



Marxism and Religion

Feminism and the soul of secularism

18 April 2011, by **Rahila Gupta**

Marieme H  lie-Lucas, founder of Women Living Under Muslim laws (WLUML), speaking at a conference on 'Secularism, Racism and the Politics of Belonging' organised by the University of East London and Runnymede Trust in January [1], posed an important question: in the face of so much discrimination, why do women of migrant Muslim-descent still choose to support secularism? She was, of course, speaking about the the North African community in France, particularly Algerians, who had fled the rise of religious fundamentalism at home. However, it is no less valid a question to pose about minority women in the UK despite their very different histories. It is also important because it shifts the focus from those women who use their religio-political identity to challenge racism to those who recognise the dangers of that strategy.

As much of state policy constructs minority communities in terms of their religious identity, it is a question of particular interest to Southall Black Sisters (SBS) who have resisted religious categorisation in their provision of a secular service to women escaping domestic violence. Their new report, *Cohesion, Faith and Gender* [2] which will be launched on 16 March explores precisely this question through in-depth interviews with women of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian backgrounds who use the centre. For those who associate

secular ideals with Western values, it may come as something of a surprise that all but one of the women did not want religious authorities to shape their lives. Whilst the majority of women were believers, they wanted a clear separation of their spiritual needs from their social needs. Most felt a primary loyalty to their gender identity and found that any attempt to assert their rights had met with the disapproval of religious leaders. They welcomed an inclusive and secular space such as the one provided by SBS because they carried memories of the gendered, caste-based and religious discrimination they had faced in their countries of origin.

To some extent public policy is influenced by the public debate. Secularism, as a concept, appears to be in danger from both the left and the right. The growing popularity of the term, secular fundamentalism, an oxymoron if ever there was one, is part of the continuing attempt to discredit it. Although secularism was traditionally the preserve of the left, some on the left have abandoned this territory, in the face of rising anti-Muslim racism and the state's War on Terror, and developed an anti-racist politics that gives succour to religious extremism rather than challenging it. The marches against the war in Iraq, for example, that were organised by the Stop the War coalition in which the major partners were the Socialist Workers' Party and the Muslim

Association of Britain, often used slogans like 'We are all Muslims'. Rallies started with prayers from the podium! This is not the way we tackle 'islamophobia', certainly not by squeezing our public secular spaces.

Similarly, the alliance of anti-EDL (English Defence League) forces in June 2010 in Tower Hamlets, which included Respect, SWP and the East London Mosque, illustrated very neatly the capitulation of the left to the fascists within while organising against the fascists without. When a member of Women Against Fundamentalism challenged one of the organisers, an ex-Respect member, on the make-up of the alliance, he dismissed her reservations as a counsel of perfection. The only threat that he could see was from the white fascists, he was not interested in the complex and complicated way in which Islamic fundamentalist forces were vying for power and for the leadership of the anti-racist/anti fascist movement in Tower Hamlets.

There are also attempts by academics to chip away at the theoretical basis of secularism. Haleh Afshar, an ex-Marxist, Muslim feminist academic and member of the House of Lords, wants to 'problematise' the notion that secularism is 'an avenue towards equality' [3]. She believes that adopting it in order to be inclusive has not worked because 'people of faith feel excluded by the

faithlessness of society'. This is a particularly enervating construct of 'people of faith' and does not reflect the lived reality of the women who come to SBS. In any case, people of faith are likely to be at greater danger from each other i.e. from different faiths rather than the faithless and would therefore benefit from a level playing field. Secularism is not about hostility to religion but about not privileging faith over non-faith.

Further constraints on secularism are placed by those who argue that religion is not a matter of choice but should be considered to be as primordial a part of one's identity as ethnicity; a position that was articulated by AbdoolKarim Vakil of King's College at the UEL conference. If religion is not a belief system, chosen freely, but seen as an embedded part of one's identity, then any critique of it becomes offensive and is collapsed into the same category as racism. As Haleh Afshar puts it, 'If what you say belittles me, if what you say disempowers me...then we can't be equal, we can't have the same rights'. But there's an unacknowledged substitution of 'me' for 'my beliefs'.

Vakil also questions the neutrality of

the secular space as a way of undermining it: because 'it is basically the way the state regulates a space in which the differences that are acceptable can manifest itself and differences that are unacceptable are excluded', and because that entails 'the disciplining of certain subjectivities and their acceptability for the public space' he argues that it cannot be neutral. But does it matter? Especially if it means disciplining of certain subjectivities such as misogyny or homophobia. He appears to further condemn 'the secular as a thickened state that's already a sedimentation of our relations, including over the very conceptualisation of what is religious, what is secular, what is political.' But as these concepts are continually contested, it is a dynamic process, a churning and not a setting.

At the far-right end of the spectrum, secularism has been hijacked as a way of asserting national identity. In France, a constitutionally secular country, Bloc Identitaire, to the right of Le Pen's National Front, embraces secularism as a way of 'othering' Muslims. Marieme Hélie - Lucas reported that in parts of Paris where Muslims pray on the streets outside their mosques, the Bloc holds provocative picnics with wine and pork on the same streets. In the UK,

the Stop Islamification of Europe (SIOE) group also seems to be supporting secularism when it argues that, 'SIOE wants all religions to be treated in law the same way as political parties, with no special legal protection.' However, their secularism is implicitly and explicitly defined as an Islam-free space, a position shared by the more sophisticated though equally racist EDL. A similar attempt to assert national identity by the BNP and the English Democrats takes them down the opposite route: identifying with Christian values in Britain, constitutionally a Christian country.

With the resurgence of religion, secularism is bound to be contested territory. The women who come to SBS to rebuild their lives testify to the importance of secular spaces. One woman said, 'I would like my views represented by women, not by community and religious leaders...If religious leaders bring their laws where can we run to? There will be more suicides, depression, castaways, conversions. It would be the biggest disaster.' Among feminists, it tends to be only some minority women scrambling for the soul of secularism. It is time for all feminists to muck in.

8 March 2011

The rise of Europe's religious right

18 April 2011, by **Sophie in 't Veld**

In England, the head of state is also titular governor of the church and bishops are members of the House of Lords. Finland and Denmark still have an official state religion, and in Greece up until recently, the Orthodox church was in charge of the public civil status register. Everywhere, churches maintain a firm grasp on education, the care and medical sectors, and the media. Churches have formal and informal positions of exception by law, which are sometimes used to refuse public services such as abortion or same-sex marriage, or to evade

secular authority in cases of child abuse.

Europeans may take a sceptical view of political leaders who are too quick to express religious faith in public (while in the US an atheist president is virtually inconceivable), yet churches have a greater influence on politics than many people realise. The Vatican has a special position due to the highly centralised organisation and its status as a state.

Worryingly, religion is also increasingly making its presence felt

in the corridors of the European Union - even though the EU was designed as a strictly secular project. The treaty of Lisbon includes article 17 on the dialogue of the EU institutions with churches and non-confessional organisations. This forms the basis for an annual summit of religious leaders with the leaders of the EU institutions. Secular organisations are largely ignored.

José Manuel Barroso, the European Commission president, and Herman Van Rompuy, the European Council

president, have special high-level cabinet officials whose job it is to maintain relations with churches. The EU has official diplomatic relations with the Vatican. The Conference of Catholic Bishops is one of the most powerful lobby groups in Brussels.

Other religions also have representatives in Brussels, but they are less influential than the Roman Catholic church. Their collective influence is not to be underestimated, however. In addition, religions have influence from the pulpit, if necessary by threatening excommunication if politicians adopt standpoints that are at odds with official doctrine.

We are witnessing the emergence of the European equivalent to the “religious right” in the US. Areas affected by this rise include women’s rights, gay rights and sexual and reproductive health rights as well as healthcare (such as contraception, abortion, condoms and IVF). Freedom of expression is also affected, generally in the form of laws against blasphemy. Freedom of religion is often conceived as a collective right of religion to exempt itself from the law, particularly the EU fundamental rights.

Religious lobbies are, for example, highly active against the broad European anti-discrimination directive that is in the works. Under intense pressure from religious lobbies, the European commission was initially reluctant to table a directive by which

discrimination against gay people could be combated.

Invoking religious freedom, the lobbies are negotiating exceptions to the ban on discrimination, including discrimination against gay people, or for the right of confessional schools to discriminate. In this way, discriminatory practices are effectively being written in stone, while the principle of equality is one of the explicit pillars of European unification.

The European commission scarcely dares to take action when member states invoke religious freedom to disregard EU-fundamental rights. For example, in the case of Lithuania, when a law was passed that bans the “promotion of homosexuality”, effectively rendering gay people invisible.

The controversial Hungarian media law also includes a paragraph of this type, which states that the media must show respect for marriage and the institution of family, whereby the government aims to constitutionally enshrine the definition of marriage as being between a man and woman. The new Hungarian media supervisor has already qualified public expressions of homosexuality as in conflict with these standards, and therefore potentially punishable under the new law. Discrimination of this type is clearly in conflict with the ban on discrimination in the EU treaties.

In the asylum and immigration

legislation, religious lobbies are advocating for a conservative definition of “family” for purposes of “family reunification”, or against the recognition of homosexuality as grounds for seeking asylum.

The fight against HIV/Aids and the reduction of maternal mortality also form targets for the religious lobbies, which are attempting to impose their own sexual morals such as a ban on condoms.

This is abuse of freedom of religion, which was intended to protect the individual against oppression and coercion on the part of the regime. Religious organisations do not determine where the boundaries of fundamental rights should be set. The EU fundamental rights are currently in the process of finding increasing expression in legislation. It is unacceptable for this legislation to be biased according to a strict religious morality. It is high time for the secular nature of the European project to be re-emphasised. Europe doesn’t do God.

Perhaps it is time to replace “freedom of religion” by freedom of beliefs or conscience, an individual right that can be claimed by 500 million Europeans in all of their diversity.

by Sophie in 't Veld

From The Guardian, 17 March 2011:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentis..>

Three discourses on Political Islam in the Middle East

4 April 2011, by **Farooq Sulehria**

Many discourses have emerged with regard to the phenomenal rise of political Islam, also referred to as Islamic fundamentalism, or *integrisme* in French. These discourses, however, are often found lacking when it comes

to the political economy of ‘Islamism’ and consequences of successful takeover of state power (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Sudan, Afghanistan) by Islamists. Either the collusion between imperialism and

fundamentalism is stressed, though justifiably, or the failure of Arab nationalists/left is pointed out in such discourses.

Chomsky, for instance, in a dialogue

with Lebanese intellectual Gilbert Achcar calls political Islam “mainly a reaction to forces of unrest in the world’. With regard to “main source of unrest in today’s world’, Achcar and Chomsky emphasise “it’s the behavior of the US government’ (Chomsky and Achcar 2007: 27). Many on the left emphasize the same point.

However, unlike Chomsky and Achcar, this line of argument---popular among left circles--- does not explain the fundamentalists’ inability to outdo progressives in the 1950s and 1960s as “forces of unrest’ were even active in the Middle East back then. But most importantly, it implies as if al-Qaida will lay down arms once “forces of unrest’ cease spreading unrest. Islamists want to pursue their Jihadist agenda till the Judgement Day whether there are any forces spreading unrest or not.

In recent years Huntington’s “clash of civilisations’ thesis has been most often applied by the right-wing mainly, to political Islam in the Middle East. But long before Huntington, Bernard Lewis in 1964 was arguing that Arab hostility to Washington was not due to US’ association with Zionism. He thought Soviet Union escaped this hostility despite her support to the creation of Israel. Lewis thought a better explanation could be found “if we view the present discontents of the Middle East not as a conflict between the states or nations, but as a clash between civilisations. The “Great Debate’, as Gibbon called it, between Christendom and Islam has been going on, in one form or another, since the Middle Ages” (Yaqub 2004: 9).

