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Affirmative Orientalism: August Bebel, Islam, and World History

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In 1884, during the period of the Socialist Laws, August Bebel took the time to publish a historical work entitled Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode. In it Bebel positioned Islam and the early caliphates as the unacknowledged link between Greco-Roman traditions of knowledge and the blossoming of European culture that, he argued, had occurred since the Renaissance. He also used the book as an opportunity to reject claims that Christianity had played this key role in world historical progress. Through an examination and contextualization of Bebel’s writings on Islam, this article shows how he viewed the role of different religious traditions within world history and how his views intersected with contemporary questions regarding the relationship between religion and socialism. The article also examines how Bebel’s work fits within a longer tradition of socialist solidarity with the Ottoman Empire.

In 1884, during the politically turbulent period of Bismarck’s Socialist Laws, the leader of Germany’s Social Democratic Party (SPD), August Bebel, set aside time to compose a historical work on the role of Islam in world history. The book, entitled *Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode*,¹ was far from easy for Bebel to write, taking him, as he complained to Karl Kautsky, more than five years to complete.² Bebel might well have wondered whether the effort had been worth it, given that, unlike his famous *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* (which he wrote more quickly while in prison in from 1877 to 1878),³ Bebel’s book-length analysis of Islam did not enjoy a wide readership or elicit a significant response among his socialist comrades.

Similarly, since then Bebel’s work of religious history has not attracted much in the way of detailed commentary by historians of Germany or of socialist

¹August Bebel, *Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode* (Stuttgart, 1884).

²Dorothea G. May, “August Bebel und der Islam: Eine späte Würdigung,” *Die Welt des Islams* 30/1–4 (1990), 178–87, at 179.

³August Bebel, *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* (Berlin, 1879).

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thought.⁴ This surprising neglect of an extended work of history by one of Germany's leading political figures might well be because the book offers the impression of being idiosyncratic in its subject matter, sitting uneasily alongside Bebel's main political preoccupations. At first glance, it seems to be at odds with Bebel's other, better-known and fiery pronouncements on the relationship between religion, socialism, and the historical march of progress. As this article makes clear, however, the contents of *Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode* are thematically closer to important discussions being conducted in socialist circles than it initially appears.

Bebel was not the first prominent German outside the discipline of oriental studies to engage with Islam and the Arabic world.⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe had immersed himself so deeply and sympathetically in Islamic culture that he thought many of his readers might have asked themselves whether he was not in fact a Muslim.⁶ Contrastingly, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's attempt to come to terms with the world-historical significance of Islam had resulted in a classically Eurocentric dismissal of what he saw as a profoundly alien civilization. For Hegel, the Islamic East was eccentric to the primary developments of world history, which was more properly dominated by the achievements of European Christendom.⁷ Partly relying on Hegel, Karl Marx's early views on Islam were similarly skeptical, largely confined to a disparaging analysis of the Orient in his discussion of the "Asiatic mode of production" as well as some inaccurate notes in the mid-1850s regarding the ostensible absence of private property in the Muslim world, views that Marx would quietly modify in the final years of his life when he lived in Algiers.⁸ For his part, Max Weber would combine the pessimistic elements of both Hegel's and Marx's comments on Islam to argue that the Muslim world had frustrated the general historical tendency towards societal progress because "the political and economic conditions of Oriental society were hostile to capitalism's pre-requisites."⁹

Notwithstanding Marx's brief orientalist comments, Bebel's extended focus on early Islam was relatively unique among Germany's social-democratic writers. It was not, however, unusual for a late nineteenth-century German socialist to

⁴Notable exceptions are May, "August Bebel und der Islam"; Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, "August Bebel und Mittelost," in August Bebel, *Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode*, ed. Wolfgang G. Schwanitz (Berlin, 1999), 1–57; and Pinar Akkoç, "Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode und Bebel's Kritik am Orientalismus," *Studien zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 41 (2019), 123–34. Bebel's book does not appear in Nina Berman's *German Literature on the Middle East* (Ann Arbor, 2014); Todd Curtis Contje's *German Orientalisms* (Ann Arbor, 2007); or Suzanne Marchand's *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire* (New York, 2009).

⁵For an exhaustive examination of these scholarly engagements, see Marchand, *German Orientalism*.

⁶Katharina Mommsen, *Goethe und der Islam* (Frankfurt, 2001); Mommsen, "Zu Goethe und der Islam—Antwort auf die oft aufgeworfene Frage: War Goethe ein Muslim?," *Goethe Yearbook* 21 (2014), 247–54.

⁷M. A. Rafey Habib, "Hegel and Islam," *Philosophy East and West* 68/1 (2018), 59–77.

⁸Peter Hudis, "Marx among the Muslims," *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 15/4 (2004), 51–67; Iqtidar Alam Khan, "Marx's Assessment of the Islamic Tradition," *Social Scientist* 11/5 (1983), 3–15. Marx and Engels had dabbled in their own speculative comparative religious history of the Middle East in a series of letters to one another in 1853 that discussed, among other things, the interrelationship between Arabic and Jewish history, as well as the role of climate on property relations and political forms in Arabia prior to the Islamic period. See Engels to Marx, 26 May 1853, Marx to Engels, 2 June 1853, Engels to Marx, 6 June 1853, in *Marx and Engels, Collected Works*, vol. 39 (London, 1983), 325, 330, 335. See also Schwanitz, "August Bebel und Mittelost," 21–2.

⁹Bryan S. Turner, *Weber and Islam* (New York, 1998), 16.

delve deeply into an aspect of premodern history when examining contemporary political conditions. Indeed, many of the issues that faced the German Empire were regularly discussed through premodern analogies. When Johann Most, for example, sought to express his resolute opposition to the oppressive political conditions of the *Kaiserreich* at the beginning of the Socialist Laws, he did so by outlining the classical antecedents of social revolution in a book surveying the history of Roman slave uprisings, the Catilinarian conspiracy, and the galvanizing proto-revolutionary tribunates of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus in the late Roman Republic.¹⁰ Most defended this use of the past by arguing,

The history of the Greek and Roman world shows too where the stumbling block lay over which all ancient peoples tripped, in fact the fate of the Greeks and Romans throws ample light not only on themselves, but also on other contemporary peoples, to allow us to ascertain the sicknesses to which they succumbed. The general name for all of these afflictions is the social question!¹¹

Later, Rosa Luxemburg would also develop her own careful analysis of slavery in the Greco-Roman world, as well as closely studying medieval social relations.¹² In these historical musings, Luxemburg noted the tension between the principle of communal ownership and social institutions such as hereditary social rank. She also examined how antique slavery had enabled “a total separation of mental and manual labour,” a state that explained for her why the leisure that had enabled the cultural efflorescence of the ancient world had been so socially restricted. The lesson she drew from this was that any future socialist society should disavow the separation of intellectual and manual forms of labour, so that scientific endeavors and the arts were open to all.¹³

Alongside these palimpsestic approaches to the ancient world, the history of antique and medieval religion, in particular of early Christianity, was also regularly revisited in the service of political debates in imperial Germany. In German socialist circles, one of the most famous examples of this was Friedrich Engels’s influential pamphlet *Zur Geschichte des Urchristentums*, which began with the contentious proposition that “the history of early Christianity offers noteworthy points of commonality with the modern workers’ movement.”¹⁴ For socialists such as Bebel and Kautsky, however, Engels’s approach had seriously misled some socialists into thinking that religion and socialism were compatible. With Engels in mind, Kautsky would later write at length on the early Roman history of Christianity in order to separate the history of religion from that of socialism and refute Engels’s parallels between modern class struggle and the ostensibly revolutionary history of early Christianity.¹⁵

¹⁰Johann Most, *Die sozialen Bewegungen in alten Rom und der Cäsarismus* (Berlin, 1878).

¹¹*Ibid.*, 1.

¹²Rosa Luxemburg, “Notes about the Economic Form of Antiquity/Slavery,” in *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg*, vol. 1, *Economic Writings*, ed. Peter Hudis (London, 2013), 331–8.

¹³Peter Hudis, “Non-linear Pathways to Social Transformation: Rosa Luxemburg and the Post-colonial Condition,” *New Formations* 94 (2018), 69–70.

¹⁴Friedrich Engels, *Zur Geschichte des Urchristentums, Die neue Zeit* 13/1–2 (1895), 4–13, 36–43, at 4.

¹⁵See Karl Kautsky, *Der Ursprung des Christentums* (Stuttgart, 1910), 493–508.

Bebel's approach, however, which brought a discussion of the historical development of politics and society together with the history of Islam, was unique among German socialists. By examining this rare example of socialist engagement with the history of the Islamic world and contextualizing it within Bebel's other writings on Islam and Christianity, the following demonstrates that Bebel saw the contributions of these two religious traditions to world history very differently. With an eye to broader historiographical discussions regarding German orientalism, particularly as explored by Suzanne Marchand and Rebekka Habermas,¹⁶ it also assesses the extent to which Bebel's book sought to cement the position of Islam as a necessary historical antecedent of socialism. Conversely, it makes clear the degree to which Bebel instrumentalized Islam as part of an ongoing political polemic against both Catholic and Protestant Christianity.

The following resists the urge to assess the veracity of Bebel's politically charged rendering of the history of Islam. Instead, it investigates *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode* as a lens through which Bebel's broader understanding of world history as a process of progressive change over time can be understood. It makes no attempt to correct Bebel's numerous misunderstandings regarding Islam and the history of the Arab Empire, but instead demonstrates the ways in which Bebel's engagement with Islam reflected how he and many other prominent social democrats understood not only non-European history but also the relationship between religion and politics. In this way, it illustrates how Bebel used history to advance the cause of "red secularism" among German social democrats by intervening in ongoing debates related to the correct socialist attitude towards Christianity,¹⁷ as well as to reframe foreign-policy issues confronting German socialists such as the so-called *orientalische Frage* and *Islamfrage*.

