopias. Religions do venture into social utopianism, but as will be seen, at their core stands a utopian solution to concerns of being and existence in an ontological, rather than a social, sense, which by necessity leaves its mark on religious social utopianism. As mentioned before, the intent of this article is to look at religious utopianism. More specifically, its aim is to explore its ontological and social versions, the way they relate to each other and the social and political implications and practical consequences arising from that relation. Quite obviously, Levitas's definition, which allows for "better way of being" other than just social, and additionally for a variety of utopian expressions, meets the conceptual demands of those aims.

2. Religious Utopianism—The Ontological Utopia

Discussions about religious utopianism most often happen from a perspective which, either consciously or unconsciously, conceptually equals utopia with descriptions and ideas about imagined good societies. Accordingly, analyses tend to focus mostly on religious material, presumably reflective of the desire for a social "better way of being", such as golden age and apocalyptic and millenarian stories, official/doctrinal theologies, "heretical" theologoumena and monastic and non-monastic religious communities.

Such an indiscriminately social perspective is understandable in the case of non-religious utopias because they are, as Levitas argues, a "socially constructed response to an equally socially constructed gap between the needs and wants generated by a particular society" (Levitas 2010, p. 210). Or in other words, problems to which their imagined realities point, criticise and try to resolve are related to the socially, i.e., historically conditioned human "way of being". Religious utopianism is also a response, socially constructed and culturally specific, but the gap to which it responds and which it fills is not socially created, neither is there any social solution to it, be it utopian or real. That gap is the fundamental problem humans have had since time immemorial, collectively and individually, with their natural, biological, or, to dress it in philosophical language, ontological way of being, namely with their mortality and their "transience of being-in-the-world" (Bauman 1992, p. 12; Bloch and Adorno 1964).

Humans are "the only creatures who not only know, but also know that they know - and cannot 'unknow' their knowledge. In particular, they cannot 'unknow' the knowledge of their mortality. . . . Once learned, knowledge that death may not be escaped cannot be forgotten—it can only *not be thought about* for a while, with attention shifting to other concerns. Knowledge has, so to speak, an olfactory rather than a visual or audial quality; odours, like knowledge, cannot be undone, they can be only 'made unfelt' by being suppressed by yet stronger odours" (Bauman 1992, pp. 3–4). Religions are in this respect not just the oldest but also very unique "odours" which very successfully shift away attention from the abyss of existential nihilism inherently present in knowing that, as Heidegger puts it, our "death is something that stands before us—something impending" (Heidegger 1962, p. 294), that our way of being is "being-towards-death" (p. 279). Their way of making "unfelt" that knowledge and the "horror of void, of ultimate absence, of non-being" (Bauman 1992, p. 13) is by construing another reality in which humans exist on an unending continuum and whose metaphysical and eternal qualities stand as an ontological counterpoint, an ontological balancing act, to the physical and transient ontology of humans. In some religions, it is construed as one god, in others as many gods, the Brahman, the Dao, the realm of ancestors of many indigenous traditions, etc., (Neville 2001). It can have personal or impersonal, transcendent or immanent, substantial or insubstantial qualities; be static or in motion, unchanging or changing, an emptiness, principle, reason, energy, power, etc., (Saldarini 2001; Haq 2001; Clooney and Nicholson 2001; Kohn and Miller 2001; Eckel and Thatamanil 2001; Fredriksen 2001). Every religious tradition has its own set of very different descriptors for it. The point at which their varied narratives about it overlap is that it is different to the actual world, with that difference described by ne plus ultra adjectives such as perfect, infinite, ultimate, universal, absolute, true, eternal, etc., (Neville 2001; Smith 1992; Diller and Kasher 2013; Hick 2004, 1981), all of which are also indicative of its qualitative betterness as well in relation to the actual world. Needless to say, these constructs neither suffer from the vagaries of nature and history nor are they ever threatened by "being-towards-death" and complete annihilation. If death ever happens, it is simply a rite of passage reaffirming its perpetuity and life sustaining quality. Thus, Christ dies but also resurrects to re-assume his divine/eternal place. Dionysus dies twice and is twice reborn, ultimately becoming an unstoppable ecstatic life force, while revived Osiris becomes the judge of truth and justice that grants eternal life.

In line with the metaphysical ontological properties of this eternal reality, human unending existence within it continues in an equally metaphysical manner. Religions never define humans strictly in physical terms. Their way of being in the actual world always includes a quality which is by default incorporeal, such as soul, spirit, will, self, energy, reason, etc. (Ward 1998). It is this immaterial part of humans which is destined to continue existing within the other reality. It continues in perpetuity with elaborate narratives about afterlife, rebirth, reincarnation, becoming one with the Brahman or the Dao, return to the ancestors, etc., transforming death and dying from being an intrinsic part of human natural ontology to a "caesura" (Bloch 1970, p. 44) in their existence, an event of only ontic importance, which, as in the case with dying/resurrecting divinities, inaugurates a "limitlessly better quality of existence" (Hick 1981, p. 461), which is invariably metaphysical.