Samuel P. Huntington amplified “clash of civilisations’ phrase in an article for Foreign Policy while spectacular emergence of bin Laden has reinforced this thesis. According to Yaqub, “problem with the “clash of civilizations” thesis... lies in its glib dismissal of precisely those concrete grievances. For Arab nationalists during the Cold War (and for Islamists more recently), opposition to Zionism and Western imperialism was a genuine cause of anti-U.S. sentiment, not merely a cover for deeper antipathies” (Yaqub 2004: 9-10).

Halliday attributes the rise of Political

Islam to “the character of states’. He thinks in countries such as Iran, Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, political Islam “has taken the form of a revolt against the state’ and a “strong modernising state has been challenged by movements of social and political opposition’ However, al-Qaida “has arisen and been sustained in countries with very weak states’. He cites Afghanistan and the larger northern part of Yemen as two such examples. “In such cases it was not revolt against a modernizing state but rather the historical absence of a state’ (Halliday 2002a: 41).

Of late, Pakistan has become a sanctuary for al-Qaida where “historical absence of state’ cannot be justified. Also, under the communists, writ of state was established almost all over Afghanistan despite U.S. intervention. In case of both Afghanistan and Yemen, one sees fall of left government coinciding with rise of fundamentalists and an aggressive foreign intervention. And appeasement of fundamentalists. Also, mere the absence of state does not explain the whole problem unless we analyse the alternative societies, built by fundamentalists, providing social services which in fact should be state’s responsibility.

Barber points to a global condition that increasingly will constitute “one McWorld tied together by communications, information, entertainment, and Commerce’. And to which only effective form of resistance has thus far been austere, pre-modern ethos of the Jihadists, who have acquired growing influence among Muslims worldwide (Barber 2000:21-6).

Barber may sound fashionable but Middle East has been penetrated by the forces of imperialist globalisation for over a century. Barber’s thesis does not explain why only last three decades have seen rise of religious right, not merely in Middle East but in the heart of globalisation itself, the USA, Christian right has emerged with a bang.

However, to avoid Tristram Shandy of a discussion in which hero of the book is not born until half-way through the

book, let us first define the term political Islam.

Understanding political Islam

By definition, “fundamentalism implies a return to Islamic roots, which in, some cases, means a challenge to centuries of scholarly interpretation of those sources’ (Ciment 1997:62).

Achcar, who prefers the term “fundamentalism’ says the “term “fundamentalism” generally points not only to the literal interpretation of religious scriptures but also to the desire of imposing it on society and government, and everyone abide by these rules... it’s a global phenomenon, not something related to Islam alone. Jewish fundamentalism, Hindu fundamentalism, Catholic, Protestant, etc’ (Chomsky and Achcar 2007: 34). Halliday thinks that ‘fundamentalist’ may be partly understood by looking at its opposite, i.e. ‘modernist’ (Halliday 2002a:53).

It is in view of these definitions one can understand three narratives developed below. The case of Saudi Arabia, modern-era’s first fundamentalist state, personifies all these narratives.

1. Imperialism is the mother of fundamentalism

On 5 January 1957, U.S. president Eisenhower asked the Congress for a resolution authorising him to pledge increased military and economic aid, even direct US protection, to any Gulf nation willing to acknowledge the communist threat. Two months later, Congress passed the resolution universally known as Eisenhower Doctrine. The Doctrine was, in fact, aimed at Arab nationalism as much” (Yaqub 2004:1-2). To save Middle East from communism, Washington turned to political Islam.

To check any movement in this direction Washington explored the possibilities of building up King Saud as a counter weight to Nasser. The king was a logical choice owing to his anti-communism. Saud obliged too. He

visited Iraq. Both monarchs agreed to forget past enmities against Nasser (Madawi 2002:116). When he visited the USA, in January 1957, Eisenhower departed from normal custom by going to airport to receive Saud. On his return, Saud extended rent-free lease of Dhahran base for another five years (Halliday 2002b:54). US' courting of political Islam against Bolshevism was in line with preceding British colonialism.

It was a Russian Jew, Joseph Rosenthal who set communism on foot in Egypt but his efforts were assisted by the British General Staff Intelligence Department which succeeded in August 1919 in obtaining from the grand mufti, Shaikh Muhammad Bakhit, a fatwa against Bolshevism. The effect was directly contrary to what it had anticipated. Some newspapers, like the Ahali, a mouthpiece of the Fabian Salamah Musa, and the nationalist Wadi-en-Nil, attacked the fatwa and defended the Bolsheviks (Batatu 2004:374-377).

Similarly, in Iraq during the unsettled years after the Wathbah of 1948 and the Intifada of 1952, when Iraqi Communist Party emerged as a mass party, religion was invoked to stem the advance of communism. Significantly the initiative came from the representatives of English power. "Communism", wrote an intelligence officer, in a letter to Iraq's secret police dated April 20, 1949, "will never be completely eradicated by what we may term 'police methods' alone". Among the 'corrective' methods recommended by Ray was what he called 'the religious approach.'

Apparently in the pursuit of this line - on October 6, 1953 - Sir John Troutbeck, the English ambassador to Iraq, made direct contact with the chief Mujtahid, Kashif ul-Ghata. The ambassador impressed upon the shaiikh that "the combating of communism is dependent upon the awakening of the ulama and the spiritual leaders" (Batatu 2004: 694).

Eisenhower's doctrine was put to test in Jordan first where nationalists were brutally crushed, with Muslim Brothers on monarchy's side, by Shah Hussain. Ever since, civil liberties

have been curtailed in Jordan. Eisenhower, however, applauded at the time Hussain's "gallant fight to eject subversive elements from his country and government" (Yaqub 2004: 135).

Earlier, in 1951 the Iranian parliament had voted to nationalise the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Shortly afterwards, Mohammad Mosadeq, main architect of nationalisation was elected prime minister. Eisenhower administration was suspicious of Mosadeq's ties to Moscow. Hence, he was overthrown in a coup staged by CIA (Yaqub 2004: 29-30).

As usual, Ayotollah Kashani was siding with coup plotters. For his services, the CIA operative in Iran dispatched \$10,000 to Ayotollah (Kinzer 2003:157-178).

These historical references will help, at least partly, explain how imperialism fathered Hamas, Hezbollah, Mehdi Militia, al-Qaida and Iranian Ayatollahs. Edward Said, for instance, points out: "The only Palestinian university not established with Palestinian funds is Gaza's Islamic (Hamas) University, started by Israel, to undermine the PLO during the Intifada." (Said 1997, p xxxix).

Yasser Arafat once affirmed, "Hamas is a creature of Israel which at the time of Prime Minister [Yitzhak] Shamir gave it money and more than 700 institutions among them schools, universities and mosques" (Napoleoni 2003:70).

Hizbollah's rise is often attributed to Iran. An equally important fact is that Israel, according to Achcar, "very deliberately disarmed all groups that were based on secular ideologies with a multireligious membership - communist or nationalist or other. And they didn't disarm communalist groups, whether Shiite or Druze, not to mention their Christian allies" (Chomsky and Achcar 2007:29).

The case of al-Qaida is too known to deserve space here. A symbiosis of US-Saudi-Pakistani spy agencies, al-Qaida was armed, trained and funded to counter Red Army in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

2. Colonels and communists

In the 1950s, Middle East had been convulsed by Arab nationalism and communism. Aided by communists, nationalists tasted their first victory in Egypt. On 23 July 1952, Free Officers seized control of the government in a nearly bloodless coup. Monarchy was abolished. They promised to stamp out corruption, compel Britain to withdraw from Egypt, and restore nation's dignity. Muhammad Naguib was the official leader but real power rested with Colonel Gamal Nasser. Truman administration was enthusiastic about the change thinking the new government would not whip up anti-British sentiment in the region. In late 1954, Nasser emerged as public leader and his Pan-Arab philosophy (anti Zionism, anti imperialism, social justice and neutrality) took final shape by 1956 (Yaqub 2004:26-34). He introduced land reforms, built union with Syria in 1958 and lent initial support to Iraqi revolution in 1958 (Ali 2002, p 95-107) where the receipts from oil, 1941-1958, had greatly added to the financial power of the Iraqi state. In consequence, the state became in large measure economically autonomous from society enhancing its potential for despotism. Simultaneously, oil royalties made the state dangerously dependent on oil companies (Batatu 2004: 34).

In the 1940s, communism became a factor in the life of Iraq. Even the right-wing Independence parties in the 1950s grumbled in a Marxist way (Batatu 2004: 465-466).

On 14 July 1958, the Free Officers, led by Qasem, seized power and declared Iraq a republic. Soon after the revolution, factional fight and a propaganda war against Cairo broke out. Nasserites led by Abdul Salam Aref, attempted a coup. Pro-Qasem troops, aided by communists, defeated the coup. In October, Bathists attempted to assassinate Qasem (Ali 2004:71-80). Qasem, now dependent on communists, went for some socio-economic reforms nonetheless.

Land reforms were introduced (1959-61), restricting the ownership (56 % land was owned by 3,000 landlords). Tax on rich was hiked (40% to 60 %)

on incomes above 20,000 dinars. Death duties and inheritance taxes were introduced. Rent-controls were introduced. Working hours were regulated. A ten-thousand housing project was introduced in Baghdad (later named as Saddam City). In 1963, Aref and Bathists captured power in a coup. Qasem was executed. In collaboration with CIA, Bathists vilified and killed many communists (Ali 2004:82-88).

Bath was ditched by Salam but they regained power in a coup in 1968. By that time, Bath in Syria had already consolidated itself in the power. However, in Syria, Bath factions kept fighting each other until in November 1970, Asad took control of Syria which made Bath founder Michel Aflaq flee the country (Ali 2004:109-110). Bath as a secular, nationalist party was founded in 1943 by Michel Aflaq and Salah Bitar, both Syrians (Ali 2002:111).

On coming to power, Iraqi Bath repressed communists, Shia, Kurds and every possible opposition. In 1990, Bathist Iraq invaded another neighbouring country, Kuwait, leading to UN sanctions which crippled Iraqi economy. In fact, war with Iran in 1980s had already broken Iraqi economy (Ali 2004:103-143).

Bath rule proved a nightmare for Arabs of Iraq. In post-Saddam period, when elections were held, Shia fundamentalists easily won the elections as Saddam had rooted out every secular opposition. Mosque was the only centre available for clandestine activity. Bath proved incapable of uniting Iraq and Syria. Hence, their Arab nationalism was hardly credible (Ali 2004:112).

The case of Iraq is not different from Egypt, or any other Arab country, where nationalists seized power. In Feb 1958, Syria and Egypt announced federation. Yemen and Lebanon also showed interest to join. But the federation came to an end abruptly (Ali 2002:106-112) shattering nationalist dream of Arab unity. As regards land reforms, in 1952, some measures were announced. Ownership was restricted to 300 feddans. Ten years down the line, only two million peasants had benefitted as only 10 %

of the expropriated land could be distributed. As far as workers were concerned, the repression of strikes in 1952 had set the course in 1952. Long before Syed Qutab, two trade union leaders were hanged (in 1952) for organising strike (Ali 2002: 96).

However, it was suicidal involvement in Yemen, against Saudi Arabia, which greatly contributed to Egypt's defeat in 1967 blitzkrieg with Israel and delivered a final blow to Nasserite politics.

With Nasser's death, Anwar Sadaat came to power who in turn, after his assassination, was succeeded by Hosni Mubarak. Though Nasser-era's reforms were rolled back yet the democratic liberties snatched by Nasser are yet to be restored.

What Batatu (2004:461) observed about Iraqi nationalists, holds true for them across Middle East:

"By withholding from the people their constitutional right to organize themselves in parties and trade unions, it took the heart out of the national movement. You cannot grapple with the mightiest empire in the world by ignoring the power of the masses".

3. Jihad by petro-dollars

According to Napoleoni, "Islamic organisations, many of which are linked to armed groups, can draw from a pool of money ranging from \$ 5 billion to \$ 16 billion, the Saudi government alone donates \$ 10 billion via the ministry of Religious Works every year" (Napoleoni 2003:123).