Bebel's orientalism and orientalist sources

Bebel never traveled to the Middle East. Nor did he have any knowledge of Arabic or any other language relevant to the study of Arabia and the early history of Islam. In that sense, he clearly lacked the specialist training to research his book on medieval Islam from primary materials or through any personal knowledge of the Middle East and its peoples. This lack of expertise has led Wolfgang G. Schwanitz to describe Bebel as a "social democratic Karl May,"¹⁸ an author who conjured up an imagined oriental world he did not know.¹⁹ Nevertheless, *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode* was not merely a work of speculative

¹⁶Marchand, *German Orientalism*; Rebekka Habermas, "Debates on Islam in Imperial Germany," in David Motadel, ed., *Islam and the European Empires* (Oxford, 2014), 231–53.

¹⁷For the concept of "red secularism" see Todd H. Weir, *Red Secularism: Socialism and Secularist Culture in Germany 1890–1933* (Cambridge, 2024). See also Sebastian Prüfer, *Sozialismus statt Religion: Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vor der religiösen Frage 1863–1890* (Göttingen, 2011), esp. 91.

¹⁸Schwanitz, "August Bebel und Mittelost," 5.

¹⁹On Karl May's ambivalent treatment of Muslim characters see Nina Berman, "Orientalism, Imperialism and Nationalism: Karl May's *Orientzyklus*," in Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop, eds., *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy* (Ann Arbor, 1998), 51–67; Nedret Kuran, "The Image of the Turk in Karl May's Novel *Von Bagdad nach Stambul*," *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 5/2 (1995), 239–46.

fiction in the vein of May's *Orientzyklus*, but rather a simplified, highly readable and (perhaps most importantly) ideologically framed summary of works that had been produced by leading nineteenth-century European orientalists. In this sense, it was not dissimilar to Goethe's earlier immersion in the Islamic world that rested neither on a capacity to read oriental languages nor on any firsthand experience of any Muslim lands.²⁰

Bebel's book rested upon a number of well-known and highly regarded works, which he listed in his foreword: "For this present discussion in regard to the facts I have principally used von Cremer's work *Kulturgeschichte des Orients*, and alongside this the respective works of Weil, Draper, Buckle, Henne am Rhin, Yves Guyot and so on."²¹ Primary among these sources was the magnum opus of the Austrian diplomat and scholar Alfred von Kremer, *Culturgeschichte des Orients unter den Chalifen*.²² Like Bebel's much smaller book, Kremer's "cultural" history of the Islamic caliphates was in fact a study of religion as a form of applied politics, with the religious teachings of Mohammed understood by Kremer primarily through the lens of the "political and social system that grew out of them."²³ Scrutinizing the interrelationship between Islam and state power, Kremer believed, offered a means by which "those general laws which determine the course of the history of peoples" might be ascertained. For Kremer, understanding Islam amounted to ascertaining its "social and political functions" rather than its scriptural and religious complexities.²⁴

Significantly for the development of Bebel's understanding of Islam's contribution to world history, Kremer also cut through the Eurocentric condescension of posterity to suggest that modern Europeans had unfairly overlooked the importance of Islamic history to their own development and had forgotten the inheritance it had bequeathed to the modern world:

Too often one is led into error by contemporary impressions in the assessment of oriental conditions and one forgets about those times when indeed those same Mohammedan peoples over whose future so many unsettling views are presently offered, were the bearers of enlightenment, of progress and a wondrous intellectual productivity. In those times, civilization had come to rest in the East ... Tremendous ideas that have arisen in Europe only in the last hundred years had been enunciated there eight hundred years earlier.²⁵

This sympathetic approach to the Islamic past was not just reproduced but amplified in Bebel's work. It was also echoed in varying ways by the eclectic group of authors that Bebel named as his other sources. These included the German orientalist Gustav Weil, whose 1866 historical overview of Islam was particularly

²⁰Mommsen, "Zu Goethe und der Islam," 248.

²¹Bebel, *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode*, iv. Also on Bebel's sources see May, "August Bebel und der Islam," 186.

²²Alfred von Kremer, *Culturgeschichte des Orients unter den Chalifen*, vol. 1 (Vienna, 1875).

²³*Ibid.*, 1: iii.

²⁴Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 189.

²⁵Kremer, *Culturgeschichte des Orients*, 1: iv.

influential on Bebel's understanding of the impact of Islam on Spain and Sicily.²⁶ Importantly, Weil's work had also offered a modest rehabilitation of Islam and its prophet that influenced those in Germany like Bebel who read his work.²⁷

Similarly important was the anti-Catholic polymath and scientist John William Draper, whose work on the conflict between religion and science was quite positive in its depiction of Mohammed and Islam as having annihilated the excesses of Christian idolatry and fostered an era of flourishing intellectual inquiry.²⁸ Also nominated by Bebel as having influenced his book was the British historian Henry Thomas Buckle, whose *History of Civilization* had been published in German in 1865 and dealt with the history of Spain in its second volume. In it Buckle had outlined what he viewed as the barbarism and ignorance of Christians in northern Spain during the Islamic period. The increasingly strident religiosity that had motivated the *Reconquista*, Buckle argued, had directly led to the radical violence of the Inquisition, themes that Bebel too would discuss.²⁹

The Swiss cultural historian of the Middle Ages Otto Henne am Rhyn, who had written on world religions (including Islam) in the early 1880s, was also named by Bebel as a key source,³⁰ as was the French politician and political economist Yves Guyot, whose anti-Christian polemic *Étude sur les doctrines sociales du christianisme* Bebel had translated and published in the late 1870s.³¹ As Bebel wrote in his introduction to this translation, Guyot's work offered him an important confirmation of the hostility he felt towards the attempted rapprochement between socialists and Christians. The purpose of Guyot's work had been, Bebel argued, to "completely destroy the misconceptions and errors that are in part still within the socialist party about the actual nature and true principles of Christianity." This required, for example, overturning the myth that Jesus of Nazareth was "the first and greatest socialist," while also reviving the reputation of atheism and proving the truly "reactionary nature of Christianity."³²

Clearly missing from Bebel's list of sources, however, are other landmark works that might have been readily available, and which might have reinforced his generally favorable impression of Islam. Conspicuously absent is Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall's (admittedly Ottoman- rather than Arab-focused) *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches*,³³ as well as Julius Wellhausen's 1882 translation of Al-Waqidi's *Muhammed in Medina*.³⁴ So too the famous French orientalist Ernest Renan was

²⁶Gustav Weil, *Geschichte der islamitischen Völker von Mohammed bis zur des Sultan Selim* (Stuttgart, 1866).

²⁷On Weil's *oeuvre* see Marchand *German Orientalism*, 122–3.

²⁸John William Draper, *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (London, 1875), 111–18.

²⁹Henry Thomas Buckle, *Geschichte der Civilisation in England*, vol. 2, trans. Arnold Ruge (Leipzig, 1865), 13–20.

³⁰Otto Henne Am Rhyn, *Das Jenseits: Kulturgeschichtliche Darstellung der Ansichten über Schöpfung und Weltuntergang, die andere Welt und das Geisterreich* (Leipzig, 1881), 171–6.

³¹Yves Guyot and Sigismond Lacroix, *Die wahre Gestalt des Christentums*, 2nd edn (London, 1889).

³²August Bebel, "Vorwort," in *ibid.*, iii–iv.

³³Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches* (Pest, 1834).

³⁴Julius Wellhausen, *Muhammed in Medina: Das ist Vakidi's Kitab al Maghazi in verkürzter deutscher Wiedergabe* (Berlin, 1882). Importantly, Wellhausen's main work on Islam and the Arab Empire would not be published until well after Bebel's book had been published. See Julius Wellhausen, *Reste Arabischen Heidenthums* (Berlin, 1887); Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur ältesten Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin, 1899);

passed over in silence by Bebel, who may have shared Engels's 1883 opinion of Renan as being "but a poor plagiarist" of German scholars.³⁵

Nonetheless, together, Bebel's sources allowed him to conceptualize his history of Islam not as a narrow study of the cultural context of a particular set of religious precepts, but as an instantiation of a more general history of human cultural development that explained how certain sociocultural structures had enabled periods of societal progress. As Bebel would in his own work, the authors of his sources sought to explain the mechanics of world historical progress and the role of different *Völker* within a universal and teleologically imbued narrative of human history. Building on these foundations, Bebel's secondhand description of Islam, Arab expansionism and the caliphates emerges less as fictive fantasy, and more as a simplification of scholarly histories which aligned temperamentally with his own immediate and explicit political purposes.

Notwithstanding his defense of the cultural and social role played by Islam both historically and contemporaneously, in its instrumentalization of orientalist scholarship for European political ends Bebel's book clearly appropriated the available knowledge of Islam and the caliphates in a manner that echoed a broader European tendency towards claiming textual "authority over the Orient" in order to serve intrinsically European concerns.³⁶ Contrary to Pinar Akkoç's assessment that "Bebel's work serves as an important medium to counteract the imagined judgments spread by orientalist perceptions of the East and to overcome orientalist discourse,"³⁷ not only would the finer detail of Bebel's work fail to withstand a forensic Saidian textual analysis, but also its emphasis on deploying the history of Islam and Arab expansionism primarily to reframe German debates regarding the role of Christianity in European history means that its lionization of Islam remains intrinsically orientalist in the Saidian sense, even if this orientalism might be characterized as an affirmative orientalism.

(Meta)narrating world historical progress

Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode not only makes clear Bebel's sense of Islam as a source of cultural development. It also offers a sense of Bebel's metahistorical understanding of the directionality of history and the mechanics of social progress at a world-historical level (what Lidtke called Bebel's *Entwicklungsglaube*).³⁸ It reveals exactly how Bebel situated the Islamic world both synchronically, within a global medieval civilizational context that included the two other major Abrahamic traditions as well as Buddhism and Hinduism, and diachronically, through the employment of Islamic history as a direct forerunner to European modernity.