For believers, these ontologically different and immeasurably better realities in which humans also have a "limitlessly better quality of existence" are a matter of faith, and they are considered as if they are a certainty. For others, like Feuerbach (1843) and Marx (1844b), they are abstract, conceptually ontologised inverted images of human limitations and existential struggles in the actual world. In any case, they are fundamentally utopian because they paint a picture of "a state of being" (Levitas) in which ultimately all human problems find their resolution via an ontologically different human mode of existence.

This ontological utopia is the foundation of every religion, the pivot around which everything else in religions revolves and what makes them in all of their intellectual and practical manifestations utopian. Religions are in effect comprehensive utopian systems with many morphologically different yet fully interacting and interrelated elements which

start from, are related to and always return to the central ontological utopia. In their systematic wholeness and purposiveness, they are actually strongly reminiscent of the totality of Jameson's closed "deliberate and fully self-conscious" "Utopian program" (Jameson 2005, pp. 3–5). The difference, however, is that religious utopian programs, in addition to Jameson's "text", "space/the city", "revolutionary praxis" and "intentional communities",[4] also have numerous other forms which lead to and find their purpose in their ultimate reality, i.e., the ontological utopia. Buddhist meditation practice cannot be fitted into any of Jameson's utopian program categories but is a way of drawing near to *sunyata* (emptiness, hollowness), which is how Buddhism describes its ontological utopia. The same is true for other religious elements. The infamous Indian caste system, which is rarely discussed as a religious construct, was officially outlawed in 1947. Yet it still persists. Among other reasons, one of these is that castes are described in the *Laws of Manu* (cc. 1000–1250 BCE), one of the most authoritative texts in India, as type of rungs on the transmigratory ladder leading towards being one with the Brahman, the Hindu version of the other "reality" (Buhler 1886, pp. 482–513).

The totality and the closedness of religious utopian programs with respect to their final ontologically flavoured purpose do not, on the other hand, mean that they are systems closed off from actual reality. Quite to the contrary. In this respect, they function as open, constantly evolving and adaptive systems which are in continuous input/output interaction with issues in the actual world. These issues are pulled into the utopian system, assessed from the perspective of the ontological utopia and then returned to where they originated from. One very clear example of this ongoing interaction is Martin Luther King Jr's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (King 1963). One of the defining documents of the civil rights era, the letter was about justifying civil disobedience as a method of fighting against racist laws. King included a plethora of biblical and non-biblical examples illustrative of the moral rightness of not complying with such laws. But his key argument against them, intent to demonstrate the absolute and unquestionable probity of civil disobedience, was the claim, taken from Aquinas, that unjust laws were not rooted in "eternal law and natural law".[5] With this claim, civil disobedience became part of the utopian ontological program, thereby turning it into something that is absolutely good, imperative and authoritative, rather than a matter of discussion and of free choice.

The interactive character of religious utopian systems and King's utilisation of the ontological utopia as a support for civil disobedience brings us to the question of the type of functions the ontological utopia can perform in the social sphere and religious social utopianism.

3. Religious Utopianism: Social Utopia—Left Radicalism

As mentioned earlier, utopias function in many ways, the main ones being compensation, criticism and transformation. Due to its completely fantastical content, at least from a non-religious perspective, the ontological utopia sits most comfortably within the domain of the compensatory type alongside non-religious utopias such as the land of Cokaygne, where roasted geese fly, walls and roofs are made of pies, pasties and flour cakes and where death also does not exist, although immortality in this utopia is a simple footnote among the overabundance of food, drink and endless idleness (The Land of Cokaygne n.d.).

Both of these utopias are in their own way implicitly critical of the actual world, but these critiques have very different flavours in terms of how they relate to and evaluate the actual world. Cokaygne's betterness, while implicitly critical of various aspects of peasants' lives, never questions the ontological goodness either of the world or of the humans. Even if they fly around roasted, geese remain geese, and humans are just fatter and happier. If anything, Cokaygne is a celebratory hyperbole of the goodness of the ontology of the actual world and humans. The betterness of the ontological utopia, however, is a critique by way of ontological Othering of the actual world and anything that is a part of it. Actual reality is "not good" not for any specific reason but simply because, from the perspective

of the ontological utopia, it is by default always inferior, no matter which changes, social, political, economic or otherwise, it undergoes.

Both Cokaygne and the ontological utopia are, as Bloch would say, abstract utopias, which play and get lost in the "Empty-Possible", as he calls completely fantastical, and thus also impossible to be realised, utopian content (Bloch 1995, pp. 144–46; Prosic 2020). Yet unlike Cokaygne's essentially social criticism of medieval peasants' reality, which remained closed off in its own fantastical world without ever having any impact on the actual world, the ontological Othering by the religious utopia is never without political and social consequences. Either, by utilising that Othering as a rationale for political action, as the aforementioned King's invocation of the "eternal law", illustrates. Or, as Marx's famous "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions . . . the *opium* of the people" (Marx 1844a), which Lenin turned into "opium for the people. . . and a sort of spiritual booze" (Lenin 1905), and which is a quality of the ontological Othering that can keep away people from social and political action.

At this point, it is important to emphasise that the ontological utopia does not have transformative powers on its own. Rather, it is its very specific type of critique that is utilised to achieve goals that can, to a lesser or a greater extent, modify certain cultural, economic or political aspects of the social reality but not revolutionise it.