Saudi financing goes much beyond Middle East. For instance, in Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), a major beneficiary of Saudi largesse, "runs a huge network of social services, including 20 Islamic institutions, 140 secondary schools, eight madrassas and a \$ 300, 000-plus medical mission that includes mobile clinics, ambulance service and blood bank" (Mir:147). The LeT headquarters, built at the cost of Rs. 50 million, houses "a garment factory, an iron-foundry, a wood-works factory, a swimming pool and three residential colonies" (Mir:147). Who has foot the bill? The

LeT chief says a "Saudi trader, Ahmed, contributed Rs. 10 million" while "another Saudi Sheikh, donated more millions for the construction of Dawa Model school" at LeT headquarters (Mir:148).

About Saudi regime, Hiro informs: "Its huge financial backing to the Afghan guerrillas fighting the Marxist regime in Kabul is universally known. What is not known widely is its cash subsidies to right-wing groups in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia and Maldives Islands. For many years it financed the Eritrean insurgents against the Marxist regime in Ethiopia. And in non-Arab Africa Saudi funds went to Cameron, Chad, Gabon, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Uganda. In Central America, it funded the anti-leftist Contra guerrillas in Nicaragua" (Hiro 2002:147).

Saudis are not alone in sustaining Islamist groups. Iran's support for Hezbollah has been reported in media. The oil-rich Sheikdom, Kuwait, only in 1990 contributed \$ 60 million to Hamas kitty, at a time when Hamas was being pampered to counter PLO (Kepel 2000:157). Hamas has benefited from Saudi generosity as well as from Iran. According to Napoleoni: "Hamas budget in the occupied territories is estimated at \$ 70 million, of which about 85 percent comes from abroad, the rest is raised among Palestinians in the occupied territories. Though it still receives about \$20-30 million a year from Iran and various ad hoc donations from Saudi Arabia (in April 2002 a telethon in Saudi Arabia raised \$ 150 million for the Palestinians under siege in the occupied territories), more and more money is raised through Palestinians expatriates, private donors in Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich Gulf states.

In 1998, after being freed by the Israelis, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, set off on a four-month tour of Arab capitals. He was welcomed as a hero and collected donations over \$ 300 million" (Napoleoni 2003:71).

The petro-dollars also translate into jobs for millions of workers from across the Muslim world. Take, for instance, the case of Pakistan "in the single year 1983, the money sent

home by Gulf emigrants amounted to \$ 36 million compared with a total of \$ 375 million given to Pakistan in foreign aid" (Kepel 2000:71).

Egypt is another Muslim country depending on remittances from Gulf countries. At one time, three million Egyptian workers were working in Gulf countries sending home \$ 4 billion (Hiro 2002: 85).

Through this process, millions of men "had during their short-term contractual employment in Saudi Arabia, been exposed to conservative Islamic views" (Hiro 2002:87). Though these jobs offer a temporary relief for regimes threatened by fast growing populations but this relief has strings attached. The countries exporting work force to Gulf have to open their gates to Wahabism that arrives disguised as mosques, madrassas, blood banks and charities as well as investment companies and banks. In certain countries like Sudan and Egypt, "Islamic banking" emanating from Gulf has greatly contributed to the rise of political Islam.

The Faisal Islamic Bank of Egypt, founded in 1977, is a typical case. Its managing director was a Saudi prince. According to Kepel: "In Egypt, these institutions were at first encouraged by those in power who saw in them an opportunity to win backing of devout middle class. They reasoned that if that class placed its money in Islamic banks and made substantial profits, it would be unlikely to join the radical opposition led by Islamists. Instead, members of the middle class would be economically integrated and would find it in their interest to perpetuate a political system that allowed them to enrich themselves.

But in 1988 the Egyptian state called a halt to this process, fearing that it would allow the Islamist movement to build up a war chest and hand the Brothers financial independence. Consequently, a campaign was launched against the banks in the press, in the same newspapers that had previously published page after page of advertisements on their behalf, as well as interviews with managing directors and fatwas favourable to them" (Kepel 2000:279-80). In 1993 the Saudis

offered money to Mubarak's government on the condition that it would encourage the Islamisation of the Egyptian society. One Saudi organisation, al-Rayan, paid Egyptian female students 15 Egyptian pounds (about \$ 5) a month pocket money to take the veil (Napoleoni 2003:119).

In 1980-85, Islamic investment throughout the Muslim world underwent a spectacular expansion, leading to creation of hundreds or so Islamic investment companies offering annual returns of around 25 percent (Kepel 2000: 279-80).

Napoleoni points out two other banks: "al-Barakaat is a Somali-based international financial conglomerate with branches in 40 countries, including the U.S.

Every year, until September 2001 when its funds were frozen by the U.S. Authorities, the US office wired at least \$ 500 million in international profits to the central exchange office located in United Arab Emirates. Of these revenues, bin Laden's network received a flat 5 per cent, equivalent to about \$ 25 million. Al-Taqwa is a bank with strong ties with Islamist groups. It was set up in Nassau in 1987 with \$ 50 million as capital, of which two-thirds came from Islamist fundamentalist organisations, one of the most important share holders was the Muslim brotherhood al-Islah of Kuwait. Among other activities, it has financed the political campaigns of Islamist candidates in the municipal elections in Egypt. The bank operatives in more than 30 countries" (Napoleoni 2003:160).

The case of Saudi Arabia

In January 1902, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, not merely wrestled back Riyadh from rival-clan, Rashid, but re-established Saud dynasty, for the third time (Holden and Johns 1981:1-7).

True, the camel riding Sauds have become a family of jet-setters, their commitment to Wahabism, a revivalist cult attributed to 18th century preacher Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahab, has not foundered. A revivalist

zealot from oasis-town of Uyayna, ibn Wahab was appalled to see Arabia sunk into corruption. The solution, he concluded, would be a return to, by force if necessary, puritan Islam (Lacy 1984:59).

Present Saudi state would not have come easily had ibn Saud not courted army of Ikhwan (Brothers). Started in 1912 (Holden and Johns 1981:69), Ikhwan were Bedouins who accepted the fundamentals of Wahabism and abandoned their life to live in the Hijrah built by ibn Saud. Ikhwan would flog all persons who were caught procrastinating in their religious duties (Madawi 2002: 57-59).

However, British subsidies also played a key role in defeating Saudi rivals (Madawi 2002: 43). When ibn Saud had subdued all the rivals, Ikhwan began to become a challenge. As many as one hundred Ikhwan settlements by 1926 across the country and ability to mobilise 50000 to 60000 armed men, they were a threat indeed. Thus, in a series of battles, Ikhwan were defeated in next two years. Again, motorised transport provided by the British proved a great help in subduing Ikhwan (Halliday 2002b:57). British Royal Air force also played a role (Madawi 2002: 69).

With these victories, ibn Saud on 22 September 1932, proclaimed Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Madawi 2002:71). Islamic fundamentalism for the first time in modern history had built itself a state. By the time, puritans subdued the country, they had staged public executions of 40,000 people and carried out 350,000 amputations: in a country of four million (Unger 2004: 68). On 14 February 1945, came the historic meeting between Roosevelt and ibn Saud, during this meeting oil-for-security relationship was initiated (Unger 2004:3).

On 9 November 1953, ibn Saud died. Coronation of crown prince Saud was smooth. (Madawi 2002:76-109). However, in 1954, there was an isolated mutiny in army. Communist-inspired pamphlets were found circulating in Hasa in 1955. Anti-monarchy slogans were even found on palace walls in Riyadh. In 1956, Aramco workers were on strike for three days. Strike was crushed

mercilessly, 200 were arrested while three activists were beaten to death (Holden and Johns 1981: 183-88). Those were the days when Nasser's Arab nationalism and socialist ideas had caught hold of Arab imagination. Saudi Arabia was no exception.

When in September 1956, Nasser visited Riyadh (Madawi 200:116), in the run up to Suez war, thousands turned up to welcome him. Reluctantly, during the Suez crisis, for the first time Saudi oil was used as a weapon. This was Saud's last major decision. By March 1958, power was passed to crown prince Feisal under pressure from the USA (Halliday 2002b:55).

Feisal introduced some social reforms. Slavery was abolished. Girls' education was stressed. Television was introduced in 1965. However, Feisal deliberately prevented armed forces from becoming strong (Halliday 2002b:56).

Eclipsed by Nasserism and handicapped by empty exchequer, Saudi dynasty remained marginalised in Arab world until late 1960s. However, six-day Arab-Israel war, proved a landmark by ushering the fall of nationalists and heralding fundamentalism's rise.

Two factors played a decisive role: nationalists' failure to bring about meaningful social and political change. Secondly, an unheard of petro-dollars rush. Between 1965 and 1975, Saudi GDP rose from 10.4 billion riyal to 164.53 billion riyals (Madawi 2003:120).

Saudi Arabia was earning more money than it could absorb enabling Feisal to lavishly increase disbursement of government revenues, stimulating business activity and benefitting merchants. Middle class saw a chance in the system. Petrodollars were not merely transforming desert's social and architectural outlook, emerging billionaires were forging new ties with global capital.

As the petro-dollars poured in over next twenty years, roughly eighty-four thousand 'high-net-worth' Saudis invested a staggering \$ 860 billion in American companies' (Unger

2004:28). Texas-based Bush family greatly benefitted from Saudi investments (Unger 2004:295-98). Oil assigned a new role to Saudis in international politics. Oil weapon used during Arab-Israeli war in 1973 enhanced Saudi image as champion of Arab cause. It, however, annoyed Washington. Kissinger in January 1975 threatened using military force if faced with "some actual strangulation of industrialised world" as a result of oil embargo (Holden and Johns 1981: 373).

This US-Saudi friction was temporary. It in fact proved a chance for rethinking. Already, in March 1974, Saudi threat to leave OPEC was pivotal in keeping prices low (Madawi 2002: 141), demonstrating Saudi commitment to imperialism.

On March 25, 1975 Feisal was killed. His brother Khalid became king. When he was enthroned, economy was doing wonders. By 1975, per capita income was \$6,806 million. Second Development Plan envisaged an expenditure at the breathtaking figure of \$141,000 (Holden and Johns 1981: 390-96). During Khalid's reign 1975-82, contradictions between Islamic facade and affluence started unraveling. Two events symbolised it. Mishaal, a prince, eloped with a lover, Muhalla. They were caught while escaping from Saudi Arabia. Both were beheaded. On 20 November 1979, Grand Mosque was taken hostage by armed men led by Juhaiman bin Muhammad Utaibi. His brother-in-law Abdullah al-Qahtani announced in microphone that he was the expected Mehdi. The bloody drama costing hundreds of lives ended on December 5 as Juhaiman's band surrendered or was wiped out (Holden and Johns 1981: 511-26).

Regionally, Saudis played an even important role as US ally. They lavishly funded Iraq against Iran in its war. Saudi financial aid amounted to \$25.7 billion (Madawi 2002:157).

They financed Mujahedeen fighting Red Army in Afghanistan. In the 1980s, Fahad succeeded Khalid on his death. However, he was not as lucky. Oil prices declined. Period of austerity had arrived. In 1985, first time since 1972, electricity and gas prices were

increased by 70 percent. Ordinary Saudis resented hike. Also, population explosion at the rate of 3.6 made the king feel pressure. Saudisation started. Islam was forgotten. Deportation of illegal immigrant workers meant that in 1985-86, 300000 were bundled off (Madawi 2002:150-52).

Social and economic divisions began to appear. Wealthy elite consisted of close circle of royalty, tribal nobility, a class of commercially successful educated Saudis. Middle class youth were becoming jobless and frustrated. Some responded to Osama (Madawi 2002:154).

On 2 August 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait. Over 50000 US troops arrived leading to a tense debate. Central questions were: can Saudis get non-Muslims' help against Muslim. Can such a government be Islamic? Mecca University's Dr Safar al-Hawali's taped speeches and Riyadh University's Salman al Awdah's lectures began to find mass hearing. On 6 Nov 1990, 45 women violated driving ban in Riyadh. Mutawa called them 'communist whores.' Ulema blamed this act on the presence of US troops that brought western culture with them. The groups associated with ben Laden, Advice and Reform Committee (ARC), appeared as the real oppositionist challenge. In 1996, bombs exploded near a US military mission in Riyadh and al-Khobar towers, killing Americans.