Wellhausen, *Das arabische Reich und sein Sturz* (Berlin, 1902). For the state of research into Arabic language and culture at this time see Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 118–23, 186–90.

³⁵Friedrich Engels, "The Book of Revelation," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (Chico, CA, 1964), 205–12, at 206.

³⁶Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979), 3.

³⁷See Akkoç, "Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode und Bebel's Kritik am Orientalismus," 128.

³⁸Vernon L. Lidtke, "August Bebel and German Social Democracy's Relation to the Christian Churches," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27/2 (1966), 245–64, at 261.

To deal with the diachronic element first, *Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode* demonstrates a willingness to concede to Islam and the caliphates a central role in the historical unfolding of human cultural development. To do this, Bebel framed Islam within a crudely Hegelian world history in which the *Weltgeist* was seen as operating in his own time through Western European events, whereas it had in earlier epochs relied upon other civilizational vehicles, such as Islamic Arabia. The radicalism, however, of Bebel's departure from other German diachronic universal histories cannot be overstated. For him, the list of culture-bearing civilizations included Greco-Roman antiquity and the Islamic caliphates but did not include the Christian kingdoms and empires of the European Middle Ages that Hegel had championed. Wittingly or unwittingly, Bebel directly inverted Hegel's sense that the Occident's Christian history was the precise reason for the "supremacy of Europe," a supremacy that was explicitly "defined in opposition to Islam."³⁹ As summarized by Kautsky in his review of the book, Bebel's rendering of the historical *longue durée* was that "we have now clearly come further than the Islamic cultural milieu ... but our development stands not on the shoulders of Christianity, but, on the one hand, on the shoulders of classical antiquity and, on the other hand, on the shoulders of Islamic culture."⁴⁰

According to Bebel (and Kautsky), far from being the fount of Europe's social and cultural development, Christianity was in fact responsible for classical antiquity's slide into the historically barren Middle Ages, which saw the suppression of any progress through theocratic and monarchical political structures that sustained feudalism, itself an unwanted product of the consolidation of large Roman-era *latifundia* estates that had enabled economic power to be monopolized by a landed aristocracy.⁴¹ This rejection of the legacy of the long centuries of Christian feudalism, while directly contrasting with Hegel's Eurocentric philosophy of history, bore some superficial resemblance to the roughly contemporaneous views of Max Weber, who had developed his own theory of world historical progress. Like Bebel's, Weber's history also began with an analysis of the decline of Rome and had charted how the appropriation of *latifundia* by the senatorial class and the resulting questions of property had unleashed a "struggle of the orders."⁴² Unlike Bebel, however, Weber remained keen to salvage something from Europe's Christian Middle Ages. On the one hand, he refuted Pliny's simplistic dictum *latifundia perdidere Italiam*; that is, "it was the Junkers who ruined Rome." On the other, he also rejected the idea that Europe's "hibernating" culture was awoken by the "minnesong and jousts of feudal society." Instead, he argued, Europe was socially reinvigorated from within by the arrival of "the division of

³⁹Thomas Lynch, "Hegel, Islam and Liberalism: Religion and the Shape of World History," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 47/2 (2021), 225–40, at 226.

⁴⁰Karl Kautsky, "August Bebel, Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode," *Die neue Zeit* 2 (1884), 236–7.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Max Weber, "Agrarverhältnisse im Alterthum," in Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Tübingen, 1924), 1–288; Weber, *Die römische Agrargeschichte in ihrer Bedeutung für das Staats- und Privatrecht* (Stuttgart, 1891); John Love, "Max Weber and the Theory of Ancient Capitalism," *History and Theory* 25/2 (1986), 152–72; Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (London, 1960), 54–9.

labor and city-based commerce in the Middle Ages,” which prepared the way for the freedoms of the citizen that “demolished the bondage” of the feudal age and “resurrected the legacy of antiquity.”⁴³

Where Weber saw internal social developments within the European Middle Ages as having established the preconditions for European capitalist modernity, Bebel dismissed medieval Christendom as a historical dead end. For Bebel, Europe had stagnated in its Christian feudal state while the Arab caliphates had assumed the mantle of custodians of world historical progress by fostering and furthering the insights of classical learning: “It was they ... who took up this knowledge and independently drove it forward and in this way created a culture that towered above the contemporary Christian one. First under the influence of their culture could development in Europe once again reach a rapid tempo.”⁴⁴

In terms of his synchronic analysis of Islam’s position amid the religions of the global Middle Ages, Bebel’s macro-level view of the origins of religion reached for a form of historical and geographical determinism to explain religious variegation across the world. As Kautsky said in his review of the book in *Die neue Zeit*, “the standpoint of the author is materialist. He assumes that the intellectual products of a people, its religion, its sense of justice, its art do not determine its material conditions, but are rather determined by the latter.”⁴⁵ Across the world, Bebel argued, all religions reflected a specific temporal and geographical context and endured insofar as they adequately met the material requirements of those societies. Under this base-superstructure reading of cultural development, “climate, land fertility and nutrition offer the foundations for the development of nations,” which then developed specific economic and social forms which in turn influenced a people’s intellectual development. Accordingly, religions were for Bebel an expression of the cultural level of their adherents, which in turn was a product of their material conditions.⁴⁶

In the same way, throughout history and across space, important prophets and messianic figures (such as Jesus or Mohammed) reflected the specific cultural milieux and forms of social organization from which they emerged, rather than any transcendent access to the divine. Their obviously individuating attributes notwithstanding, for Bebel, world religions such as Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity also held much in common insofar as they sought to address for their specific society the same overarching human social need for group solidarity, basic standards of moral conduct, and a modicum of social equality to avoid social conflict. These impulses, he argued, were not divinely inspired but were innately human and were not the sole preserve of any particular religious tradition, which in any case would be constantly cross-fertilized by other traditions across time and space.⁴⁷

Following Kremer’s dictum that the “first and most important” element of cultural history was a study of the “racial type” of a people,⁴⁸ Bebel also offered a racial

⁴³Max Weber, “Die sozialen Gründe des Untergangs der antiken Kultur” (1896), in Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 289–311, at 290, 311.

⁴⁴Kautsky, “August Bebel, Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode,” 236–7.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 236–7.

⁴⁶Bebel, *Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode*, 2–3.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 6–9.

⁴⁸Kremer, *Culturgeschichte des Orients*, 1: viii.

perspective on the development of the Arabs in which his acceptance of the racial typologies of nineteenth-century anthropology is immediately apparent.⁴⁹ In his account of the social development of pre-Islamic Arabia before its inhabitants began their conquests under the flag of Islam and took up their role as *Kulturträger*, Arabs were, he wrote, “a true *Naturvolk*.” This, he opined, had initially made it difficult for them to give up their ostensibly characteristic *bellum omnium contra omnes* in favor of Islam’s new dictum of social harmony that stressed equality amongst all Muslims.

Yet Bebel’s understanding of race was constructivist. While asserting that Jews, Christians, and Muslims originated “from the same race of people, the Semitic,” he treated all three groups as separate faith communities formed in different times and places that had shaped them.⁵⁰ According to Bebel’s geographically determinist account, the Arabs’ warlike state of nature and pre-Islamic Arabia’s volatile cultural and religious forms were a direct product of its inhospitable landscape and hot climate, which he argued hampered the rise of a centralized state apparatus and had led to nomadism, tribalism, and an explosive oscillation between the opposing cultural tendencies of desert hospitality and perpetual violence between extended familial units. With regard to pre-Islamic religiosity, he speculated that isolated desert life and the absolute quiet of desert nights had led to a superstitious credulity that had prepared Arabs for a belief in the immanence of supernatural beings.⁵¹ It was in this context, he maintained, that Mohammed had appeared as a prophet of a new religion that blended Judaism, Christianity, and local Arabic religious traditions centred on the Ka’ba in Mecca at a time and in a region where prophets were not unusual. This new faith, however, “bore witness to a higher morality, and a healthy and humane outlook,” and similarly “reflected the morality and character of the people and the time,” serving to bind together an otherwise divided Arabian population with new religious and social laws via a vigorous (indeed bellicose) process of proselytizing.⁵² In an unconscious echo of Ibn Khaldun’s concept of *asabiyyah* or communal social vigor,⁵³ Bebel suggested that the *naturvölkisch* Arabs’ warlike primordial state of nature then operated as a galvanizing social force that assisted them in their conquests outside Arabia. This was until such time as their cultural context changed and “the rapid acquisition of riches and the large number of foreign women awakened sensual cravings in them that would eventually bring about their descent into decadence.”⁵⁴

In terms of the development of social structure under the Islamic Arab Empire, Bebel offered a picture of a society that at its apex had moved away from the martial egalitarianism of its early expansionist period towards a class society not too

⁴⁹Bebel was not the only social democrat to endorse a *Kulturstufe* reading of peoples. In a Reichstag debate regarding the expulsion of Poles in 1886, Wilhelm Liebknecht described Germany as “culturally superior” to the unimpressed Polish deputies. See Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, *Purging the Empire: Mass Expulsions in Germany, 1871–1914* (Oxford, 2015), 96.

⁵⁰Bebel, *Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode*, 1, 15.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 10–15.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 20–23.

⁵³Murat Önder and Fatih Ulaşan, “Ibn Khaldun’s Theory on the Rise and Fall of Sovereign Powers: The Case of the Ottoman Empire,” *Adam Akademi* 8/2 (2018), 231–66.