One of the reasons for this lack of a transformative function is that the religious utopian system does not contain a coherent or, for that matter, any slightly detailed vision of what constitutes a better social way of being. A frequent methodological error made by utopian scholars, especially in relation to Christianity, is to consider the garden of Eden from Genesis and the apocalypse from Revelation as a utopian social discourse painting an image of a past social utopia of easy living and social harmony which was lost, resulting in the present age of suffering, misery, inequalities, injustices and generally strife and antagonistic social relations, and which will be redressed in the future by a (re)establishment of a socially harmonious condition.[6] A closer inspection of the stories, however, reveals that there is nothing social, either explicitly or implicitly, in them. The only thing we learn from the biblical Garden of Eden, the Christian past, allegedly social, utopia, is that it was a fruit garden shared by God and humans (Gen. 3). If this is by any stretch of imagination a social utopia, then, as Brecht would say, "something is missing" in it because it appears as some kind of a permissive/restrictive social utopia where existence is easy, food is available without effort, yet also deeply problematic given that it is God and not humans who decides which food, namely fruits, can and cannot be eaten. The same is the case with the future Christian utopia from Revelation, whether in its millenarian or amillenarian version. The only inkling that the future utopia might also be about changing social reality is the purge during Judgement Day, which includes the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and liars (Rev. 21). The absence of conflict in these stories, which utopian scholars like to interpret through social hermeneutical glasses, is actually about an absence of conflict between humans and the divine, which, being an ontologically different reality, has no attributes that can be translated as representative of this world's social reality.

Details about what constitutes in religions an ideal society, and what can conditionally be called religious "social" utopianism, is contained in a variety of other textual and practical materials, ranging from written and unwritten moral precepts, laws and codes of behaviours to narratives describing the conduct of notable past characters and groups and even rituals. During the Iranian revolution, it was Shi'a Islam's Muhharam collective mourning rituals[7] that were used as symbolic representation of a better social "way of being" to that under the hated Pahlavi dynasty (Rahimi 2022). In a similar manner, the famous Müntzer's rebellion, favoured by Marxists, fed on a few verses from Acts 2 describing early Christians as not having individual possessions, holding everything in common and distributing goods according to needs.[8] In other words, social utopianism in religions is contained in bits and pieces with social flavour that can be utilised for political purposes, but there is no religious vision about specifically social non-antagonistic relations or a

clear view about the nature of such relations that would, in turn, be capable of informing harmonious relations within the society as whole. As will be clear later, the religious utopian social is in service of the utopian ontological.

The other reason why religious utopianism does not have transformative powers on its own is that those socially minded fragments, despite having what seems to be concrete, non-fantastical content, are never an end in themselves. "All things in common" from Acts, along with assorted moral teachings, sayings and parables[9] which are frequently politically utilised as representations of a social harmony based on economic equality (Weitling 1842; Williams 2022; Gutiérrez 1973), are in the Bible never an end that is by itself and in itself important, as is the case with non-religious utopias with such ideals. They are either a consequence of human/divine accord or one of the instruments to achieve it and thus only epiphenomenal to the process of achieving the ontologically different way of being. The verse "You cannot serve God and mammon" from Matthew 6:24, for example, has often been used by Christian socialists to argue that God does not approve of material wealth (Hardie 1907). Within the context of Matthew 6, however, its real purpose is to emphasise the importance and primacy of the other reality and human metaphysical existence,[10] while "mammon" is a metaphor critical of anything of this world, not a metaphor targeting social inequalities based on material possessions. The same is the case with the verses from Acts describing the life of early Christians. Selling possessions, having "all things in common", etc., happens after the Pentecostal descent, and it is a sign of forming a community that will be rewarded with an eternal existence in that other better reality. Holding all in common, etc., is not about social relations in this world but about separating Christians from the actual world and presenting them as a spiritual community that even in this world is already part of the other, metaphysical, world.

The social critique of actual reality that these and all other socially flavoured biblical verses seem to make is still from the perspective of the ontological utopia. The fantastical content of the utopia and its compensatory function, which, as Marx said, make humans existentially squat "outside of the world" (Marx 1844a), undermine the capacity of religious "social" utopianism to be a transformative, revolutionary force aimed at transforming the totality of social reality. Utopias that do have that capacity, or, in Bloch's terminology, "concrete utopias", are non-fantastical in the sense that they are directly and concretely related to and cognizant of the Real-Possible, as he calls the existing, historically and economically determined reality and the possibilities contained within it. They and their critique are "transcendent without transcending" (Bloch 1995, p. 146). Religious ontological Othering, on the other hand, always sidetracks the discontent arising from the Real-Possible away from the Real-Possible itself and into the Empty-Possible about another, ontologically better way of being. In other words, it cannot transcend without not transcending. It always ends up in the transcendent and thus the impossible.

It is only once the social in "all things in common", etc., is liberated from the abstract trappings of the "Empty-Possible" ontological utopia and its "illusory happiness" (Marx 1844a) about the possibility of an ontologically different way of being and related to concrete historical reality that such ideas can become a revolutionary political force. That is precisely what Marx and Engels (1848) did in the *Communist Manifesto*, where "all things in common" was severed from its metaphysical utopian context and related to the historical process and humans as concrete, physical beings.[11] Or, as Engels put it in reference to the writings of W. Weitling, another Christian socialist[12] prone to "sentimental love dreaming", communism could become a real political force only once it "no longer meant the concoction, by means of the imagination, of an ideal society as perfect as possible, but insight into the nature, the conditions and the consequent general aims of the struggle waged by the proletariat" (Engels 1885). Such complete disconnection of its social, communistic-like pieces from its ontological utopia, however, has been and will remain an impossible task for Christianity and, for that matter, any other religion with similar, socially sounding claims. The reason is simple: that would mean the abolishment of their primary compensatory utopian function and with it their own *raison d'être*.