In 2000, a Saudi airliner en route London was high jacked by two Saudis. Their demands were schools, hospitals, welfare (Madawi 2002:165-85). Having eliminated secular opposition in the 1950s, Saudis were now facing religious fanatics whom they pampered and continue pampering all across the Muslim world. These fanatics point out Saudis corruption and consider further Islamisation of the society as a solution to all the ills. However, a semi-official description of the country goes like this (Yamani 1997:20): "Present day Saudi Arabia is one of the largest market economies in the Middle East. There are no currency controls and no socialist dogma. Emphasis is placed on the private sector and its influence is encouraged

to grow every day. This is perhaps due to Islamic doctrine which prevails supreme in the kingdom. Islam prescribes that all wealth is owned by God, and the individual is an agent who is entrusted with portions of that wealth and who is then held by the manner he or she uses it".

Saudi-style free market is at its best in media industry where, to borrow Sreberny's (2000: 63) phrase, "Mickey Mouse, the Spice Girls and Koran collide' literally. There was a televisual revolution in terms of channels available in the wake of First Gulf War. Sreberny says the Gulf War (1990) brought 24-hour CNN coverage, which found eager audiences and created pressure for change in the regional media industries. Not the pioneers, but Saudi royals were among the first to launch private TV channels. London-based MEBC, latterly MBC, and Rome-based Orbit were among the first private channels to wander Middle Eastern airwaves. Orbit, available on encrypted services requiring a decoder, dropped BBC World Arabic channel since it was showing "Death of Principle' (Sreberny 2000: 63-71). Similarly, Al Ra'is was cancelled. But Star Academy was aired by LBC-Sat where Saudi Prince Talal has a stake (Kraidy 2008: 189-99). Saudi Arabia is most important consumer of Egyptian TV films; hence, Egyptian films hesitate to touch upon matters sensitive to Saudi state (Hafez 1994: 8-9).

"In Saudi-financed projects, 'drinks' or kisses may not be shown. An Egyptian commentator calls it "Beduinization of Arab culture'. The other aspect of mediated culture is Jihadification of culture. Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV is the prime example. But Hamas, Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic Jihad and host of Salafi groups run either TV channels or websites. The mediated, virtual Jihadist world, in turn, is largely oiled by petro-dollars.

Conclusion

It is hard to coin an all-encompassing definition that defines political Islam.

Despite the definitional complexities, one can agree that Islamists plan to implement their agenda by coercion, if necessary. Their rise in last three decades owes to a number of factors, few beyond the scope of this essay, but we can analyse this phenomenon only if looked at with historical context.

Equally, important is to understand the political economy of political Islam. It is evident that Islamists were marginalised when viable left/nationalist alternatives were available. They filled the vacuum left by left/nationalists in Middle East. In their rise, overt and covert imperialist patronage or intervention has helped Islamists gain the present status. Also, imperialism is not in clash with fundamentalism. It is only a section of fundamentalism, gone "awry' or out of control, that Washington and its allies are fighting against. Osama/Hamas/Hezbollah constitutes a case of Frankenstein. The Saudi-US relationships remain cosy. Hence, "clash of civilisations' thesis hardly stand the test.

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Eleven Theses on the Resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism

24 September 2006, by **Gilbert Achcar**



Similarly, elementary analytical caution forbids putting such diverse phenomena as the resurgence of Muslim clerical and/or political movements in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, or Senegal, Zia Ul-Haq's military dictatorship in Pakistan or Gaddafi's in Libya, the seizure of power by Iranian Shi'ite clergy or by Afghan guerrillas, etc., all into the same category. Even phenomena that on the surface appear clearly identical, such as the progress made by the same movement, the "Muslim Brotherhood," in Egypt and Syria, have different underlying political content and functions, determined by their different immediate objectives.

Beneath their agreement on otherworldly matters, beyond their agreement on problems of everyday life, when they do agree on such issues, and notwithstanding their similar, even identical, denominations and organizational forms, Muslim movements remain essentially political movements. They are thus the expression of specific socio-political interests that are very much of this world.

2. There has been no eruption of Islam into politics. Islam and politics have always been inseparable, as Islam is a political religion in the etymological sense of the word. Thus, the demand for the separation of religion and state in Muslim countries is more than secularist: it is openly anti-religious. This helps explain why none of the major currents of bourgeois or petty bourgeois nationalism on Islamic soil, with the exception of Kemalism in Turkey, have called for secularism. What is an elementary democratic

task elsewhere-separation of religion and state-is so radical in Muslim countries, especially the Middle East, that even the "dictatorship of the proletariat" will find it a difficult task to complete. It is beyond the scope of other classes.

Furthermore, the democratic classes of Muslim societies have on the whole shown no interest, or almost none, in challenging their own religion. In fact Islam has not been perceived in the twentieth century as the ideological cement of an outmoded feudal or semi-feudal class structure in these societies. It has been seen instead as a basic element of national identity jeered at by the foreign Christian (or even atheist) oppressor. It is no accident that Turkey is the only Muslim society not to have been subjected to direct foreign domination in the twentieth century. Mustafa Kemal too was exceptional among his peers. He waged his main battle not against colonialism or imperialism but against the Sultanate, a combination of temporal and spiritual power (the Caliphate). On the other hand Nasser, however radical a bourgeois nationalist, had every interest in identifying with Islam in his main combat against imperialism; all the more so because this was a cheap way for him to protect his left and right flanks.

3. The following theses do not deal with Islam as one element among others, albeit a fundamental element, in the ideology of nationalist currents. That kind of Islam's time is up, as with the currents that identify with it. More generally, we shall distinguish between Islam used as one means among others of shaping and asserting a national, or communal, or even sectarian identity, on the one hand, and Islam considered as an end in itself, a total, general objective, a

unique, exclusive program, on the other. "The Koran is our constitution," declared Hassan Al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. The Islam that interests us here is Islam elevated to an absolute principle, to which every demand, struggle and reform is subordinated-the Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood, of the "Jamaat-i-Islami," of the different ulemas' associations and of the movement of Iranian ayatollahs whose organized expression is the Islamic Republican Party.

The common denominator of these different movements is Islamic fundamentalism, that is, the wish to return to Islam, the aspiration to an Islamic utopia, which incidentally cannot be limited to a single nation but must encompass all Muslim peoples if not the whole world. In this spirit, Bani-Sadr declared to the Beirut daily An-Nahar in 1979 that "Ayatollah Khomeini is an internationalist; he is opposed to Islamic Stalinists who want to build Islam in one country" (sic!). This "internationalism" is also visible in the way that all these movements go beyond the borders of their countries of origin and/or maintain more or less close relations with each other. They all reject nationalism in the narrow sense, and consider nationalist currents-even those that claim to be Islamic-rivals if not adversaries. They oppose foreign oppression or the national enemy in the name of Islam, not in defense of the "nation." The United States is thus not so much "imperialism" for Khomeini as the "Great Satan"; Saddam Hussein is above all an "atheist," an "infidel." For all the movements in question, Israel is not so much a Zionist usurper of Palestinian land as "the Jewish usurper of an Islamic holy land."

4. However progressive, national

and/or democratic the objective significance of certain struggles carried on by various Islamic fundamentalist currents, it cannot mask the fact that their ideology and their program are essentially, by definition, reactionary. What sort of program aims to construct an Islamic state, faithfully modeled on the seventh century of the Christian era, if not a reactionary utopia? What sort of ideology aims to restore a thirteen-century-old order, if not an eminently reactionary ideology? Thus it is wrong and even absurd to define Islamic fundamentalist movements as bourgeois, whatever the extent to which some struggles they wage align them with all or part of their countries' bourgeoisies, just as wrong as to define them as revolutionary when they happen to come into conflict with these same bourgeoisies.

In terms of the nature of their program and ideology, their social composition, and even the social origins of their founders, Islamic fundamentalist movements are petty bourgeois. They do not hide their hatred of representatives of big capital any more than of representatives of the working class, or their hatred of imperialist countries any more than of "communist" countries. They are hostile to the two poles of industrial society that threaten them: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. They correspond to those layers of the petty bourgeoisie described in the Communist Manifesto:

"The lower middle class, the manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant, all these fight against the bourgeoisie to save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class. They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. Nay more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history."

Petty bourgeois Islamic reaction finds its ideologues and leading elements among the "traditional intellectuals" of Muslim societies, ulemas and the like, as well as among the lower echelons of the bourgeoisie's "organic intellectuals," those coming from the petty bourgeoisie and condemned to stay there: teachers and office workers in particular. In a period of

ascendancy Islamic fundamentalism recruits widely at universities and other institutions that produce "intellectuals," where they are still more conditioned by their social origins than by a hypothetical and often doubtful future.

5. In countries where Islamic fundamentalist reaction has been able to become a mass movement and where it now has the wind in its sails, the labor force includes a relatively high proportion of middle classes, according to the Communist Manifesto definition: manufacturers, shopkeepers, artisans and peasants. Nevertheless, any outbreak of Islamic fundamentalism mobilizes not only a larger or smaller layer of these middle classes, but also layers of other classes newly spawned by the middle classes under the impact of capitalist primitive accumulation and impoverishment. Thus parts of the proletariat whose proletarianization is very recent, and above all parts of the sub-proletariat that capitalism has dragged down from their former petty bourgeois level, are particularly receptive to fundamentalist agitation and susceptible to being caught up in it.

This is Islamic fundamentalism's social base, its mass base. But this base is not the natural preserve of religious reaction, the way that the bourgeoisie relates to its own program. Whatever the strength of religious feeling among the masses, even if the religion in question is Islam, there is a qualitative leap from sharing this feeling to seeing religion as an earthly utopia. In order for the opiate of the masses to become an effective stimulant once more in this age of automation, the peoples must truly have no other choice left but to throw themselves on God's mercy. The least one can say about Islam is that its immediate relevance is not obvious!

In fact, Islamic fundamentalism poses more problems than it solves. Although Islamic law is several centuries younger than Roman law, it was produced by a society considerably more backward than ancient Rome. (The Koran was largely inspired by the Torah, just as the Arabs' way of life was fairly similar to the Hebrews'.) And besides the problem of updating a thirteen-

century-old civil code, there is also the question of completing it. In other words, the most orthodox Muslim fundamentalist is incapable of responding to the problems posed by modern society with exegetical contortions alone, unless the contortions become totally arbitrary and therefore a source of endless disagreements among the exegetes. There are thus as many interpretations of Islam as there are interpreters. The core of the Islamic religion, which all Muslims agree on, in no way satisfies the pressing material needs of the petty bourgeois, quite apart from whether it can satisfy their spiritual needs. Islamic fundamentalism in itself is in no way the most appropriate program for satisfying the aspirations of the social layers that it appeals to.

6. The social base described above is notable for its political versatility. The quotation from the Communist Manifesto above does not describe a fixed attitude of the middle classes, but only the real content of their fight against the bourgeoisie when there is a fight, when they turn against the bourgeoisie. Before fighting against the bourgeoisie, the middle classes were its allies in the fight against feudalism; before seeking to reverse the course of history they contributed to advancing it.

The middle classes are first and foremost the social base of the democratic revolution and the national struggle. In backward, dependent societies such as Muslim societies the middle classes still play this role as long as the tasks of the national and democratic revolution are still more or less uncompleted and on the agenda. They are the most ardent fans of any bourgeois leadership (and even more of any petty bourgeois leadership) that champions these tasks. The middle classes are the social base par excellence of the Bonapartism of the ascendant bourgeoisie; they are in fact the social base of all bourgeois Bonapartism. So the only time when large sections of the middle classes strike off on their own and seek other paths is when bourgeois or petty bourgeois leaderships that have taken on national and democratic tasks run up against their own limits and lose their credibility.