⁵⁴Bebel, *Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode*, 62–3.

dissimilar to that of nineteenth-century Germany, one in which a landed class rested atop a trading and manufacturing class which jostled for influence alongside the empire's office holders—that is to say, public servants—all of whom lived in the cities alongside the wage-earning urban poor. By this time, he rued, the simple certainties of the old life of the Arabic *Naturvolk* were rapidly evaporating, with class struggle resulting from the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty living at close quarters in the empire's cities. These conditions assisted in the emergence of revolutionary “Catilinarian elements.”⁵⁵

On the other hand, he maintained, some traces of Islam's initial tendency towards social leveling remained in its legal code, hardwired into the state by the laws handed down by Mohammed that insisted that “all Muslims are to be seen as equal and brothers,” a step that “hindered the establishment of an actual aristocracy.” Bebel insisted that “a strongly democratic strain ran through Islam; with the pursuit of the most important and influential state offices open to every person irrespective of their class,” including, he noted, “members of other faiths,” something “completely unheard of” in Christian Europe. While not doing away with slavery, he argued, Mohammed sought to alleviate its worst elements so that it was a far milder form of servitude than those prevailing in Europe at the time.⁵⁶

Despite the outsized reputation that the oriental harem had in Europe in his time, Bebel also defended the status of women under Islam, suggesting that the harem was in fact a later Turkish and Persian innovation and that in the early Islamic state Arab women studied, gave lectures, became poets, and even held magistracies.⁵⁷ In this he followed Kremer's view that “the position of women at the court of the caliph” was originally an elevated and influential one where “women often had the decisive word and the wife of the caliph was often in reality the true ruler.”⁵⁸ Bebel also argued that polygamy had pre-dated Islam and that enlightened Muslim men felt free to marry Christians and Jews without penalty, an interfaith marriage that he pointed out had been impossible in Europe until the very recent past. Neither the state nor clergy interfered in the institution of marriage, he insisted, while it was possible for Muslim wives to divorce their husbands.⁵⁹

Bebel also paid close attention to the political development of the “religious, political and social state” created by Mohammed and his succeeding caliphs. Following Kremer, Bebel argued that through the highly ritualized repetition of collective prayer, Mohammed created a form of collective religious and military discipline among hitherto splintered Arab communities.⁶⁰ His successors built upon this to create a highly integrated expansionist state which developed a leveling financial system specifically designed for “the support of impoverished believers” through a progressive taxation system that gradually moved from being levied on chattels to monetarization, a system that Kremer in his work did not shy away from calling “socialist” in nature.⁶¹ So too all forms of income from rent, Bebel pointed out, were

⁵⁵Ibid., 78–84.

⁵⁶Ibid., 86–8.

⁵⁷Ibid., 94–6.

⁵⁸Kremer, *Culturgeschichte des Orients*, 1: 147–8.

⁵⁹Bebel, *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode*, 94–6.

⁶⁰Kremer, *Culturgeschichte des Orients*, 1: 10.

⁶¹Ibid., 1: 12.

taxed, as were gold, jewellery, and land. Non-Muslims also paid a poll tax that was graduated by income level. This tax advantage for Muslims, Bebel suggested, led to conversions to Islam based on material advantage rather than religious conviction in such numbers that the caliphs sought to slow down the rate of conversion.⁶² “How different from Christianity,” Bebel observed, “which no sooner conquered a non-Christian people before they immediately forced the defeated to the Christian faith with violence, while for the Muslims this change in belief was a matter of indifference, if it meant losses for the treasury.”⁶³

On the question of the maintenance of Arab hegemony, however, Bebel propounded a strangely racist theory of the dangers of racial mixing to Arab supremacy which included a strongly gendered dimension. Bebel applauded, for example, Caliph Umar’s decision to keep Arabs strictly separate from those they conquered and in particular his law that had stopped Arabs from acquiring land in conquered areas, as a very useful measure to guard against the sedentarization, fragmentation, and dissolution of the ruling Arab nation within the mass of the broader conquered population. When Arab men began to take foreign wives, Bebel lamented, a new phase of cultural decline began through “the mixing of blood and the destruction of character that would later have such sinister consequences”: “The mixing with other peoples, particularly through wives, increased and the cleverly devised isolation ended and there was no arresting the process of assimilation. The dire influences of the decadent old cultures of Egyptians, Persians, Syrians, and others prevailed over the positive characteristics of the primordial Arabs.”⁶⁴

Benevolent Muslims and malevolent Christians

Without glossing over the role that imperialist warfare and looting played in the spread of Islam out of Arabia, Bebel repeatedly stressed the tolerance exhibited by the caliphs of the Arab Empire which had been established in a multifaith region:

In sharp contradiction to the views held in contemporary Europe that see Islam as having been inspired by fanatical intolerance towards those of other faiths, the opposite must be stated. Christians, Jews, and those of other faiths have from the first day of its establishment lived in peace and security under Islam, which for those who had different beliefs at this time in Christian Europe was never the case.⁶⁵

For Bebel, it was in fact the repeated barbaric invasions of crusading Christians from Europe after the eleventh century that had jeopardized this religious tolerance.⁶⁶ Prior to and even after this, however, “Jews and Christians were afforded ... the highest positions of honour in Muslim states,” with many serving as the

⁶²Bebel is also following Kremer on the question of economic conversions. See Alfred von Kremer, *Culturgeschichte des Orients unter den Chalifen*, vol. 2 (Vienna, 1877), 137–8.

⁶³Bebel, *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode*, 28–37.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 37–9, 48–9.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 24–5, 53. Partly following Kremer, *Culturgeschichte des Orients*, 2: 401–5.

⁶⁶Here he follows Kremer, *Culturgeschichte des Orients*, 2: 501.

caliph's advisers and physicians, as well as governors of imperial territories. Christian and Jewish intellectuals also worked closely with Muslims in the fields of philosophy, medicine, and science. By comparison, Christian Europe at the same time was marked by its intolerance:

So it happened, that from the earliest times onwards, whereas the Christian Occident still lay in deepest barbarism and the wildest persecutions were underway against all who dared to doubt church dogma or whose studies had the results of threatening to infringe upon the doctrines of the church, the Muslim Empire delighted for the most part in spiritual freedom and culture. It was the Orient that bestowed the light of reason on the Occident, sunk in the darkest night of superstition.⁶⁷

With this civilizational mission in mind, the anti-imperialist Bebel refrained from condemning the scale of Arab imperialism not only in Arabia and the Levant, but also in Asia, Africa, and Europe.⁶⁸ The anti-militarist Bebel also professed to be impressed by the sophisticated rules of war embraced by the Arab armies, which ensured that foreign captives were not murdered. He also praised the "humane spirit" of the conquering Arabs which ensured that any prewar-era hostages held by them were released upon the outbreak of hostilities.⁶⁹

Assisting the cultural hegemony of Islam but also the spread of ideas across the Islamic world, Bebel pointed out, was the spread of Arabic as a common *lingua franca*. Arabic, he argued, allowed for a cultural blossoming that was further enabled by an emphasis on the necessity of education and acculturation that included "all nationalities and the various faiths" of the empire. While the expansion of the Arab Empire was indeed a violent one, Bebel conceded, this was no different to the violence of all states and was not a specifically Islamic vice. At the same time, the advances in thought and science enabled by Islam's putative openness to free thought were invaluable to the long-term development of all humanity. This included the eventual bringing of progress and enlightenment to Europe, which benefited from Islamic influences in Spain and Sicily and through the knowledge torn from the Middle East during the Crusades, even though Europe's Crusaders had in fact, Bebel contended, sought to extinguish the centres of learning that had been nurtured in the East since antiquity. For Bebel, the centrality of Islam to Europe's slow shedding of a thousand years of Christian superstition and ignorance was undeniable:

There can be no doubt that as after almost a thousand years of Christian rule Europe grasped after intellectual redemption it was the intimate contact with Arabic cultural endeavors in Italy and Spain which allowed them to arise during the era of rebirth, the Renaissance and, after some setbacks, pushed Europe onto the path of progress. It was not the influence of Christianity, that in all times set itself against human progress, fighting it with fire and the sword,

⁶⁷Bebel, *Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode*, 25–6.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 44–5.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 44–8.

but rather an anti-Christian, heathen influence that heralded the uplifting of intellectual life and the era of reform in Europe.⁷⁰

Spain and Sicily, Bebel maintained, had been at their most progressive when under Muslim rule, before becoming permanent backwaters when they were reconquered by Christians. Indeed Islamic Cordoba, with its world-leading libraries, stood with Baghdad as a sophisticated centre of learning at a time when the cities of Europe were still small, dingy, dirt-caked towns. There was no greater sign of the tolerance of Islam, Bebel opined, than the difference between the cultural exchanges in Spain that welcomed Jews and Christians to take part in the intellectual advances taking place there, and the brutal intolerance of the Spanish Inquisition, which not only actively persecuted Jews and Muslims but also goaded the Spanish masses into pogroms against them.⁷¹ The end of Islamic Spain, Bebel concluded, was the end of tolerance and cultural life and the return of Christian barbarism. The result was that Spain sank into poverty, misery, and irrelevance under the weight of its ruling priests.⁷² This, Bebel argued, was all that could be meant by the “civilizing effects of Christianity.”⁷³

In terms of general state infrastructure, Bebel also noted the advances in the Arab postal system and the irrigation of regions (such as Spain) threatened by the desertification which had since taken hold because “the current people and governments are incapable” of coming to grips with it.⁷⁴ He also offered other detailed evidence of what he viewed as the cultural superiority of the Islamic world over Christian Europe, pointing to Arab innovations in agriculture, trade, textiles, mining, and medicine. Particularly stressed was the enhanced mobility afforded by the reach of the Arab Empire, again a notable position for the anti-imperialist Bebel to take. He enthusiastically described Arab trade voyages to Africa, India, and China as evidence that “the Arabs of the ninth century knew sea routes and lands and stood in extensive trading relations with peoples that Christian Europe at that time knew of only through hearsay and only then via the Arabs themselves.” In summary, Bebel emphasized, “there was no area of human endeavor in agriculture, in trade and in transport, in industry, art, and science as well as military science where the Arabs of that period were not more highly advanced than Europeans.” To this list of cultural achievements Bebel added mathematics, medicine, chemistry, history, geography, geology, and philosophy as domains that had evinced Arab superiority over the West.⁷⁵

Islamic scholarship, he believed, had also been on a firmer foundation than its Western equivalent, because while “in the Occident there has been and remains a vast gulf between scholars and the people,” in the Muslim world scholarship was undertaken not by a caste of intellectuals, but by “men of the practical life: merchants, traders, craftsmen, and state officials.” In the West, “our scholars

⁷⁰Ibid., 69–70.