Left political radicalism based on religious social utopianism—such as the medieval millenarian movements (See, for example, Cohn 1970), Thomas Müntzer's peasant rebellion (1525), the Münster rebellion (1535), the seventeenth-century Diggers, many nineteenth-century communistic communities in the US [13], the Taiping rebellion (1850–1864)[14] as well as its last flare flare-up, the late twentieth-century South American liberation theology movement (See Huetos 2023)—has noble goals, but it is not without reason that Marx's Introduction to *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* begins with the statement that "the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism" (Marx 1844a). Like Hegel's dialectical arguments, whose abstract and tautological character Marx criticises, religion also starts with the fantastical and the metaphysical, meanders through the concrete in a self-referential way and then goes back to its abstract domicile. Quite obviously, in order to, as Marx would say, "establish the *truth of this* world", the "*other-world of truth*" needs to vanish (Marx 1844a). Left political religious social utopianism can never go that far and therefore can never be truly transformative.

4. Religious Utopianism: Social Utopia—Fundamentalism

Religious social utopianism, however, is much more at home with a different type of radicalism which is equally buried in the abstract but whose meandering through the real world manifests itself as pernicious Us/Them thinking and social Othering, which, in turn, can result in persecution and violence towards the perceived Other. In the last four decades, it is this type of religious social utopian radicalism that the world has experienced through the rise of religious fundamentalism.

Religious fundamentalism is a complex phenomenon. Looking at all of its features and how they relate to religious utopianism is beyond the scope of this article. In this section, the focus is only on the relation between religious fundamentalism and religious social utopianism and the social Othering that occurs as a result of that relation.

As previously discussed, every religion has its own different set of descriptors for the reality that it presents as ontologically superior to the actual world. Throughout history, these differently imagined utopian realities, whether interreligious or intrareligious, have been the reason for long-lasting social tensions, conflicts and wars. One of the lengthiest and bloodiest amongst such conflicts was the European religious wars, which were triggered by a theological dispute in 1517 about the right way of salvation. Rome believed that the only path was through the Church, while Martin Luther and the Protestants claimed that it was only through faith. The conflict lasted for more than a century, destroying in the process most of the Western European feudal political, social and economic structures. The uneasy peace that was established, however, did not resolve the initial utopian disagreement. It remained and still divides the once unified Western Christianity. Within the new socio-economic and political structures, it simply lost its importance as a reason to wage wars.

The brutality and the duration of those wars in Europe are a testament to the inherently divisive nature of religions and their differently conceived ontological utopias. Even in the modern, relatively secular and secularised world, where no practical and intellectual effort is spared to demonstrate that religions can peacefully coexist[15] and that the other reality they all speak about refers to the same thing except under different names,[16] religions continue to be divisive socio-cultural phenomena. While their leaders and philosophers might talk about some trans-religious universal truth, at the level of, what Bourdieu would call, "habitus and doxa" (Bourdieu 1990), no Muslim would ever agree that Islam's god is a trinity, no Christian would pray in a mosque, no Jew would acknowledge the Quran as a moral guidance, nor would a Daoist accept the Christian idea of original sin. Even the Bahá'í Faith, a relatively new religion built around the idea that all religions are true, would not approve of its followers praying at some other religion's temple or simply exchanging Bahá'í's Nineteen-Day Fast for any of the fasts practised in other religions. In everyday social and cultural practice and interaction, the faithful continue to believe that it is their own religion's ontological vision that is "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). In other words, despite knowing about the plurality[17] of religions and their

very particular tenets and practices, people continue to understand their own religion to be, philosophically speaking, *the* onto-epistemological universal that is true across space and time. Particularity and universality are mutually exclusive concepts, but, in religions, whose favourite children next to immortality are miracles, the logical miracle of Tertullian's *credo quia absurdum* also finds its home.

From a religious perspective, such Quine-like "ontological commitment"[18] of believers to the universality of their very specific religious onto-epistemological discourse, together with the conviction that they are *the* custodians of an absolute and unvarying ontological "truth", is not problematic. Religions are not in the business of self-destruction, to which wholesale admission that their "truth" is as good as the next one might lead. Most of them are actually looking for ways to expand the traditional base from which their followers originate. One of the ways of doing that is by maintaining the singularity and the universality of their own "truth".

From a social perspective, however, plurality of religions by necessity entails a certain level of "Us/Them", in-group/out-group thinking and categorisation of people. By itself, such thinking does not have to be problematic. Humans are social beings who are naturally predisposed to belonging and identifying with social groups (of which religion can be one). On the other hand, they learn and make sense of the world around them by observing, noticing, sorting and classifying differences. Distinguishing between "the same" and "not the same" is one of the cognitive processes in which everyone engages. The social version of "Us (the same)/Them (not the same)" thinking is therefore not by default a negative way of relating to members of groups other than ours, despite often being characterised as such.