Of course, as long as capitalism on the rise seems to open up prospects of upward social mobility for the middle classes, as long as their conditions of existence are improving, they do not question the established order. Even when depoliticized or unenthused, they normally play the role of "silent majority" in the bourgeois order. But if ever the capitalist evolution of society weighs on them with all its force-the weight of national and/or international competition, inflation and debt-then the middle classes become a formidable reservoir of opposition to the powers that be. Then they are free of any bourgeois control, and all the more formidable because the violence and rage of the petty bourgeois in distress are unparalleled.

7. Even then the reactionary option is not unavoidable for the petty bourgeoisie, downtrodden though it is by capitalist society and disillusioned with bourgeois and petty bourgeois democratic-nationalist leaderships. There is always another option, at least in theory. The middle classes are faced with the choice between reaction and revolution. They can join the revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie, as the Communist Manifesto foresaw:

If by chance [the middle classes] are revolutionary, they are so only in view of their impending transfer into the proletariat, they thus defend not their present, but their future interests, they desert their own standpoint to place themselves at that of the proletariat.

In the backward and dependent societies that the Communist Manifesto did not take into account, however, the middle classes have absolutely no need to abandon their own viewpoint in order to place themselves under proletarian leadership. Quite the contrary, by taking up the middle classes' aspirations, notably national and democratic tasks, the proletariat can manage to win them over to its side.

But for the proletariat to win the middle classes' confidence, it must first of all have a credible leadership itself, a leadership that has proved itself politically and practically. If on

the other hand a leadership with a majority in the working class has discredited itself on the level of national democratic political struggles (while maintaining its majority position because of its trade union positions or simply the lack of an alternative), if it proves politically flabby in face of the established order, or if even worse it supports the established order, then the middle classes will really have no choice but to lend their ears to petty bourgeois reaction-even if it is as inscrutable as Islamic reaction-and possibly respond to its calls.

8. In all the countries where Islamic fundamentalism has gained considerable ground, particularly in Egypt, Syria, Iran and Pakistan, all the conditions described above exist. In all these countries middle class living standards have manifestly deteriorated over the last few years. Although some of these countries are even oil exporters themselves, the only effect the massive oil price increases have had on most of their middle classes has been unbridled inflation. In addition, bourgeois and petty bourgeois democratic-nationalist leaderships are generally discredited in these countries. In all four countries, democratic-nationalist leaderships have undergone the test of state power.

All of these leaderships had had virtually unanimous middle class support at certain moments in their history as they were trying to implement their national democratic programs. Some went a long way in this direction, notably in Egypt and countries under Egyptian influence, where Nasser towered over the political landscape. Nationalists were able to stay in power for a long time, or are still in power-in the latter cases because they owe their power to the army.

In Iran and Pakistan, where the nationalists formed civilian governments, the army soon swept them away; Mossadegh and Bhutto came to sad ends. In all four countries, in any case, the progress made so far in carrying out the national democratic program, even within the framework and limits of a bourgeois state, ranges from very little to almost

none. Even in Iran where the Mossadegh experience was a very short one, the Shah took it on himself (on his US tutors' advice) to bring about with his own pseudo-Bismarckian methods what the combined efforts of Robespierres and Bonapartes accomplished elsewhere.

On the other hand, the only noteworthy working class political organizations in the whole region are Stalinist parties.

These, when they amount to anything, have totally discredited themselves with a long history of selling out popular struggles and making deals with the powers that be. So when middle class discontent began to surface these past few years in the four countries mentioned, no working class or bourgeois or petty bourgeois nationalist organization was able to capitalize on it. The way was wide open for petty bourgeois Islamic fundamentalist reaction.

By contrast, in Algeria, Libya and Iraq, where the enlightened despotism of a bourgeois or petty bourgeois nationalist bureaucracy allowed broad middle class layers to benefit from the oil manna, Islamic fundamentalism could be contained.

9. While Islamic fundamentalism has made notable gains in Egypt and Syria as well as Iran and Pakistan, the forms and extent of its gains differ greatly from one country to another, as do its political content and function. In Syria, the fundamentalist movement is the main opposition to the declining Bonapartism of the Ba'athist bourgeois bureaucracy, and engaged in a life-and-death struggle against it. Syrian fundamentalists have profited from the fact that the Ba'athist ruling elite belongs to a minority faith (Alawi).

The outrageously, purely reactionary nature of the Syrian fundamentalist movement's program reduces its possibilities of seizing power on its own to almost nothing. It cannot on its own, on the basis of such a program, mobilize the forces needed to overthrow the Ba'athist dictatorship. Still less can it run, alone, a country whose economic and political problems are as thorny as Syria's. The

Syrian fundamentalist movement is thus condemned to co-operate with the Syrian propertied classes (bourgeois and landowners). It is not, and cannot be, any more than their spearhead.

In Egypt too, for the same reasons, the possibility of an independent seizure of power by the fundamentalist movement is very limited, all the more so because it has less influence there than in Syria. In both these countries a long struggle against progressive regimes has hardened the fundamentalist movement, thus highlighting its reactionary character. Moreover, the very scope of Egypt's economic problems makes the fundamentalists' bid for power even less credible.

The Egyptian bourgeoisie is perfectly aware of this fact and is thus very obliging toward the fundamentalist movement. The fundamentalists constitute in its eyes an ideal "fifth column" inside the mass movement—a particularly effective "antibody" to the left. That is why it is not at all worried about Egyptian fundamentalist movement's trying to outbid the left on the left's two favorite issues: the national question and the social question; any gains made by Islamic reaction on these two issues mean equivalent losses for the left. The Egyptian bourgeoisie's attitude toward the fundamentalist movement resembles that of any bourgeoisie faced with a deep social crisis toward the far right and fascism.

Pakistan is different from Egypt in that the Pakistani fundamentalist movement has consolidated itself mainly under reactionary regimes. It has therefore been able to reclaim some elements of the national democratic program for long periods of time and thus form a credible opposition to the established order. But during these same long periods, bourgeois democratic-nationalist tendencies were themselves in opposition, and more credible and thus more influential than the fundamentalists were.

Only when Bhutto, skipping the stages of a Nasser-type evolution in an impressive historical shortcut, rapidly alienated the masses by getting

entangled in his own contradictions was the way opened up for the extreme right dominated by the fundamentalist movement (given that the Pakistani far left was insignificant). Bhutto's bankruptcy was so glaring that the fundamentalists managed to mobilize a huge mass movement against him.

The army's coup d'état was meant to forestall the "anarchy" that could have resulted had this mobilization led to Bhutto's overthrow (as in Iran!). To win the fundamentalists' sympathy, Zia Ul-Haq's reactionary bourgeois military dictatorship took over their projects for Islamic reforms and used them to its own advantage. Today it is counting on the fundamentalist movement to neutralize any "progressive" opposition to its regime, including the late Bhutto's party.

In the three cases analyzed above, the fundamentalist movement has proved itself to be nothing but an auxiliary for the reactionary bourgeoisie. But Iran is different.

10. In Iran the fundamentalist movement, represented mainly by the fundamentalists among the Shi'ite clergy, was forged in a long and bitter struggle against the Shah's eminently reactionary imperialist-backed regime. The sad historical bankruptcy of Iranian bourgeois nationalism and Stalinism is too well known to describe here. Because of this exceptional combination of historical circumstances, the Iranian fundamentalist movement managed to become the sole spearhead of the two immediate tasks of the national democratic revolution in Iran: overthrowing the Shah and severing the ties with US imperialism.

This situation was all the more possible because the two tasks in question were in perfect harmony with the generally reactionary program of Islamic fundamentalism. So as the social crisis matured in Iran to the point of creating the preconditions for a revolutionary overthrow of the Shah, as the middle classes' resentment of him reached fever pitch, the fundamentalist movement personified by Khomeini managed to harness the immense power of the embattled middle classes and sub-proletariat and

deal the regime a series of body blows.

The fundamentalists were almost suicidal in their determination to remain unarmed, a feat that only a mystical movement is capable of. The Iranian fundamentalist movement managed to carry out the first stage of a national democratic revolution in Iran. But its fundamentalist character very quickly got the upper hand.

In a sense, the Iranian revolution is a permanent revolution in reverse. Starting with the national democratic revolution, it could under proletarian leadership have "grown over" into a socialist transformation. Its fundamentalist petty bourgeois leadership prevented that, pushing it on the contrary in the direction of a reactionary regression. The February 1979 revolution was astonishingly similar to February 1917—two identical points of departure ushering in diametrically opposite processes. While October 1917 enabled the Russian democratic revolution to go to its logical conclusion, in Iran the fundamentalist leadership betrayed the revolution's democratic content.

The Russian Bolsheviks replaced the Constituent Assembly, after having struggled to have it elected, with the eminently democratic power of the soviets; the ayatollahs replaced the Constituent Assembly, which they too had placed at the head of their demands but never allowed to see the light of day, with a reactionary caricature: the Muslim "Assembly of Experts." The fate of this demand common to the two revolutions eloquently sums up the counterposed natures of the leaderships, and thus the opposite directions they took.

As for the democratic forms of organization that arose in the course of the Iranian February, the Islamic leadership co-opted them. The shoras were a far cry from the soviets! On the national question, while the Bolsheviks' proletarian internationalism made possible the emancipation of the Russian empire's oppressed nationalities, the ayatollahs' Islamic "internationalism" turned out to be a pious pretext for bloody repression of the Persian empire's oppressed nationalities. The

fate of women in the two revolutions is just as well known.

The fundamentalist Iranian leadership only remained faithful to the national democratic program on one point: the struggle against US imperialism. But it stayed true to this struggle in its own peculiar way. Describing the enemy not as imperialism but as the "West" if not the "Great Satan," Khomeini called for throwing out the baby with the bathwater, or rather the baby before the bathwater. He attributed all the political and social gains of the bourgeois revolution, including democracy and even Marxism, which he considered (correctly) a product of (supposedly "Western") industrial civilization, to the hated "West."

He called on Iranians to rid their society of these plagues, while neglecting the main links between Iran and imperialism: the economic links. The US embassy affair, the way it was managed, gained Iran nothing. In the final analysis it proved very expensive, profitable in the last analysis to US banks. However the fundamentalist dictatorship evolves in Iran from now on, it has already proved to be a major obstacle to the development of the Iranian revolution.

Moreover, its evolution is very problematic. Beyond the exceptional combination of circumstances described above, there is a fundamental difference between Iran

and the three other countries mentioned earlier: Iran can afford the "luxury" of an experiment with an autonomous, petty bourgeois, fundamentalist regime. Its oil wealth is the guarantee of a positive balance of payments and budget. But at what price and for how long? The economic balance sheet of two years of fundamentalism in power is already very negative compared with earlier years. On the other hand, the inconsistency of the fundamentalist "program" and the great variety of social layers who identify with it and interpret it according to their own lights are manifest in a plurality of rival and antagonistic centers of powers. Only Khomeini's authority has made it possible so far for them to keep up a façade of unity.

11. Islamic fundamentalism is one of the most dangerous enemies of the revolutionary proletariat. It is absolutely and under all circumstances necessary to fight against its "reactionary and medieval influence," as the "Theses on the National and Colonial Question" adopted at the Second Congress of the Communist International said many years ago. Even in cases such as Iran, where the fundamentalist movement takes on national democratic tasks for a time, the duty of revolutionary socialists is to fight intransigently against the spell it casts on the struggling masses.

If not, if they do not free themselves in

time, the masses will surely pay the price. While striking together at the common enemy, revolutionary socialists must warn working people against any attempt to divert their struggle in a reactionary direction. Any failure in these elementary tasks is not only a fundamental weakness, but can also lead to opportunist wrong turns.

On the other hand, even in cases where Islamic fundamentalism takes purely reactionary forms, revolutionary socialists must use tactical caution in their fight against it. In particular they must avoid falling into the fundamentalists' trap of fighting about religious issues. They should stick firmly to the national, democratic, and social issues. They must not lose sight of the fact that a part, often a big part, of the masses under Islamic fundamentalist influence can and must be pulled out of its orbit and won to the workers' cause.