⁷¹Ibid., 125–33.

⁷²Ibid., 134–5.

⁷³Ibid., 138.

⁷⁴Ibid., 57.

⁷⁵Ibid., 73–7, 104–10. On the relationship between trade and the Arab Empire, Bebel partly follows Kremer, *Culturgeschichte des Orients*, 2: 273 ff.

understand as a rule virtually nothing of the practical life” and have very little influence on those around them, “unlike the Arabs,” he opined, where scholarly advances were based on years-long empirical experience of the world around them.⁷⁶ The knowledge accumulated by these scholars, however had been lost to the world because of the twin barbarisms of the Mongols and the Christians who had wantonly destroyed it. Even in the nature of their conquests, Bebel asserted, Muslims had once again shown their superiority:

The Arabs carefully collected during their conquests all of the works that would be useful to their studies and could teach them about the peoples and lands they had conquered. The Christians by the expansion of their doctrine destroyed all such cultural monuments as the work of Satan and heathen abomination that a good Christian should eradicate as quickly as possible.⁷⁷

While in the East Muslims enjoyed an Islamic Enlightenment, no scholar in the West would have dared move beyond the narrow boundaries set by Christian dogma, Bebel asserted, and while Islamic leaders unstintingly praised learning in all religious and intellectual traditions for the glory of knowledge, even someone as scholarly-minded as Martin Luther had warned Christians that, far from a blessing, reason was a “damned whore.” At the same time as Christians forbade interfaith education, in the Islamic world it was often Christians who were placed in charge of education. Meanwhile, in the field of medicine, Bebel commented, while Christians were still relying on “miracles and the swindle of relics” to cure the ill, Arabs were already applying scientific approaches to medicine and its effects on the body.⁷⁸

The Islamic study of religion, too, was unlike Europe in its determinedly antihierarchical rejection of religious orders that could claim special social and political privileges. Religious debate and controversies were permitted in the Islamic world without fear of the dangerous accusation of heresy that had disqualified open philosophical discussion in Christian Europe. Members of all religions, and even atheists, Bebel claimed, had been able to debate each other freely in public “without the least interference of the state against freedom of opinion and freedom of assembly.” It was this very ability to debate matters freely, he asserted, that had brought about Islam’s intellectual advances. The course and outcome of these intellectual exchanges would then be recorded in countless books that could be accessed in every Muslim city in an explosion of “freedom to speak your opinion that has not been exceeded by today’s universities.”⁷⁹ Exemplifying this freedom, he argued was a conference held in Baghdad where not only the various sects of Islam but Christians, Jews, Hindus, Zoroastrians, and even atheists had all gathered to exchange views. The participants had all promised, he reported, to draw upon reason alone and not the doctrinal certainties of their respective faiths in their disputations—something unimaginable in Europe, he argued, even up to the nineteenth century.⁸⁰

⁷⁶Bebel, *Die mohamedanisch- arabische Kulturperiode*, 99.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 100.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 100–4.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 90–93.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 110.

With these laudatory comparisons between Muslims and Christians in mind, it is worth offering a sense of the reasons why the leader of the German Social Democratic Party would make time in the middle of his party's most difficult period of state suppression to write a work of premodern history. The answers to this, as the following two sections make clear, lie with Bebel's determination, on the one hand, to clarify his attitude towards the relationship between socialism and Christianity, and, on the other, to direct social-democratic attitudes to the contemporaneous "Eastern question." His vehement insistence that Islam was a progressive force in world history, a view shared by very few Germans outside scholarly circles prior to World War I, can at least partially be explained, that is, by the work's origins as an anti-Christian polemic, as well as by his articulation of the strong (but not uncontroversial) nineteenth-century socialist position in support of the most important Muslim power of the period, namely the Ottoman Empire. As his later position on the so-called *Islamfrage* would show, Bebel remained consistent in his defense of Islam well into the twentieth century.

History as anti-Christian polemic

At the time of the publication of *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode*, Bebel's antipathy towards Christianity was exceptionally well known. It had been made famous in Reichstag and press pronouncements in which he gave voice to his seemingly consistent view that religion "has since the beginning of time and among all peoples been the primary means of deception and exploitation,"⁸¹ and that it was "intimately bound up with the material interests of the ruling social class."⁸² In this judgment, based on a long period of study during his 1872 incarceration in Hubertusburg,⁸³ he made (at least publicly) no distinction between Catholics and the Protestants who attacked them during the German *Kulturkampf* in the early 1870s.

Exemplifying this, Bebel had laid out publicly his strong rejection of all faith-based politics in his famous speech to the Reichstag at the beginning of the *Kulturkampf* in 1872.⁸⁴ Opening with a quote from Buckle suggesting that the overt politicization of confessional differences was a product of political immaturity and represented a "sham fight" between two confessional positions that shared the same intellectual weaknesses, Bebel mocked the putative hypocrisy of Protestant Reichstag deputies attacking their Catholic counterparts. Protestantism, he taunted, was equally corrosive, only differentiated by being the religion of the liberal middle classes, a "religion in pyjamas and slippers" that was nonetheless, like Catholicism, still "contrary to modern principles as well as contemporary science." Worse, he

⁸¹ August Bebel, "Die parlamentarische Tätigkeit des Deutschen Reichstages und der Landtage und die Sozialdemokratie von 1871–1874," in Heiner Jestrabek, ed., *August Bebel: "Die moderne Kultur ist eine antichristliche ...": Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften zur Religionskritik* (Aschaffenburg, 2007), 30–38, at 31.

⁸² August Bebel, "Glosse zu die wahre Gestalt des Christentums," in Jestrabek, *August Bebel*, 65–82, at 80.

⁸³ Prüfer, *Sozialismus statt Religion*, 34–5.

⁸⁴ On the *Kulturkampf* and the role of Protestant liberals in it see especially Michael Gross, *The War against Catholicism: Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Ann Arbor, 2005); Roisin Healy, *The Jesuit Specter in Germany* (Boston, MA, 2003); Manuel Borutta, *Antikatholizismus: Deutschland und Italien im Zeitalter der europäischen Kulturkämpfe* (Göttingen, 2010).

believed, liberal deputies who surely understood modern science could have no real religious beliefs beyond their material interests. Consequently, their publicly espoused pious sentiments were simple hypocrisy. Continuing in this vein, Bebel reiterated that “all religious dogmas are contrary to sound reason and science.” Once the Social Democrats came to power, he warned, “it will all be over for both liberalism and ultramontaniam.”⁸⁵

It was not only German liberalism, Bebel believed, but also German socialism that had been infected with dangerously untimely religious precepts and prejudices. In an attempt to combat this tendency, in the mid-1870s Bebel went to great lengths to stymie the attempt of the socialist priest Wilhelm Hohoff to insinuate a Catholic strain into German social democracy. In a short but vigorous article in the Leipzig social-democratic newspaper *Volksstaat*, Hohoff had argued for the compatibility of socialism with the principles of social equality contained within Christian teachings. Defending what he saw as the historically egalitarian dimensions of Catholicism, Hohoff asserted that the view expressed in an earlier edition of the newspaper, that the Catholic clergy were historically responsible for perpetuating social and political inequality, was an insult to the thousands of clerics (such as himself) who had turned their backs on wealth and privilege and willingly taken a vow of poverty to become lifelong servants and advocates of the poor.⁸⁶

Written at the height of the *Kulturkampf* in November 1873, Hohoff's Catholic socialism had firm roots in both German socialism and German Catholicism. As Heiner Grote and more recently Stefan Berger have made clear, Ferdinand Lassalle and the social Catholic bishop Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler were very close in their thinking.⁸⁷ Correspondingly, Lassallean socialists had long “worked harmoniously with Catholic journeymen associations.” Joseph Dietzgen, too, had deliberately sought to narrow the gap between socialism and Christianity, offering common ground that many socialists gladly embraced.⁸⁸

Hohoff's intervention became famous not because of any depth or intricacy in its argument (it took the form of a brief letter to the editor),⁸⁹ but because it

⁸⁵Bebel, 17 June 1872, *Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, 1079–82. On Bebel and religion see, for example, Todd H. Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession* (Cambridge, 2014), 192–3; Wilfried Spohn, “Religion and Working-Class Formation in Imperial Germany 1871–1914,” *Politics and Society* 19/1 (1991), 109–32, at 120–21; Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, “Organisierte Religionskritik im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 37/3 (1985), 203–15, at 203–5.

⁸⁶Wilhelm Hohoff, “An die verehrliche Redaktion des ‘*Volksstaat*’ zu Leipzig,” *Volksstaat*, 23 Jan. 1874, 3–4. Also in anon., ed., *Christentum und Sozialismus: Eine religiöse Polemik zwischen Herrn Kaplan Hohoff in Hülfe und August Bebel* (Berlin, 1929), 3–6. For another, more radical, socialist discussion of Christianity see Johann Most, *Die Gottlosigkeit: Eine Kritik der Gottes Idee* (Berlin, 1877).