The problems with Us/Them thinking start when axiological and deontic binary evaluations such as good/bad, right/wrong, etc., are attached to observed differences, which is something that religions are especially prone to due to their heavy involvement with ethics on the one side and their contradictory onto-epistemic position "particularity which is universality" on the other. This is not to say that religious Us/Them categorisation cannot function in a value-free manner, as the benign, relational, conjunctive Us *and* Them version which does not interfere with the social sphere and is marked by accepting differences and a dialogic and communicative attitude towards them. It is just that in certain situations, their ethics, wrapped in the aforementioned onto-epistemological contradiction, makes them more predisposed towards sliding into a disjunctive, monologic, polarising and conflictual Us *versus* Them wholesale Othering mode in which the differences between Us and Them are presented through hierarchically organised, essentialised binaries of good and evil, right and wrong, our true way and their false way, our superior way versus their inferior way, etc., which set the conditions for social exclusion, persecution and, in extreme cases, also violence against the Other and their evil, wrong and inferior ways.

The religious fundamentalism of the last several decades is the modern highpoint of this malignant, divisive Us/Them religious thinking. I will not get into a detailed discussion about what religious fundamentalism is and what the situations are in which its hostile Us/Them way of thinking raises its head. Both are very complicated topics, and I am yet to find a theory and a definition that takes into consideration the utopian side of religions and its relationship with religious fundamentalism. The majority of the definitions revolve around religious fundamentalism as a reaction against the diminished role of religion due to modernity, secularism, globalisation, etc., in order to stop the "erosion of traditional society" and "fight back against the encroachment of secular modernity" (Marty and Appleby 1995, p. 6; Almond et al. 2003; Bruce 2006; Juergensmeyer et al. 2023; Caplan 1987).[19] While this might be so from the point of view of religions as a socio-cultural phenomenon, from the angle of their utopianism, which takes the form of an onto-epistemological universal, the whole process looks like a fight against competing universals. And those universals are not confined to the ones coming from the plurality of religions. Democracy, modernisation, secularisation, liberalism, civil society, etc., have also been theorised, promoted and enforced as onto-epistemological universals, even though they, like religions, have very specific cultural and historical origins.[20] They also rest on the

contradiction "particularity which is a universality" and involve "ontological commitment" marked by *credo quia absurdum* logic. And they are also utopian in character since they, like many utopias, are supposed to lead to an ideal society. In a sense, they are universals which mimic the qualities of religious universals.[21] From this perspective, and if we are to use the discourse of these new pseudo-religious universals, religious fundamentalism is a reaction against the saturation of the market with faked versions of a unique brand. In other words, religious fundamentalism is an attempt to put a copyright on the "I am the way, the truth and the life" product.

I am also unconvinced by the arguments that fundamentalism is a "process of selective retrieval, embellishment, and construction of 'essentials' or 'fundamentals'" (Marty and Appleby 1995, p. 6). Every religion has a set of such retrieved, selected, embellished and constructed "essentials" that are not open to negotiation. Just try to convince Christians that Luke 28:1 does not say anything about the Virgin Mary's sinless conception. I also have problems with the frequently cited claim that fundamentalism insists on the inerrancy of sacred books and other authoritative sources (Almond et al. 1995, p. 96). Such sources and books are always inerrant. Apart from the literal sense, there is always the allegorical, metaphorical, etc., sense through which their correctness shows itself. No religion would ever say, "Look, Jesus/Buddha/Muhammed/Yahweh made a mistake here". Hermeneutics and exegesis are specialties of religions, and they always find a way to demonstrate the inerrancy of their sources.

Fundamentalism's claim about the inerrancy of sacred books and other sources of authority has more to do with the character of the overall discourse into which those sources are embedded and how they are utilised within it. Their inerrancy seems hypostasised because it is part of constant discursive production of true/false statements, which is clearly an attempt to preserve the singularity and the universality of one's own onto-epistemological claim amidst other similar claims. In this sense, fundamentalism is better understood as Foucault's "dispositif/apparatus", a sort of strategic formation of discursive and non-discursive elements, whose major function is separating statements that can be qualified as true or false within the demands of the epistemic field that the apparatus serves in times of "*an urgent need* (Foucault 1980, pp. 195–97)". For Foucault, that epistemic field is the "field of scientificity" (in relation to sexuality); in religions, the epistemic field is in relation to the singularity, universality and veracity of their ontological utopia. The forms in which the fundamentalism/dispositif of any religion will employ the true/false separation, which is always a type of epistemic Othering, vary. Some groups will limit their Othering to speeches or to living in isolated compounds, while others, like the infamous Islamic State, will also resort to social oppression and physical elimination of the Other, which are in their view representative of those competing, in their view, false universals.