At the same time revolutionary socialists must nevertheless declare themselves unequivocally for a secular society, which is a basic element of the democratic program. They can play down their atheism, but never their secularism, unless they wish to replace Marx outright with Mohammed!

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Islam and the Left - a reply to Salma Yaqoob

13 December 2005

Dear International Viewpoint

What is the difference between a Muslim in power and a Muslim outside of it?

I read the comment of Ms. Salma Yaqoob. Firstly, I was astonished how a leftist website has published an article in defence of Muslims and "their contribution to peace and anti-

imperialist struggle" without any response to it.

As if we, the people living under tyranny of despotic regimes in the Middle East, don't have the right to call ourselves a part of humanity and cry out our sufferings.

As if it is not political Islam that has

created a catastrophe in these societies not only at present time but also from centuries ago. I am also surprised when European leftists forget the modernist traditions of France and Italy in the war against fanaticism and the oppressive rule of the religion.

Undoubtedly, the seclusion of religion and its waning role in the West, has

caused leftists to forget the danger of its revival that has become a threat as internal crises of capitalism grow. The US is a good example where Christian fundamentalism is going to introduce itself as a main current.

Since, Ms. Yaqoob has pointed to my country - Iran - in her comment, let me give a response. She says "though what has Iran got to do with me?" and tries to absolve herself, and get rid of bearing the stigma of a supporter of Iranian Islam. She says everything is OK and Muslims and socialists can work together.

When I hear these words I remember speeches of Ayatollah Khomeini in Paris who said "everybody even communists will be free to work under our rules, women will not have to observe hijab [Islamic code of dressing for women]".

Yes, Muslims give good promises before seizing power but create a bloodbath after seizing it. Please don't tell me there are various factions among Muslims. I do know this well, but the truth resides largely in ideological teachings of Islam.

As you know Islam is based on certain dogma. Even most modernist Islamic intellectuals don't deny this. Islam does not tolerate relativity and doubt, and Muslims must believe in absolute concepts. Indeed, what's wrong with Islam stems from this fact that Islam has not been 'Protestanized' and has not yet been expelled to the realm of private life.

This is our painful and tragic experience in Iran, where thousands of leftists were killed and tortured to death. I would also like to know how Ms. Yaqoob thinks about stoning men and women for

adultery, cutting hands and legs of thieves, qisas (mutilating body members as an Islamic punishment), lashing men and women for having relations as opposite sexes, and many other examples of inhumane behaviour in our country.

I would like to know whether she has protested against the barbarous conditions imposed on women in Iran and other countries of the Middle East, or whether she prefers to remain silent and fight "imperialism and war" hand in hand with "anti-imperialist" regimes of the Middle East such Iran, former Bathist regime, Syria etc.?

As the people tolerating much pain and torture in the last quarter of century please let us doubt these words.

Best Regards

A friend from Iran

Islam and the left

25 October 2005, by **Salma Yaqoob**

Marxism and Religion

1 June 2005, by **Michael Löwy**

The well-known phrase "religion is the opiate of the people" is considered as the quintessence of the Marxist conception of the religious phenomenon by most of its supporters and its opponents. How far is this an accurate viewpoint? First of all, one should emphasize that this statement is **not at all specifically Marxist**. The same phrase can be found, in various contexts, in the writings of Kant, Herder, Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, Moses Hess and Heinrich

Heine... For instance, in his essay on Ludwig Börne (1840), Heine already uses it - in a rather positive (although ironical) way: "*Welcome be a religion that pours into the bitter chalice of the suffering human species some sweet, soporific drops of spiritual opium, some drops of love, hope and faith*". Moses Hess, in his essays published in Switzerland in 1843, takes a more critical (but still ambiguous) stand: "*Religion can make bearable... the unhappy consciousness of serfdom...*

in the same way as opium is of good help in painful diseases". (1)

The expression appeared shortly afterwards in Marx's article on Hegel's philosophy of Right (1844). An attentive reading of the Marxian paragraph where this phrase appears, reveals that it is more qualified and less one-sided than usually believed. Although obviously critical of religion, Marx takes into account the **dual character** of the phenomenon:

"Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of an unspiritual situation. It is the opiate of the people." (2)

If one reads the whole essay, it appears clearly that Marx's viewpoint owes more to left neo-Hegelianism, which saw religion as the alienation of the human essence, than to Enlightenment philosophy, which simply denounced it as a clerical conspiracy. In fact when Marx wrote the above passage he was still a disciple of Feuerbach, and a neo-Hegelian. His analysis of religion was therefore "pre-Marxist", without any class reference, and rather a-historical. But it had a **dialectical quality**, grasping the contradictory character of the religious "distress": both a legitimization of existing conditions and a protest against it.

It was only later, particularly in *The German Ideology* (1846), that the proper Marxist study of religion as a **social and historical reality** began. The key element of this new method for the analysis of religion is to approach it as one of the many forms of **ideology** - i.e. of the **spiritual production** of a people, of the production of ideas, representations and consciousness, necessarily conditioned by material production and the corresponding social relations.

After writing, with Engels, *The German Ideology*, Marx paid very little attention to religion as such, i.e. as a specific cultural/ideological universe of meaning. One can find, however, in the first volume of *Capital*, some interesting methodological remarks; for instance, the well known footnote where he answers to the argument according to which the importance of politics in the Ancient times, and of religion in the Middle-Age reveal the inadequacy of the materialist interpretation of history: "*Neither could the Middle-Age live from Catholicism, nor Antiquity from politics. The respective economic conditions explain, in fact, why Catholicism there and politics here played the dominant rôle (Hauptrolle)*

". (3) Marx will never bother to provide the economic reasons for the importance of medieval religion, but this passage is quite important, because it acknowledges that, under certain historical circumstances, religion can indeed play a **decisive role in the life of a society**.

In spite of his general lack of interest for religion, Marx paid attention to the relationship between protestantism and capitalism. Several passages in *Capital* make reference to the contribution of protestantism to the primitive accumulation of capital - for instance by stimulating the expropriation of Church property and communal pastures. In the *Grundrisse* he makes - half a century before Max Weber's famous essay! - the following illuminating comment on the intimate association between protestantism and capitalism: "*The cult of money has its asceticism, its self-denial, its self-sacrifice - economy and frugality, contempt for mundane, temporal and fleeting pleasures; the chase after the eternal treasure. Hence the connection (Zusammenhang) between English Puritanism or Dutch Protestantism and money-making (Geldmachen)*". (4) The parallel (but not identity!) with Weber's thesis is astonishing - the more so since the author of *The protestant ethic* could not have read this passage (the *Grundrisse* where published for the first time in 1940).

On the other hand, Marx often referred to capitalism as a "*religion of daily life*" based on the fetishism of commodity. He described capital as "*a Moloch that requires the whole world as a due sacrifice*", and capitalist progress as a "*monstruous pagan god, that only wanted to drink nectar in the skulls of the dead*". His critique of political economy is peppered with frequent references to idolatry: Baal, Moloch, Mammon, the Golden Calf, and, of course, the concept of "fetish" itself. But this language has rather a metaphoric than a substantial (in terms of sociology of religion) meaning. (5)

Friedrich Engels displayed (probably because of his pietist upbringing) a much greater interest than Marx for religious phenomena and their historic role. Engels's main contribution to the

Marxist study of religions is his analysis of the relationship of religious representations to **class struggle**. Over and beyond the philosophical polemic of "materialism against idealism", he was interested in understanding and explaining concrete social and historical forms of religion. Christianity no longer appeared (like in Feuerbach) as a timeless "essence", but as a cultural system undergoing transformations in different historical periods: first as a religion of the slaves, later as the state ideology of the Roman Empire, then tailored to feudal hierarchy and finally adapted to bourgeois society. It thus appears as a symbolic space fought over by antagonistic social forces - for instance, in the XVIth century, feudal theology, bourgeois Protestantism and plebeian heresies.

Occasionally his analysis slips towards a narrowly utilitarian, instrumental interpretation of religious movements:

"... each of the different classes uses its own appropriate religion... and it makes little difference whether these gentlemen believe in their respective religions or not." (6)

Engels seems to find nothing but the "religious disguise" of class interests in the different forms of belief. However, thanks to his class struggle method, he realized - unlike the Enlightenment philosophers - that the clergy was not a socially homogeneous body: in certain historical conjunctures, it divided itself according to its class composition. Thus during the Reformation, we have on the one side the high clergy, the feudal summit of the hierarchy, and on the other, the lower clergy, which supplied the ideologues of the Reformation and of the revolutionary peasant movement. (7)

While being a materialist, an atheist and an irreconcilable enemy of religion, Engels nevertheless grasped, like the young Marx, the dual character of the phenomenon: its role in legitimating established order, but also, according to social circumstances, its critical, protesting and even revolutionary role. Furthermore, most of the concrete studies he wrote concerned the **rebellious** forms of religion.

First of all, he was interested in **primitive Christianity**, which he defined as the religion of the poor, the banished, the damned, the persecuted and oppressed. The first Christians came from the lowest levels of society: slaves, free men who had been deprived of their rights and small peasants who were crippled by debts. (8) He even went so far as to draw an astonishing parallel between this primitive Christianity and modern socialism:

a) the two great movements are not the creation of leaders and prophets - although prophets are never in short supply in either of them - but are mass movements; b) both are movements of the oppressed, suffering persecution, their members are proscribed and hunted down by the ruling authorities; c) both preach an imminent liberation from slavery and misery. To embellish his comparison Engels, somewhat provocatively, quoted a saying of the French historian Renan:

"If you want to get an idea of what the first Christian communities were like, take a look at a local branch of the International Workingmen's Association."

According to Engels, the parallel between socialism and early Christianity is present in all movements that dream, throughout the centuries, to restore the primitive Christian religion - from the Taborites of John Zizka ("of glorious memory") and the Anabaptists of Thomas Münzer until (after 1830) the French revolutionary communists and the partisans of the German utopian communist Wilhelm Weitling.

There remains however, in the eyes of Engels, an essential difference between the two movements: the primitive Christians transposed deliverance to the hereafter whereas socialism places it in this world. (9)

But is this difference as clear-cut as it appears at first sight? In his study of the great peasant wars in Germany it seems to become blurred: Thomas Münzer, the theologian and leader of the revolutionary peasants and heretic (Anabaptist) plebeians of the sixteenth century, wanted the immediate establishment on **earth** of the Kingdom of God, the millenarian

Kingdom of the prophets. According to Engels, the Kingdom of God for Münzer was a society without class differences, private property and state authority independent of, or foreign to, the members of that society. However, Engels was still tempted to reduce religion to a stratagem: he spoke of Münzer's Christian "*phraseology*" and his biblical "*cloak*". (10) The specifically religious dimension of Münzerian millenarianism, its spiritual and moral force, its authentically experienced mystical depth, seem to have eluded him.

Engels does not hide his admiration for the German Chiliastic prophet, whose ideas he describes as "quasi-communist" and "religious revolutionary": they were less a synthesis of the plebeian demands from those times as "a brilliant anticipation" of future proletarian emancipatory aims. This **anticipatory and utopian** dimension of religion - not to be explained in terms of the "reflection theory" - is not further explored by Engels but is intensely and richly worked out (as we shall see later) by Ernst Bloch.

The last revolutionary movement that was waged under the banner of religion was, according to Engels, the English Puritan movement from the XVIIth century. If religion, and not materialism, furnished the ideology of this revolution, it is because of the politically reactionary nature of this philosophy in England, represented by Hobbes and other partisans of royal absolutism. In contrast to this conservative materialism and deism, the Protestant sects gave to the war against the Stuarts its religious banner and its fighters. (11)

This analysis is quite interesting: breaking with the linear vision of history inherited from Enlightenment, Engels acknowledges that the struggle between materialism and religion does not necessarily correspond to the war between revolution and counter-revolution, progress and regression, liberty and despotism, oppressed and ruling classes. In this precise case, the relation is exactly the opposite one: revolutionary religion against absolutist materialism...