⁸⁷Heiner Grote, *Sozialdemokratie und Religion: Eine Dokumentation für die Jahre 1863 bis 1875* (Tübingen, 1968); Stefan Berger, “Difficult (Re-)alignments: Comparative Perspectives on Social Democracy and Religion from Late-Nineteenth-Century to Interwar Germany and Britain,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 53/3 (2018), 574–96, at 579. See too Wilhelm von Ketteler, *Die Arbeiterfrage und das Christentum* (Mainz, 1864).

⁸⁸Berger, “Difficult (Re-)alignments,” 579.

⁸⁹Hohoff's book-length discussions on the relationship between Catholicism and socialism would come later. See Wilhelm Hohoff, *Die Bedeutung der Marxschen Kapitalkritik* (Paderborn, 1908); Hohoff, *Die wissenschaftliche und kulturhistorische Bedeutung der Karl Marx'schen Lehren* (Braunschweig, 1921).

was directly answered at great length over three editions of the *Volksstaat* by August Bebel, who vehemently rejected the priest's overtures to German socialists.⁹⁰ Bebel's vituperative response to Hohoff was aimed squarely at burning all possible bridges between socialism and Christianity at a time when tentative overtures were being made in both directions.⁹¹ In particular, Bebel took aim at what he saw as the Christian socialist's deliberate attempt to obscure the central role of the church in the perpetuation of institutionalized social inequality and in defense of the prevailing political order. "Christianity and socialism," Bebel thundered, "relate to one another like fire and water."⁹² Decisively slamming the door shut on religious socialism, he declared, "That so-called good core of Christianity that you (but not I) find within it is not Christian but a general human attribute, and that which is actually a product of Christianity, namely the doctrine and dogma, is in fact antipathetic to humanity."⁹³ Bebel's attacks ultimately did nothing to discourage Hohoff, who over time deepened his critique of capitalism along Catholic lines. Convinced that Marx's theory of value and his critique of alienated labor and wage slavery accurately described contemporary political and economic realities, Hohoff persisted in drawing upon the history of medieval European Christendom to fashion a template for a future utopian socialist society. "Civilization," he contended in direct opposition to Bebel, "has never made quicker and broader progress than during the Catholic Middle Ages."⁹⁴ Marxism, supplemented by the scholastic tradition of Thomas Aquinas, Hohoff believed, was the basis for a future politics.⁹⁵ So, too, the legal philosophy of the Middle Ages, including the church's prohibition of usury, formed the basis for Hohoff's view that "there should be no such thing as profit."⁹⁶ "Canonical economic theory and the practical politics of Christian cities and the guilds during the Middle Ages," he argued, "showed a clearly anticapitalist tendency," and medieval Christendom had shown the possibility of "the realization of a Christian socialism and collectivism."⁹⁷

As interesting as the broader issues at stake in the Hohoff–Bebel polemic are, what is particularly noteworthy here is not so much the atheist Bebel's (in some ways unsurprising) summary rejection of any inner similarities between socialism

⁹⁰Prüfer, *Sozialismus statt Religion*, 51–2.

⁹¹On attempts to chart a course between religion and the workers' movement outside the SPD see Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, *Arbeiterbewegung und organisierte Religionskritik: Proletarische Freidenkerverbände in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart, 1981); Grote, *Sozialdemokratie und Religion*. See also the later efforts of Eduard Dietz and Friedrich Naumann to reconcile Christianity and socialism. Andreas Hunkel, *Eduard Dietz (1866–1940): Richter, Rechtsanwalt und Verfassungsschöpfer* (Berlin, 2009), 205; Hans Hermann Hofelder, "Christentum und Sozialismus: Das Experiment Friedrich Naumanns," *Zeitschrift für evangelische Ethik* 20/1 (2014), 81–97.

⁹²Later, Hohoff would reply, "it is not Christianity and socialism but capitalism and Christianity that relate to one another like water and fire." Hohoff, *Die wissenschaftliche und kulturhistorische Bedeutung der Karl Marx'schen Lehren*, 14.

⁹³August Bebel, "Offene Antwort an Hr. Kaplan Hohoff," *Volksstaat*, 1 March 1874, 4 (part 1 was published in *Volksstaat*, 20 Feb. 1874, 2–3, and part 2 in *Volksstaat*, 27 Feb. 1874, 2–3). Other printed versions of this include August Bebel, "Mein Herr," in anon., *Christentum und Sozialismus*, 4–15; and Jestrabek, *August Bebel*, 43–58. The text of the Jestrabek edition is markedly different from the 1874 version and should be used carefully.

⁹⁴Hohoff, *Die Bedeutung der Marx'schen Kapitalkritik*, 57–8.

⁹⁵Ibid., 36–7.

⁹⁶Ibid., 37.

⁹⁷Ibid., 40–41.

and Christianity, as the method Bebel employed to articulate his case, namely a historical comparison between Christianity and other religions. In conceding, for example, that in the past there had been “thousands and thousands” of Catholic clerics who had given up all claim to worldly possessions and social rank to serve their flock, Bebel pointed out that such “preparedness for self-sacrifice, self-denial, and asceticism” could also all be found in the histories of other major faith traditions, such as Judaism, Confucianism, Islam, and, in particular, Buddhism. Like these other world religions, he observed, Christianity was a product of human endeavor, not divine revelation, and, as such, inevitably bore some traces of a general human tendency towards selflessness that could not be explained by the intentions of the church.⁹⁸ His rejection of the similarities between the Christian tradition and socialism, that is, rested squarely on a comparative and world-historical approach to religions and their social-cultural origins.

With this historically framed anti-Christian polemic in mind, it is easier to understand why Bebel would begin writing *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode* only four years after he had crossed swords with Hohoff,⁹⁹ at a time when some social democrats were constantly debating their relationship with religion, and when socialist politics’ role in and relevance to religion was “fiercely debated.”¹⁰⁰ Without doubt, Bebel remained just as much an atheist when writing it as when he had declared in the Reichstag that “all religious dogmas stand in opposition to a healthy rationality and science,”¹⁰¹ and elsewhere that he was an opponent of “every religion.”¹⁰² Indeed, Bebel’s large socialist audience might have reasonably expected him, on the ground of intellectual consistency, to offer a similar rejection of Islam, a second Abrahamic tradition, as similarly anti-pathetic to the cause of socialism. Instead, however, in *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode* Bebel wrote extremely positively about the historical role of Islam, describing in detail what he saw as the important sociocultural progress achieved within the Islamic world in the premodern era. Unlike in his rancorous rejection of Hohoff’s Christianity, in his history of the Arab Empire, Islam and its fostering of intellectual developments emerged as the unacknowledged link between Greco-Roman traditions of knowledge and the blossoming of European culture that, he argued, had occurred since the Renaissance.

Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode, that is, stepped back from a general hostility towards all forms of religion to offer a surprisingly positive assessment of the world-historical importance of Islam. In doing so, however, it renewed the polemical anti-Christian intent of Bebel’s earlier Hohoff articles. This polemical intention was far from hidden. In the book’s foreword, Bebel made it clear that he had intended for it to be read as a part of his longer-term desire to free people from their “ancient spiritual yoke.” Rather than doing so by offering a trenchantly

⁹⁸August Bebel, “Offene Antwort an Hrn. Kaplan Hohoff,” *Volksstaat*, 20 Feb. 1874, 2–3.

⁹⁹In all likelihood Bebel began the book while he was imprisoned from 1877 to 1878. See May, “August Bebel und der Islam,” 179. This dating cannot be confirmed, as Bebel does not mention it among the list of numerous works he worked on during that time. See August Bebel, *Aus meinem Leben*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart, 1911), 390–400.

¹⁰⁰Prüfer, *Sozialismus statt Religion*, 35–6.

¹⁰¹August Bebel, 17 June 1872, *Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, 1080.

¹⁰²Bebel, “Offene Antwort an Hrn. Kaplan Hohoff,” *Volksstaat*, 27 Feb. 1874, 2.

atheistic survey of all religions, however, he did so by contrasting what he saw as the socially destructive influence of ancient and medieval Christianity with the comparatively enlightened historical role played by early Islam, all within a broader, metahistorical framework that stressed the transience of any religion's contribution to what he assumed to be the dialectical unfolding of human progress.¹⁰³

By suspending his attack on religion as being always and everywhere a tool of oppression, Bebel created for himself the opportunity to expand his earlier critique of Christianity as a morally bankrupt and historically barren cultural institution through a detailed discussion that contrasted the spiritual and social poverty of Christendom with the social revolution precipitated by the founding of Islam and the subsequent cultural advancements unleashed by the Arab Empire during the Rashidun, Umayyad, and Abbasid caliphates. The book, that is, followed on from Bebel's earlier use of comparative religious history in his anti-Hohoff polemic in the *Volksstaat*, not as a means of understanding past religions for their own sake, but as a vehicle for derailing the Eurocentric historical assumptions of Christians and, in so doing, forestalling any attempt to offer a historical basis for any future political alliance between Christians and socialists.

Textually, Bebel's earlier exchange with Hohoff marks *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode* in clearly discernible ways. His discussion of the fate of Spain, for example, apart from echoing his source, Weil, was in many respects a reiteration and expansion of the remarks he had made in answer to Hohoff a decade earlier, when he had insisted that "Christianity is an enemy of freedom and culture" and had been for more than a thousand years. "Spain under the rule of the 'heathen' Moors," he had written in 1874, "achieved the highest era of blossoming in agriculture, manufacturing, art, and science, with a high standard of living, only to be turned into a desert by Christianity and destroyed." The Iberian peninsula, he concluded, had never recovered from the pernicious effects of Christianity.¹⁰⁴

Related to this, Bebel repeatedly returned to the vicious anti-Semitism of the Christian Middle Ages, particularly after the "reconquest" of Spain, which he counterposed against the pronounced religious tolerance of Islam. As has been mentioned, Bebel viewed Jews, Christians, and Muslims as "originating from the same race of people, the Semitic," but treated all three groups as separate faith communities.¹⁰⁵ The primary difference between them, he asserted, was cultural and political. Whereas Christians and Jews had always lived in "safety and security" under Islamic rulers, Bebel insisted, Jews in Christian Europe, and Muslims in the Holy Land, had faced "persecution" and Christian "barbarism."¹⁰⁶ The powerful viziers of the Islamic world, Bebel argued, had included among their number Christians and Jews as a matter of course, despite the anti-Semitism of some of the Muslim commoners over whom they ruled.¹⁰⁷ Jews were always exceedingly welcome too in Islamic Spain, unlike during the period of their "bloody persecution" and "oppression" when Spain was ruled by Christians.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³Bebel, *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode*, iii–iv.