Othering as a process of separating the true/good/right, etc., Us from the false/evil/wrong, etc., Them in conjunction with religious fundamentalism inevitably involves religious social utopianism. It is essentially a social act and requires the social sphere to be effective. The social sphere is also the only space through which religious fundamentalism can demonstrate in an obvious way that its universal is the true one. The best way to do that is by creating an ideal society based on its own social utopian depository, from which it draws on heterogenous socially flavoured elements, ranging from sacred books, sayings, laws and codes of behaviour, rituals to narratives about significant historical or pseudo-historical events, especially from when the religion was in its ascendancy or conversely at its weakest point, which, as will be seen, serve as a powerful Othering tool in service of demonstrating the truthfulness of the defended religious universal. These elements are reconfigured into a dichotomic true/false concrete social system of values, rules, codes of conduct, etc., and presented as the social twin of the ontological utopia and therefore as a society that is perfect, superior, infallible, pure, unchangeable and ultimate.[22] Everything that is within this ideal social system marked as true translates into positive deontic and axiological values, good, right, ought to, must, etc. Everything that is marked false translates into the negative evil, wrong, inferior, must not, etc.

That ideal society, mimicking the faultlessness of the ontological utopia, can have spatial boundaries, as in the case of the Islamic State, which occupied large swaths of Iraqi and Syrian territory; the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which has several settlements in the US; numerous other US Christian fundamentalist groups that live in small enclaves and Jewish Gush Emunim, which exclusively chose to live in settlements along the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Golan Heights. Or it can be without any spatial boundaries, existing only through its scattered members, such as the fundamentalist Sunni Muslims, who patrolled the streets of East London in 2013–2014 attempting to impose their ideal society on the local population[23], and the members of the Westboro Baptist Church, who thanked God for 9/11, the punishment of a nation that allows homosexuality and abortions.[24]

The idealness of that society and its dichotomic true/false prism are the context and the epistemic wall from which the irreconcilable, non-synthetic dialectics of Othering, of glorifying the Us and vilifying the Other, takes place, from where the Other, once considered along the lines of the conjunctive Us *and* Them relation, which recognises distinctions in non-judgemental manner, is now construed as antagonistic, threatening and dangerous. The representation of the Other that arises from the filtering true/false process tends to be in absolutely negative terms because only against such a completely negative image can Us and to it related Our society be assessed to be properly reflecting the ne plus ultra attributes of the ontological utopia and therefore also of its meritoriousness, to be defended, maintained and preserved.

Nothing and no one is safe from becoming the Other, which is, in effect, an abstract, essentialised, static collective entity in which every specificity, individuality and historical movement is erased. Individuals, peoples, cultures, other religions, states, the aforementioned freshly minted universals, but also in-group members who violate the social perfection in some way, get compacted into a body of negative stereotypes. One of the more common ways of stripping the Other of any identity except for being the Other is by displacing past events and their protagonists into the present. Throughout Osama bin Laden's statements, for example, one encounters recollections of the battles between Muslims and the "Romans", a synonym for Crusaders, next to warnings against the dangers of the current enemy empire, which does not have any other identity marker except being the "Romans" or Rome.[25] And they are, like the Crusaders before them, also oppressors, liars, evildoers, transgressors, criminals, immoral, corrupt, spreading falsehood, etc.[26] Likewise, during the Bush Jr. presidency, Christian fundamentalists, like their president, often qualified the war on terror as a "crusade" (Roche 2021) and thereby associated all present Muslims with the anonymous Muslims of the past.

The past is also displaced in order to demonstrate the perfect Us against the evil Other. The Caliphate of the Islamic State was a recreation of the golden age of the first Rashidun Caliphate (632 C.E.–661 C.E.). That first Caliphate was far from being an ideal society, but in the Sunni imagination of the Islamic State leaders, it was reconstructed as such, as its name, *Rashidun* (rightly-guided), suggests. In the declaration about the formal (re)establishment of the Caliphate, Muhammad Abu al-Adnani, the spokesperson of the Islamic State, like Osama bin Laden, first recalls the vile empires (Persia and Byzantine)[27] which the Rashidun Caliphate defeated and then moves on to the present itemising one by one the things that the Islamic State has done, demonstrating that the ideal conditions of the Rashidun Caliphate are fully recreated and that the only thing remaining for a full recreation of that ideal is to formalise its existence (al-Adnani 2014).[28]

We find the same pattern of displacing glorious past conditions in the rhetoric of Israeli fundamentalists who, in their utopian desire to recreate the biblical Israel, often refer to Palestinians as Canaanites (the tribe biblical Isarel defeated) and Ishmaelites (descendants of Abraham's first son who was expelled to the desert). In their imagination, the completion of real Israel can be achieved only once the "Promised Land [. . .] 'vomit[s] out' any other people" that try to live there (Lustick 1988).

One of the effects of this transfer of past conditions into the present is that it removes the Other of its temporal and spatial coexistence with the Us. The Other is not someone with whom we are familiar and with whom, despite being different, we have shared biographies and many other commonalities. It becomes identified with the Other of that former period, who is the adversary that needs to be subjugated, dominated or eliminated if the glorious days of the past marked by purity and perfection are to be re-established. The utopian consequences of past repression and violence towards the Other legitimise the use of the same methods towards the Other in the present. In order to convince the *umma* that the Caliphate already exists, al-Adnani says that "the kuffār (infidels) are disgraced. . . . the people of bid'ah (heresy) are humiliated" (al-Adnani 2014), which is a sign that the purity of the first Caliphate has arrived. Jewish fundamentalists also see the path to fulfilment of God's promise of land by giving the Palestinians the choice to flee, which was the fate of Hagar and Ishmael, fight and be destroyed, or to accept Jewish rule and be dominated, which replicates Joshua's conquest of the land (Lustick 1988).