Engels was convinced that since the French revolution, religion could no more function as a revolutionary ideology, and he was surprised when French and German communists - such as Cabet or Weitling - would claim that "Christianity is Communism". This disagreement on religion was one of the main reasons for the non-participation of French communists in the *French-German Yearbooks* (1844) and for the split with Weitling in 1846.

Engels could not predict liberation theology, but, thanks to his analysis of the religious phenomena from the viewpoint of class struggle, he brought out the protest potential of religion and opened the way for a new approach - distinct both from Enlightenment philosophy (religion as a clerical conspiracy) and from German neo-Hegelianism (religion as alienated human essence) - to the relationship between religion and society.

Most twentieth century Marxist studies on religion limit themselves to comment or develop the ideas sketched out by Marx and Engels, or to apply them to a particular reality.

Many Marxists in the European labour movement were radically hostile to religion but believed that the atheistic battle against religious ideology must be subordinated to the concrete necessities of the class struggle, which demands unity between workers who believe in God and those who do not. Lenin himself who very often denounced religion as a "mystical fog" insisted in his article "Socialism and Religion" (1905) that atheism should not be part of the Party's programme because "*unity in the really revolutionary struggle of the oppressed class for creation of a paradise on earth is more important to us than unity of proletarian opinion on paradise in heaven*". (12)

Rosa Luxemburg shared this strategy, but she developed a different and original approach. Although a staunch atheist herself, she attacked in her writings less religion as such than the reactionary policy of the Church in the name of its own tradition. In an essay written in 1905 (*Church and Socialism*) she claimed that modern

socialists are more faithful to the original principles of Christianity than the conservative clergy of today. Since the socialists struggle for a social order of equality, freedom and fraternity, the priests, if they honestly wanted to implement in the life of humanity the Christian principle "love thy neighbour like thineself", should welcome the socialist movement. When the clergy support the rich, and those who exploit and oppress the poor, they are in explicit contradiction with Christian teachings: they do serve not Christ but the Golden Calf. The first apostles of Christianity were passionate communists and the Fathers of the Church (like Basil the Great and John Chrysostom) denounced social injustice. Today this cause is taken up by the socialist movement which brings to the poor the Gospel of fraternity and equality, and calls on the people to establish on earth the Kingdom of freedom and neighbour-love. (13) Instead of waging a philosophical battle in the name of materialism, Rosa Luxemburg tried to rescue the social dimension of the Christian tradition for the labour movement.

Austro-Marxists, like Otto Bauer and Max Adler, were much less hostile to religion than their German or Russian comrades. They seemed to consider Marxism as compatible with some form of religion, but this referred mainly to religion as a "philosophical belief" (of neo-Kantian inspiration) rather than to concrete historical religious traditions. (14)

In the Communist International little attention was paid to religion, although significant number of Christians joined the movement, and a former Swiss Protestant pastor, Jules Humbert-Droz, became during the 1920s one of the leading figures of the Comintern. The dominant idea among Marxists at that time was that a Christian who became a socialist or communist necessarily abandoned his former "anti-scientific" and "idealist" religious beliefs. Bertold Brecht's beautiful theatrical play *Saint Jean of the Slaughterhouses* (1932) is a good example of this kind of approach towards the conversion of Christians to the struggle for proletarian emancipation. Brecht describes very perceptively the process by which

Jean, a leader of the Salvation Army, discovers the truth about exploitation and social injustice and dies denouncing her former views. But for him there must be an absolute and total break between her old Christian faith and her new credo of revolutionary struggle. Just before dying, Jean says to the people:

"If ever someone comes to tell you that there exists a God, invisible however, from whom you can expect help, hit him hard in the head with a stone until he dies."

Rosa Luxemburg's insight, that one could fight for socialism in the name of the true values of original Christianity, was lost in this kind of crude and somewhat intolerant "materialist" perspective. As a matter of fact, a few years after Brecht wrote this piece, there appeared in France (1936-1938) a movement of revolutionary Christians, numbering several thousand followers which actively supported the labour movement, in particular its more radical tendencies (the left wing of the Socialist Party). Their main slogan was: "We are socialists because we are Christians." (15)

Among the leaders and thinkers of the Communist movement, Gramsci is probably the one who showed the greatest attention to religious issues. Unlike Engels or Kautsky he was not interested in primitive christianity or the communist heresies of the Middle-Ages, but rather in the functioning of the **Catholic Church**: he is one of the first Marxists who tried to understand the contemporary role of the Church and the weight of religious culture among the popular masses.

His most substantial writings on religion are to be found in the *Prison Notebooks*: in spite of their fragmentary, unsystematic and allusive nature, they contain most insightful remarks. His sharp and ironic criticism of the conservative forms of religion - particularly the Jesuitic brand of Catholicism, which he heartily disliked - did not prevent him from perceiving also the utopian dimension of religious ideas: "*religion is the most gigantic utopia, that is the most gigantic 'metaphysics,' that*

history has ever known, since it is the most grandiose attempt to reconcile, in mythological form, the real contradictions of historical life. It affirms, in fact, that mankind has the same 'nature', that man... in so far as created by God, son of God, is therefore brother of other men, equal to other men, and free amongst and as other men... ; but it also affirms that all this is not of this world, but of another (the utopia). Thus do ideas of equality, fraternity and liberty ferment among men... Thus it has come about that in every radical stirring of the multitude, in one way or another, with particular forms and particular ideologies, these demands have always been raised ". He also insisted on the internal differentiations of the Church according to ideological orientations - liberal, modernist, Jesuitic and fundamentalist currents within Catholic culture - and according to the different social classes: "*Every religion... is really a multiplicity of different and often contradictory religions: there is a Catholicism for the peasants, a Catholicism for the petty bourgeoisie and urban workers, a Catholicism for women, and a Catholicism for intellectuals ... "*. Moreover, he believes that Christianity is, under certain historical conditions, "*a necessary form of the will of the popular masses, a specific form of rationality in the world and of life "*; but this applies only to the innocent religion of the people, not to the "Jesuitical Christianity" (*cristianesimo gesuitizzato*), which is "*pure narcotics for the popular masses "*. (16)

Most of his notes relate to the history and present role of the Catholic Church in Italy: its social and political expression through the Catholic Church Action and the People's Party, its relation to the State and to the subordinate classes, etc. While focusing on the class divisions inside the Church, Gramsci is also aware of the relative autonomy of the institution, as a body composed of "traditional intellectuals" (the clergy and the lay Catholic intellectuals) - i.e. intellectuals linked to a feudal past and not "organically" connected to any modern social class. This is why the main motive for the political action of the Church, and for its conflictive

relation with the Italian bourgeoisie, is the defense of its corporative interests, its power and its privileges.

Gramsci is very much interested by the Protestant Reformation, but unlike Engels, and Kautsky he does not focus on Thomas Münzer and the anabaptists, but rather on Luther and Calvin. As an attentive reader of Max Weber's essay, he believes that the transformation of the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination into "one of the major impulses for practical initiative which took place in the world history", is a classical example of the passage from a world-view into a practical norm of behaviour. To some extent, one can consider that Gramsci uses Weber in order to supersede the economic approach of vulgar Marxism, by focusing on the historically productive rôle of ideas and representations. (17)

But his relation to Protestantism is much broader than this methodological issue: for him the Protestant Reform, as a truly national/popular movement, able to mobilise the masses, is a sort of paradigm for the great "moral and intellectual reform" that Marxism wants to accomplish: the philosophy of praxis "corresponds to the connexion Protestant Reform + French Revolution: it is a philosophy that is also politics and politics that is also a philosophy". While Kautsky, living in Protestant Germany, idealised the Italian Renaissance, and despised the Reform as "barbarian", Gramsci, the Italian Marxist praised Luther and Calvin and denounced Renaissance as an aristocratic and reactionary movement... (18)

Gramsci's remarks are rich and stimulating, but in last analysis they follow the classical Marxist pattern of analyzing religion. Ernst Bloch is the first Marxist author who radically changed the theoretical framework - without abandoning the Marxist and revolutionary perspective. In a similar way to Engels, he distinguished two socially opposed currents: on one side the theocratic religion of the official churches, opium of the people, a mystifying apparatus at the service of the powerful; on the other the underground, subversive religion of the poor and the heretical rebels.

However, unlike Engels, Bloch refused to see religion uniquely as a "cloak" of class interests: he explicitly criticized this conception, while attributing it to Kautsky only... In its protest and rebellious forms religion is one of the most significant forms of utopian consciousness, one of the richest expressions of the **Principle Hope**. Through its capacity of creative anticipation, Judeo-Christian eschatology - Bloch's favorite religious universe - contributes to shaping the imaginary space of the **not-yet-being**. (19)

Basing himself on these philosophical presuppositions, Bloch develops a heterodox and iconoclastic interpretation of the Bible - both the Old and the New Testaments - drawing out the *Biblia pauperum*, which denounces the Pharaohs and calls on each and everyone to choose *aut Caesar aut Christus* (either Caesar or Christ).

A religious atheist - according to him only an atheist can be a good Christian and vice-versa - and a theologian of the revolution, Bloch not only produced a Marxist reading of millenarianism (following Engels) but also - and this was new - a **millenarian interpretation of Marxism**, through which the socialist struggle for the Kingdom of Freedom is perceived as the direct heir of the eschatological and collectivist heresies of the past.

Of course Bloch, like the young Marx of the famous 1844 quotation, recognized the dual character of the religious phenomenon, its oppressive aspect as well as its potential for revolt. The first requires the use of what he calls "*the cold stream of Marxism*": the relentless materialist analysis of ideologies, idols and idolatries. The second one however requires "*the warm stream of Marxism*", seeking to rescue religion's **utopian cultural surplus**, its critical and anticipatory force. Beyond any "dialogue," Bloch dreamt of an authentic union between Christianity and revolution, like the one which came into being during the Peasant Wars of the sixteenth century.

Bloch's views were, to a certain extent, shared by some of the

members of the Frankfurt School. Max Horkheimer considered that "*religion is the record of the wishes, nostalgias (Sehnsüchte) and indictments of countless generations.*" (20) Erich Fromm, in his book *The Dogma of Christ* (1930), used Marxism and Psychoanalysis to illuminate the Messianic, plebeian, egalitarian and anti-authoritarian essence of primitive Christianity. And Walter Benjamin tried to combine, in a unique and original synthesis, theology and Marxism, Jewish Messianism and historical materialism, class struggle and redemption. (21)

The idea that there exists a common ground between the revolutionary and the religious mind had already been suggested, in a less systematic way, by the most original and creative Latin American Marxist, the peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui. In an essay from 1925, "Man and the Myth", he proposed a rather heterodox view of revolutionary values: "The bourgeois intellectuals busy themselves with a rationalist critique of the revolutionary's method, theory and technique. What a misunderstanding! The force of the revolutionaries does not lie in their science; it lies in their faith, their passion, their will. It's a religious, mystical, spiritual force. It is the force of Myth...The revolutionary emotion...is a religious emotion. The religious motivations have moved from heaven to earth. Their are no more divine, but human and social". Celebrating Georges Sorel as the first Marxist thinker that understood the "religious, mystical, metaphysical character of socialism", he writes a few years later, in his last book, *Defense of Marxism* (1930): "*Thanks to Sorel, Marxism was able to assimilate the substantial elements and acquisitions of the philosophical currents that came after Marx. Superseding the rationalist and positivist bases of the socialism at his time, Sorel found in Bergson and the pragmatists ideas that strenghtened socialist thought, restoring it to its revolutionary mission... The theory of revolutionary myths, applying to the socialist movement the experience of the religious movements, established the bases for a philosophy of revolution...*". (22)

This formulations - expression of a

Romantic/Marxist rebellion against the dominant (semi-positivist) interpretation of historical materialism - may seem too radical. In any case, it should be clear that Mariategui did not want to make of socialism a Church or a religious sect, but intended to bring out the **spiritual and ethical** dimension of the revolutionary struggle : the faith ("mystical "), the solidarity, the moral indignation, the total commitment at the risk of one's own life (what he called the "heroic "). Socialism for Mariategui was inseparable from an attempt to **re-enchant** the world through revolutionary action. Little wonder that he became one of the most important Marxist references for the founder of Liberation Theology, the peruvian Gustavo Gutierrez.