¹⁰⁴Bebel, "Offene Antwort an Hr. Kaplan Hohoff," 1 March 1874, 1.

¹⁰⁵Bebel, *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode*, 1, 15.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 24–5.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 132, 134.

Given the stress that Bebel placed upon his work's role as a direct continuation of his earlier anti-Christian polemics, it is significant that *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode* was published exactly at the midpoint of the period that Lidtke argued was marked by a more general abandonment by the social democrats, on tactical grounds, of their earlier strident attacks on Christianity.¹⁰⁹ If a cautious rapprochement with religiously minded socialist comrades was seen as a politically shrewd tactic by some socialists in the difficult years of the early to mid-1880s, their leader was certainly not a party to this strategy. As he wrote to Kautsky, *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode* was intended to widen the split between socialism and Christianity by exposing the hypocrisy and false historical claims that characterized nineteenth-century European Christian histories.¹¹⁰ In an attempt to squeeze Christianity out of the history of human progress, Bebel offered a (for the nineteenth century) strongly revisionist reading of the premodern past that firmly rejected the notion that Christianity was a source of any impetus towards social development during the ancient and medieval periods. Instead, he insisted, this honour should go to Islam:

The Muslim–Arabic cultural period is the connecting link between the decadent Greco-Roman period and antique culture in general, and the European culture that has flourished since the Renaissance period. Without this link, European culture could scarcely have attained the heights it has. Christianity has been steadfastly opposed to this entire cultural development. Accordingly one can justifiably say: modern culture is an anti-Christian culture.¹¹¹

This anti-Christian polemic, it is worth pointing out, did not go unchallenged by other socialists in later years. In 1905, Rosa Luxemburg came to very different conclusions when she offered her own contribution to the debate in her (originally Polish-language) pamphlet *Kirche und Sozialismus*. In this she argued that, while those reactionary priests who engaged in anti-worker politics must be viewed as “the mortal enemy of the people,” this was not because socialists were antireligious. Instead, she claimed, “social democracy does not take away anyone’s religious beliefs and does not fight against religion! On the contrary it demands complete freedom of conscience for all and respect for every faith and conviction.”¹¹² Engels’s view that the history of early Christianity was similar to that of early socialism also remained influential in some circles.¹¹³ Later, in the early years of the Weimar Republic, other religious socialists, such as Eduard Dietz, would seek to

¹⁰⁹Lidtke, “August Bebel and German Social Democracy’s Relation to the Christian Churches”, 245–64.

¹¹⁰Heiner Jestrabek, “Republik—Sozialismus—Atheismus: August Bebel und die Religionspolitik der frühen Sozialdemokratie,” in Jestrabek, *August Bebel*, 1–16, at 14.

¹¹¹Bebel, *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode*, 144.

¹¹²Rosa Luxemburg, *Kirche und Sozialismus*, at www.marxists.org/deutsch/archiv/luxemburg/1905/xx/kirche.htm (accessed 9 May 2024).

¹¹³Engels, *Zur Geschichte des Urchristentums*.

shrug off Bebel's anti-Christian legacy and find a way to reconcile Christianity with socialism in the manner of Hohoff.¹¹⁴

Orientalism and the social-democratic Eastern question

It was not only the question of the historical role of Christianity and its relation to socialism that Bebel sought to revise. His 1884 book was also an intervention in a second political debate, one related to the contours of social-democratic foreign policy regarding the Islamic southeast of Europe. That Bebel wrote his medieval history through the palimpsest of the more immediate question of contemporary European relations with the Ottoman Empire helps explain why Bebel's view of the Islamic world in *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode* seems surprisingly favorable, given the more prevalent contemporaneous (not least of all Marxist) theoretical assumptions regarding the implacably atavistic nature of "oriental despotism" and the place of the "Asiatic mode of production" within the putatively iron laws governing historical development. Rather than condemning "oriental despotism" *tout court* or including the relationship between Islam and the caliphs' secular power within his vociferous complaints about the long history of collusion between religious and political elites, Bebel offered a stout defense of the Islamic world and even of the world-historical importance of Arab imperialism for the kind of humanist progressive tradition that Bebel saw himself and the broader socialist movement as representing. As Kautsky stated in his review of the book in *Die neue Zeit*, far from lambasting the Islamic caliphates, Bebel's work aimed at reversing the situation in which "the Christian world prefers to look down on the Islamic Orient with complete disdain and self-satisfaction." Bebel's task, Kautsky noted, was to correct the dominant misconception among Germans "that Islam is synonymous with barbarism."¹¹⁵

The object of this task and of Bebel's affirmative orientalism was not simply to silence religious socialists in Germany. It also extended to offering a history that was congruent with the pro-Ottoman position of many prominent social democrats on the so-called Eastern question; that is, on the geopolitical question of what attitude to take towards the increasing conflict and sporadic warfare between the Islamic Ottoman Empire, its Christian minorities, and Christian tsarist Russia in the period between the Crimean War and World War I.¹¹⁶

Particularly during the Russo-Turkish conflict of the late 1870s and the subsequent Congress of Berlin in 1878,¹¹⁷ it was not uncommon to see Social Democrats such as Wilhelm Liebknecht and Bebel defend the Ottoman Empire against its detractors, who pointed to its myriad abuses against its Balkan and other Christian minorities as sufficient reason to abandon it politically. In the Reichstag, the Social Democratic Party declared that they were "having none of the Russian appeals to Christian solidarity" and instead made it clear that they

¹¹⁴Hunkel, *Eduard Dietz*, 205. Dietz and others would continue to seek a *modus vivendi* between religion and socialism well into the Weimar period. See Hans Beyer, "Der religiöse Sozialismus in der Weimarer Republik," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 8/11–12 (1960), 1464–82.

¹¹⁵Kautsky, "August Bebel, Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode," 236–7.

¹¹⁶On the Eastern question in Germany more broadly see Friedrich Scherer, *Adler und Halbmond: Bismarck und der Orient 1878–1890* (Paderborn, 2001).

¹¹⁷For Germany's role in the Congress of Berlin see Scherer, *Adler und Halbmond*, 46–65.

saw the Ottoman Empire as the only thing that would stop Russia from brutally oppressing southeastern Europe just as it had Poland.¹¹⁸ Nationalist agitators in the Balkans were, according to these Social Democrats, simply the “toys and tools of Russia,” while the 1878 Congress of Berlin would only guarantee the continuation of Russian wars of aggression. If the Ottoman bulwark was breached, Liebknecht warned, Austria and eventually Germany would fall in turn to tsarist oppression.¹¹⁹

For Bebel and his close collaborator Liebknecht, any criticism of the Ottoman Empire implicitly amounted to support for the imperial designs of the absolutist and expansionist Russian Empire, which was seen as far more threatening to the prospects of European socialism than the Ottomans.¹²⁰ As Bebel would write just two years after his book on the history of Islam was released, when it came to the “Eastern question,” Europeans had been erroneously convinced that it was the Turks who were somehow more barbaric than the predatory Russians:

The deeply ingrained prejudice in Europe against the Turks, that one is dealing with fanatical religious enemies and a brutal, barbaric people that is only interested in mistreating Christians, is of use to Russian plans and Russian politics. This prejudice is strengthened and abetted in Western Europe by a press in the service of Russia and the entire army of reactionary Christian zealots. Although it is a fact that on average the administration of justice, personal freedom, and freedom of religion is safer and the freedom of the press greater in the Turkish Empire than in Russia ... Russia is always presented in comparison to Turkey as some kind of exemplary *Kulturstaat* and its conquest of Turkey as representing great cultural progress.¹²¹

In this determined reversal of the prevailing European encoding of the civilized/barbaric dichotomy, Bebel echoed the views of Liebknecht as expressed during the Russo-Turkish crisis of 1877 and 1878 (the same period in which Bebel began writing his book on the Islamic world), that “Russia is a plundering and conquering state that seeks world domination and Constantinople is the gate that locks them out of the world and the key that opens up the world for it.” Liebknecht warned against the “crocodile tears” of those who spoke of “Turkish atrocities” while their hands were still “soaked in the blood of murdered Poles.” To be against the Turks, he insisted, was to “walk hand in hand with the barbarian state Russia” and support the “destruction of Turkey by Russia.”¹²²

¹¹⁸Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, “‘Ideal and Ornamental Endeavours’: The Armenian Reforms and Germany’s Response to Britain’s Imperial Humanitarianism in the Ottoman Empire, 1878–83,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40/2 (2012), 183–206, at 190–91

¹¹⁹Wilhelm Liebknecht, 19 Feb. 1878, *Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, 111–15.

¹²⁰William George Vettes, “The German Social Democrats and the Eastern Question, 1848–1900,” *American Slavic and East European Review* 17/1 (1958), 86–100.

¹²¹August Bebel, “Deutschland, Rußland und die orientalische Frage,” *Die neue Zeit* 4/11 (1886), 502–15, at 505.