With the temporal/spatial displacement, the Other becomes an anonymous collectivity, which, as Said would say, accumulates "no existential or even semantical thickness" (Said 1991, p. 230) except the absolutely negative attributes (moral, economic, social, cultural, political) associated with the past adversary. Given that these utterly pernicious qualities of the homogenised group originate from a long bygone era that is compacted with the present, they also come to be the unchanging essence, the natural condition of the Other. Thus, the present Other in religious fundamentalist discourse becomes a strange, collective, anonymous entity that is not subject to evolutive historical processes or any development. In that sense, it is also something that is both physical and metaphysical, and completely vanquished and thus transient yet still enduring, with the only aspect that settles and crosses over between these inconsistencies, the Other's negative essence. In short, it is a true image of an eternal evil, of an incorrigibly flawed and immeasurably inferior entity, which is, like the inferiority of the real world to the ontological utopia, by default always such because the Us is by the mere fact of existing always superior to it.

As can be seen from previous discussion, the fundamentalist understanding of a better social way of being has a penchant for perfection, which is the quality pointed out by K. Popper as the reason why practical attempts at realising utopian ideals by necessity end up in totalitarianism and repression (Popper 1962). When it comes to non-religious utopias, this argument is deeply flawed because not all utopias are about perfection. Some are about a better, not necessarily perfect society. However, societies created according to the demands of religious social utopianism almost always end up, to a lesser or greater degree, despotic and authoritarian and are certainly more inclined towards understanding differences in a polarising, uncompromising Us *versus/or* Them manner, which engages in Othering that paints the others in comprehensively adverse terms. Religious fundamentalist utopian societies are at the extreme end of this general tendency.

5. Conclusions

Society based on religious social utopianism demands both societal and personal perfection because it is a way of concretising the ne plus ultra conditions of the ontological utopia. With such a double-layered demand for perfection, there is no room for variations, development, compromise or any kind of movement. Every move away from perfection means straying away from the inert excellence of the abstract ontological utopia. Humans, however, cannot exist like static abstractions. Nor can their societies, no matter how strong the desire is, individually or collectively, for a metaphysical way of being and the "illusory happiness" of the religious ontological utopia. They are not entities but relations and processes which are embedded in the history of the concrete world and can only become better, not perfect, relations and processes. Attempting to create societies based on religious social utopianism, which cannot be extricated from its entanglement with the fantastical content and the perfection of the ontological religious utopia, are doomed to be either

abortive attempts, as in the case of left political religious radicalism, or to end up as a fundamentalist bigoted dystopian reality.

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Notes

1 Its full title was *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia* (A truly golden little book, not less beneficial than enjoyable, about how things should be in a state and about the new island Utopia).

2 In the English edition of the work, More left no doubts about the meaning of utopia as "a good place which is a no place": "Wherfore not Utopie, but rather rightely my name is Eutopie, a place of felicitie" (More 1556, p. 167).

3 According to Utopian Studies Europe and Utopian Studies (US), utopia is part of literature, philosophy, sociology, history, architecture, cultural studies, economics, classics, politics, ecology, anthropology, film, media, computer games, American studies, gender studies, languages, psychology and urban planning. https://utopian-studies-europe.org/about/; https://utopian-studies.org/ (accessed on 10 January 2024).

4 The "Utopian city" concept/the transformation of a whole space can be related to places such as the Vatican, Mecca, Athos, Kanchipuram, etc. Many religion-based rebellions, ranging from Christian medieval millenarian uprisings and the Protestant Reformation to the Buddhist rebellion in Vietnam, the Iranian revolution and recent ISIS war, can be regarded as "Utopian revolutions"/revolutionary praxis. "Utopian communes or villages"/intentional communities cover monastic communities and many non-monastic yet "spiritual" communities. When it comes to "Utopian texts", all religions have "texts" about some paradisial period, whether in the past or the future.

5 "To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law" (King 1963).

6 See, for example, Sargent, who on the one side defines a utopia as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail" (Sargent 1994, p. 8) and then goes on to describe Eden and the apocalypse from Revelation as eutopias (pp. 20–21), although those stories provide no details about the society they allegedly describe.

7 Muhharam rituals commemorate Husayn bin Ali's death in 680. He is an important early figure for Shi'a Islam, whose death happened during the turbulent times after Mohammed's death when the Muslim community had to resolve the question of the best political leadership. This dispute led to the Sunni and Shi'a division, with the former supporting leaders without a direct hereditary line from Muhammed and the latter supporting Imams with a direct kinship lineage.

8 Acts 2.44–45: "And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need". Acts 4.32–35: "Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need".

9 Matthew 5; 6; 7; 19:24; 23:4–12. Luke 6:25; 12:13–21; 18:18–30. Mark 10:17–22.

10 Matthew 6.25, 31, 33. [25] "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"; [31] "Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'"; [33] "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

11 In this Special Issue of *Religions*, R. Boer's writes about the absence of ontological transcendence in Chinese traditional culture and Chinese ideas about ideal society, which, because of their secular character, seem to have found a good fit with Marxism (Boer 2023).

12 Weitling's Garantien der Harmonie und Freiheit (Guarantees of Harmony and Freedom) (Weitling 1842) and Das Evangelium eines armen Sünders (The poor sinner's gospel) (Weitling 1845), which advocated communism based on Christian morality, were quite influential among workers but also divorced from any historical analysis regarding the causes of poverty or social conflict.

13 See, for example, Nordhoff (1875), which mentions the Amana Community, the Harmony Society, the Society of Separatists, the Shakers, the Perfectionists, the Icarians and the Aurora and Bethel communities.

14 Two articles in this Special Issue of *Religions* are dedicated to left political radicalism based on religious social utopianism. C. Petterson writes about Thomas Müntzer, one of the Protestant Reformation's wayward children and the leader of the German peasant uprising against feudal authorities, whom E. Bloch called the "theologian of revolution" and whose understanding of God as "we-revelation" in people led him to rebel against Luther's political siding with the princes (Petterson 2023); while J.

Crossley traces A. L. Morton's Marxist recovery of the Diggers' religious utopian radicalism in seventeenth-century Great Britain (Crossley 2023).

[15] See, for example, numerous interreligious declarations of and initiatives about tolerance, unity, ecumenism, interfaith dialogue, etc., "A Common Word Between Us and You" (https://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/, accessed on 10 January); Parliament of the World's Religions (https://parliamentofreligions.org/, accessed on 10 January 2024), United Religions Initiative (https://www.uri.org/about, accessed on 10 January 2024).

[16] See, for example, theoretical developments arguing for the essential sameness of religions' ontological utopias such as Hick (1981, pp. 451–67); Hick (2004); Griffin (2005); Griffiths and Lewis (1983). Hick and Griffin are just two representatives of a very long list of philosophers of religion that represent the so-called "plurality" trend. Most of them have Western Christian affiliations, while the trend itself developed, interestingly enough, after World War II, in parallel with the waning of colonialism.

[17] In this article, "plurality" is used in this ordinary sense of being numerous and diverse.

[18] In Quine's philosophy, "ontological commitment" is a relation "between existence assertions (including theories), on the one hand, and specific entities or kinds of entities (or ontologies), on the other." It combines logical, epistemic, linguistic and metaphysical elements (Craig 2005).

[19] The modernisation/secularisation thesis is a very problematic proposition, especially with respect to countries with a majority Muslim population where Islam was never marginalised. The Iranian revolution, a favourite example of rising religious fundamentalism, did not happen because of the modernisation and secularisation that allegedly occurred under the Shah. That is a myth popularised by Western anti-Iranian propagandists. Iranians were quite happy to modernise under Mohammad Mosaddegh's government in 1951, which was overthrown in the 1953 coup orchestrated by US and British intelligence services. The Iranian revolution was an anti-colonial revolt against a government which was an extended hand of Western powers.

[20] Much of my thinking in this part of the paper was influenced by Boer's discussion about false universals (Boer 2021).

[21] See, for example, the speech by the Islamic State founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi from 1994, in which he calls democracy "modern heretic religion" (Ingram 2020).

[22] According to the spokesperson of the infamous Islamic State (2014–2019), the Caliphate style governance of the IS, including the social rules under which people lived, was a utopian affair, a realised dream of the umma and an expression of harmony between Allah and his people, or in his words, the fulfilment of Allah's promise (al-Adnani 2014). The same is many Christian and Jewish fundamentalist groups, with strict codes of conduct, dress, ritualised daily activities, defined social roles, etc. They also believe that these social measures are what God demands in order for them to be in accord with his ways.

[23] https://observers.france24.com/en/20130122-muslim-patrols-sharia-east-london-video-tower-hamlets (accessed on 10 January 2024).

[24] http://edition.cnn.com/2011/US/03/02/scotus.westboro.church/index.html?hpt=C1 (accessed on 10 January 2024).

[25] "The Romans have gathered under the banner of the cross to fight the nation of beloved Muhammad, prayers and peace be upon him, so think of the rewards of your jihad" (Lawrence 2005, p. 211). "The raid of the Romans started in Iraq; no one knows where it will end" (p. 213). "Resist the New Rome" (p. 212).

[26] "The Islamic Nation that was able to dismiss and destroy the previous evil Empires like yourself . . . wishes to remove your evils, and is prepared to fight you". (Lawrence 2005, p. 172)

[27] "They put out the fire of the Magians (fireworshippers) forever, and they forced the noses of the cross-worshippers onto the ground. . ."

[28] The list includes repossessing the land, the destruction of illegitimate rulers and their soldiers, the implementation of all Sharia penalties, securing newly created borders, the demolition of crosses and graves, the release of prisoners (presumably of their own fundamentalist brand), ensuring lives and wealth, the appointment of governors and judges, the enforcement of taxes on infidels, taking money from infidels and the collection of obligatory alms, the establishment of courts, holding lessons and classes in the masājid and "by the grace of Allah, the religion has become completely for Allah. There only remained one matter, a wājib kifā'ī (collective obligation) that the ummah sins by abandoning. It is a forgotten obligation. The ummah has not tasted honor since they lost it. It is a dream that lives in the depths of every Muslim believer. It is a hope that flutters in the heart of every mujāhid muwahhid (monotheist). It is the khilāfah (caliphate). It is the khilāfah—the abandoned obligation of the era" (al-Adnani 2014).

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