¹²²Wilhelm Liebknecht, *Zur orientalischen Frage oder soll Europa kosakisch werden?* (Leipzig, 1878), 7–8, 14, 23, 29

In this, Liebknecht had the support of no lesser a personality than Marx, who wrote to him on 4 February 1878, arguing,

We absolutely take the side of the Turks for two reasons. 1) Because we have studied the Turkish peasant, that is the mass of the Turkish people, and found them to be without question the most industrious and ethical representatives of the peasantry in all of Europe. 2) because the defeat of the Russians would greatly hasten social revolution in Russia, the preconditions for which are in place, and with that radical change in all of Europe.¹²³

A week later, Marx would write to Liebknecht again, warning further that unless the Europeans acted to halt it, the Ottoman Empire would be forever “shackled to Russia by means of an offensive and defensive alliance.”¹²⁴

Bebel’s, Liebknecht’s, and Marx’s pro-Ottoman views were not shared by all socialists, with Heinrich Levy remonstrating in 1878 against the pro-Turkish position of leading socialists in a book-length plea for some consideration for the oppressed minorities of the Balkans, suffering at the hands of “an Asiatic military and theocratic despot state with a decadent ruling class.”¹²⁵ Levy’s plea fell on deaf ears, however, and, as late as 1896, this time during the Armenian massacres, Liebknecht, with the support of Bebel,¹²⁶ would reiterate the view that criticism of the Ottoman Empire was tantamount to support for Russia, “the cradle of European absolutism,” as well as of “the Russian-tsarist policy of conquest” that amounted to an “annihilatory struggle” (*Vernichtungskampf*) against the Turks.¹²⁷

By this time, instead of Levy it was Rosa Luxemburg who sought to overturn the pro-Ottoman tendencies of prominent German social democrats as she sought to garner support among them for the Ottoman Empire’s oppressed Christian minorities.¹²⁸ The social-democratic leadership, however, remained unwavering in their geopolitical reading of Europe’s southeast, which they felt was congruent with their party’s long-standing foreign policy. Their pro-Ottoman position, Liebknecht asserted, was entirely consistent with Marx’s demand immediately prior to the Crimean War in 1853 that socialists unstintingly support the Ottoman Empire against Russian “absolutism.”¹²⁹ Defending this long-held position, Liebknecht condescendingly addressed Luxemburg in *Vorwärts* in 1896 and directly cautioned her against sympathizing with the Armenians in a way that would destabilize the Ottoman Empire and assist the despotic Russians:

¹²³Marx to Liebknecht, in *ibid.*, 57.

¹²⁴Marx to Liebknecht, 11 Feb. 1878, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 45, *Letters 1874–79* (London, 2010), 300.

¹²⁵Heinrich Levy, *Zur orientalischen Frage oder soll die sozialistische Arbeiter-Partei türkisch werden?* (Zurich, 1878), 5.

¹²⁶For Bebel’s support of this position see Margaret Lavinia Anderson, “Down in Turkey, Far Away’: Human Rights, the Armenian Massacres, and Orientalism in Wilhelmine Germany,” *Journal of Modern History* 79/1 (2007), 80–111, at 86.

¹²⁷Wilhelm Liebknecht, “Erklärung,” *Vorwärts*, 11 Nov. 1896, 4.

¹²⁸For Luxemburg’s reply to Liebknecht see Rosa Luxemburg, “Zur Orientpolitik des ‘Vorwärts,’” *Sächsischen Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 25 Nov. 1896, 2.

¹²⁹Karl Marx, “The Real Issue in Turkey,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 12 April 1853, 4.

“Miss Rosa Luxemburg, who is of course a Polish woman, would be more fruitfully engaged if she concerned herself with the Russian atrocities in Poland and in Russia itself. Then she would not be in danger of serving, without wanting to, the cradle of European absolutism.”¹³⁰ Given the robust defense of Muslim Turkey against Christian Russia by party luminaries such as Liebknecht and Bebel between the 1870s and the 1890s, Bebel’s book defending the historical legacy of Islam and refuting the progressivist claims of Christianity seems far more consistent with social-democratic understandings of historical geopolitics than at first glance. By championing the role of Islam in the history of human progress over the *longue durée*, Bebel lent further support to the long-standing social-democratic position on the Eastern question that had resolutely stressed the necessity of a pro-Ottoman, pro-Muslim stance that offered principled opposition to the predations of an absolutist Christian Russia.

This politically charged appropriation of the religious history of the Middle East, it is worth noting, contrasts markedly with the type of carefully detailed, scholarly studies that Marchand has argued characterized the work of most German orientalist. ¹³¹ Given, too, its clear role as an intervention in the political and cultural debates of the late nineteenth century, *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode* also brings into question Rebekka Habermas’s sense that “Islam had received no special attention ... in high-profile public debates” until around 1910. ¹³² Indeed, his 1884 book offers a sense of precisely why, in 1906, Bebel would involve himself directly in the question of the clash between Christian missions and Islamic communities in Africa. As Jörg Hausteine has recently made clear, in the March 1906 Reichstag debate on whether to support Christian or Muslim colonial schools in East Africa, Bebel not only insisted that “the Mohammedan element is the superior cultural element there,”¹³³ and that Islam and Islamic schools were “the only valuable thing and defensible aspect of German colonialism,” defending in the process “the utility of Islam in the cultural evolution of Africans.”¹³⁴ He also included some rare words of praise for Kaiser Wilhelm II’s policy of “holding aloft the flag of Islam” in order to win the sympathy of the Muslim world for Germany.¹³⁵

Such sentiments are entirely in keeping with Bebel’s 1884 work that insisted that any attempt to foist a religion upon a society culturally unsuited to it (as he argued colonizing Christian missionaries abroad sought to do) would guarantee that the new religion would not gain any traction unless new material realities intervened that altered this cultural state. ¹³⁶ In this sense, Bebel’s generally positive assessment of the contribution of Islam to world history in both 1884 and 1906 anticipated the later, similarly sanguine, conclusions by orientalist such as Carl H. Becker, who argued in 1910 that Islam was essentially a benign Asiatic form of Hellenism

¹³⁰Liebknecht, “Erklärung,” 11 Nov. 1896.

¹³¹Marchand, *German Orientalism*.

¹³²Habermas, “Debates on Islam in Imperial Germany,” 235.

¹³³August Bebel, 13 March 1906, *Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, 1982.

¹³⁴Jörg Hausteine, *Islam in German East Africa, 1885–1918: A Genealogy of Colonial Religion* (Cham, 2023), 168.

¹³⁵August Bebel, 13 March 1906, *Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, 1982.

¹³⁶Bebel, *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode*, 4–5.

that had played an important historical role in the cultural development of Africa.¹³⁷

Like Becker and others involved in these later discussions of the *Islamfrage*, Bebel had studied scholarly works on the Islamic past in the 1880s in order to contribute to immediate, contemporary German political questions. For Bebel, this offered the grounds for an attack on the cultural and religious chauvinism of European Christians and underpinned a reassessment of the status of the Islamic world in European political estimations. Bebel's depiction of the salutary historical and cultural effects of Islam not only informed socialist attitudes towards the Ottoman Empire, but also antedated some of the broader themes of later discussions of the *Islamfrage* in colonial circles that questioned Islam's historical and contemporary role as a cultural force in the extra-European world.¹³⁸

Conclusion

Bebel's sense of the indispensable historical role of Islam and of the Arab Empire, as expressed in *Die mohamedanisch-arabische Kulturperiode*, is in some ways a departure from his professed rejection of all religions and his otherwise fiercely guarded anti-imperialist credentials. It seems strange too that the author of an influential book championing the rights of women would also seek to explain away as a late cultural import putatively "oriental" cultural phenomena such as harems while blaming foreign women for diluting the martial vigor of the virile Arab warrior race.

Yet, in other ways, Bebel's history of Islam and of the first three caliphates is consistent with his broader literary production and political preoccupations. The work is first and foremost a sustained attack on the cultural chauvinism and historical assumptions of Christian Europe. By proffering a world history that positioned Islam as the real civilizational link between the culturally flourishing world of Greco-Roman antiquity and the nascent modernity of the Renaissance, Bebel could offer a historical lineage for historical progress (including the growth of socialism) that bypassed the church and its contemporary advocates such as Hohoff. Dispensing with Christianity as a cultural force, the Islamic world could emerge, under his reading, as a direct forerunner to the Enlightenment tradition and the vision of socialist modernity that Bebel and his fellow socialists served.

This progressivist world history, dismissive of Christianity's claims to world-historical importance and emphatic in its defense of Islam, might be termed an affirmative orientalism, one constructed by Bebel through a partial and partisan reading of works that brought to life an Islamic world he had never personally encountered. This intellectual engagement with the East offered him the opportunity to create a radically revisionist history of progress that positioned nineteenth-century Western Europe as the heir of an earlier Islamic Enlightenment. It also provided a historical basis for Bebel's argument in support of the Ottoman Empire, as the home of a religion that he believed was, historically speaking, more tolerant and

¹³⁷Carl Heinrich Becker, "Staat und Mission in der Islampolitik," in *Verhandlungen des deutschen Kolonialkongresses 1910 zu Berlin* (Berlin, 1910), 638–51; Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 361–7.

¹³⁸Bebel's book appears not have been referenced in the debates within the colonial milieu regarding the so-called *Islamfrage*. See Habermas, "Debates on Islam in Imperial Germany," 231–53.

progressive than European Christianity, and a state worthy of protection from the retrograde absolutism of the Orthodox tsarist Russian Empire. Bebel's history of Islam, that is, was a semi-factual, polemically framed metahistorical refutation of Christian Eurocentrism that offered him an Islamic lineage for the West's historical development and an explanation for the deeper historical origins of the progressive socialist movement. Affirmative in its orientalism, it rejected the idea that religious solidarity was a sufficient lens through which to see the past and the present.

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