What is sorely lacking in these " classical " Marxist discussions on religion is a discussion on the implications of religious doctrines and practices for **women**. Patriarcalism, unequal treatment of women and denial of reproductive rights prevail among the main religious denominations - particularity Judaism, Christianity and Islam - and take extremely oppressive forms among fundamentalist currents. In fact, one of the key criteria for judging the progressive or regressive character of religious movements is their attitude towards women, and particularly on their right to dispose of their own body : divorce, contraception, abortion. A renewal of Marxist reflection on religion in the XXIth century requires to put the issue of women rights at the center of the argument.

Notes

(1) Quoted in Helmut Gollwitzer, "Marxistische Religionskritik und christlicher Glaube ", Marxismusstudien, Vierte Folge, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1962, pp.15-16. Other references to this expression can be found in this article.

(2) Karl Marx, "Towards the Critique

of Hegel's Philosophy of Right ", 1844, in Louis S.Feuer (ed.), Marx and Engels, Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy, London, Fontana, 1969, p. 304.

(3) K.Marx, Das Kapital, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1968, I, p. 96.

(4) Karl Marx, Das Kapital, pp. 749-750 ; Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft), Midesex, Penguin Books, 1973, p. 232 and Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, p. 143.

(5) K.Marx, Werke, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1960, vol. 9, p. 226, and vol. 26, p. 488. Some liberation theologians (Enrique Dussel, Hugo Assmann) will make extensive use of this references in their definition of capitalism as idolatry.

(6) F.Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of Classical German Philosophy ", in Feuer (ed.), Op.cit. p. 281.

(7) F.Engels, " The Peasant War in Germany ", Op.cit. pp. 422-475.

(8) F.Engels, Anti-Dühring, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1969, pp. 121-122, 407.

(9) F. Engels, "Contribution to a History of Primitive Christianity ", in Marx and Engels, On Religion, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1960, ch. 25.

(10) F.Engels, "The Peasant War in Germany ", 1850, in Op.cit. p. 464.

(11) F. Engels, "On Materialism ", Op.cit. p. 99.

(12) V.I.Lenin, "Socialism and Religion ", (1905), Selected Works, Moscow, 1972, vol. 10, p. 86.

(13) R.Luxemburg, "Kirche und Sozialismus" (1905), in Internationalismus und Klassenkampf, Neuwied, Luchterhand, 1971, pp. 45-47, 67-75.

(14) On this see David McClellan's interesting and useful book, Marxism and Religion, New York, Harper and Row, ch. 3.

(15) See Agnès Rochefort-Turquin's excellent research Socialistes parce que Chrétiens, Paris, Cerf, 1986.

(16) Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, edited by Quintin Hoare and G.Nowell Smith, London, New Left Books, 1971, pp. 328, 397, 405 and Il Materialismo Storico , Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1979, p. 17.

(17) A.Gramsci, Il Materialismo Storico, pp. 17-18 (direct reference to Weber), 50, 110. Cf. M. Montanari, "Razionalita e tragicita del moderno in Gramsci ", Critica Marxista, 2-3, 1987, p. 58.

(18) A.Gramsci, Il Materialismo Storico, p. 105. Cf. Kautsky, Thomas More und seine Utopie p. 76.

(19) E.Bloch, Das Prinzip Hoffnung, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1959 (three volumes) and Atheismus im Christentum. Zur Religion des Exodus und des Reichs, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968.

(20) Max Horkheimer, "Gedanke zur Religion ", (1935), in Kritische Theorie, Frankfurt/Main, S.Fischer Verlag, 1972, Band I, p. 374.

(21) See our articles "Revolution against Progress : Walter Benjamin's Romantic Anarchism ", New Left Review, n° 152, November-December 1985 and "Religion, Utopia and Countermodernity : The Allegory of the Angel of History in Walter Benjamin ", in M.Löwy, On Changing the World, Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press, 1993.

(22) José Carlos Mariategui, "El Hombre y el Mito ", El Alma Matinal, Lima, Editorial Amauta, 1971, pp. 18-22 and Defensa del Marxismo, Lima, Amauta, 1971, p.21.

Alliances and Coalitions in Britain: “Stop the War” and “Respect”

16 April 2005, by Jane Kelly, Karen O’Toole

We have no differences with the main body of Achcar’s argument; it expresses well the important distinction between the need for Marxists to fight for a militant secularism while at the same time defending the right of individuals to have and to express their own religious beliefs. Thus we support the right of Muslim women to wear or not wear the hijab as, when and where they choose, as we defend the right of Sikh men to wear their turban.



We oppose the right of any authority, whether secular or religious, to determine how an individual may dress or behave, as long as it does not hurt anyone else. Our immediate response to the French debate on the hijab and our critique of the Sikh Temple’s response to the play Behzti in Birmingham, along with other articles published in Socialist Outlook and Socialist Resistance show that we defend the democratic rights of Muslim women and also that we are not afraid to condemn censorship imposed by religious dogma.

It is the last section of Achcar’s article that is controversial. This involves the links that have been built with Muslim communities, first through the Stop the War Coalition (StWC) and then with Respect. In both cases these were unique developments in British politics and major political gains and achievements for the British left. The SWP were central to these developments both within the anti-war movement and then Respect. As Socialist Resistance, we also played an active part in developing and defending this orientation in the StWC and in Respect. Had the radical left refused to work with the Muslim

groups, including the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), the anti-war movement would never have had the breadth or diversity to mobilise such huge numbers. Achcar acknowledges this important development and compares it with the lack of such a development in France.

We agree with Achcar that a united front on a single issue, in this case opposition to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, can be made “with the devil”. In fact the Liberal Democrats spoke from Stop the War platforms. It was certainly right to welcome MAB into the StWC around the demands of “Stop the War” and “Defend Palestine”. MAB were not only loyal to these slogans but were a part of the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of Muslims on the massive February 2003 demonstration. The Birmingham Mosques alone brought over a hundred coaches on that day.

But Achcar conflates the role of an organisation like MAB in the StWC and Respect - they are very different things. Its participation is legitimate in the case of the StWC but not in Respect. At present Respect is somewhere between a coalition and a political party, with Marxists within it, but MAB is not a part of Respect: it took a policy decision that it could not join given the political basis of Respect. Achcar elides over this crucial fact. It is true that there have been Muslim candidates standing for Respect, including Anas Al-tikriti, who stood as a Respect candidate in the European elections, 2004. But he stood as an individual, resigning as MAB’s President in order to do so. Surely that is his contradiction not Respect’s, for in standing he accepted Respect’s manifesto and its programme. There are also of course individual members of Respect who are in MAB, as well as individual

Muslims who are not, but MAB as an organisation calls for a vote for different candidates in different parts of the country - including Liberal Democrats and Greens as well as Respect.

We do not think all this amounts, as Achcar argues, to Respect “choosing to ally electorally with an Islamic fundamentalist organisation like the MAB”. Nor would we oppose someone from a Christian background standing as a candidate. The central anti-war candidate in the up-coming general election in Britain, George Galloway, is himself a Catholic and is personally opposed to a woman’s right to choose. This latter is a problem, but since Respect has a woman’s right to choose in its programme and its manifesto, it is a different kind of problem to one which would exist if a Catholic organisation was allowed to affiliate.

As Achcar says, “The British far-left has the merit of having displayed a greater openness to the Muslim populations than the French far-left. It has organised impressive mobilisations with the massive participation of people originating from Muslim immigration against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which the government of its country participated.” How Marxists should relate to individuals and their religious organisations only becomes a real issue when, as in Britain, it ceases to be abstract and the left starts to engage with them. Of course socialist and religious organisations are competitors in trying to win people to their ideas. And the SWP, in their desire to keep the coalition (including the Respect Coalition) together, plays down the differences socialists have with religion. At the last Respect Conference Chris Bambery, a leading member of the SWP, correctly argued

against a sectarian resolution attempting to commit Respect to secularism. But then, he wrongly went on to insist that religion was not an important issue in his practical experience, nor politically in a general sense. Clearly the situation is changing today and Marxists have to be wary that we do not hide our secular traditions and that we engage in the ideological and political debates generated by this new and challenging situation.

We cannot prejudge how an individual's political beliefs may develop in the process of struggle. As people radicalise over specific issues (in this case responding to the new situation after 9/11 and then the war against Iraq) their consciousness is uneven - but in this process a positive engagement by socialists can allow a debate around other issues, such as democratic rights, or economic imperialism and globalisation, which is capable of deepening their radicalisation over many issues, including other types of oppression. It is not materialist to suggest that Muslim workers will blindly follow the mosques: their growing militancy and preparedness to work with the left means that their ideas will start to change too, if we are able to respond to their everyday experience. Will an offensive against religion be the main way to change their ideas? No, although discussion of the contradictory role of religion is necessary - and here the SWP is probably at fault as they do not do this systematically.

One of the reasons for the growth of religion in general and Muslim organisations in particular is precisely the failure of the left, the labour movement and the trade unions in Britain to defend and support oppressed communities. But while ethnic minorities have traditionally voted Labour, this was in the past based on clientelism: with a new generation of Muslims, many of them born in Britain, this type of relationship is being rejected and things are starting to change. Nor is this solely a radicalisation due to the war. Despite the failure of the trade union movement to respond adequately to the privatisations and attacks over the past period, there has been a process of younger, working class Muslims joining trade unions. In some of the more radical sections of the trades union movement Muslims are having a big input into organisation and activity. A deeper radicalisation leading to the development of second-generation Muslim leaders has been taking place, which has been politically consolidated by opposition to the War and a preparedness to make alliances with the left. For example Oliur Rahman, a Respect local councillor and parliamentary candidate in East London, is both a trade unionist and a Muslim.

The Muslim communities are heterogeneous, divided like any other by generational, gender and nationality differences. The same point

can be made about the base of MAB. While the Association itself may be "Islamic fundamentalist", as Achcar characterises it, those who identify with it, or carry their placards on demonstrations are not politically homogenous. There is a delicate balance to be struck between engaging with and capitulating to forces organised by religious groups. The left does not always get it right - but the achievements so far have been quite new in Britain.

In areas such as East London and Birmingham, with large black and minority communities, Respect is now seen not only as the anti-war party but also a left party, and is winning support. Part of this support comes from the mosque, some of it from individual Muslims and other ethnic minorities, but either way the majority of the support is working class.

At a recent 700 strong Respect rally five out of the nine speakers were from ethnic minorities (three of them Respect candidates). The left in Britain has never achieved such collaboration before and while there is always danger in making new alliances, the issue is how to break the hold of religious bigotry. Some of the leaders of the MAB will never agree with the radical left, but that doesn't necessarily mean all Muslims organised by them now will agree with them in the future.

*Written on behalf of the ISG Political Committee
April 2005*

Why we should defend Secularism

31 March 2005, by Alex Cowper

Secularism was a key demand of the leaders of the bourgeois revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries in the West, in France, America and elsewhere. They thought that human beings (or at least a minority of them) could arrive at truth through reason and construct rational social

institutions. They wanted to reduce the role of religion and expand the role of the non-religious - secular - sphere in public life, with the aim of separating the functions of Church and State.

This has rarely been attained in

practice, but to this day, for example, there are no religious services or assemblies in US public schools. At the same time, bourgeois reformers argued for the right of the individual to freedom of thought and expression in both religious and political spheres.

Recently these secular traditions have been invoked against Muslims in the war on terror. The West, it is argued, stands for freedom and tolerance, against Islamic traditions of repressiveness and intolerance. But this stark binary opposition is called into question by the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the US and by the Blair government's emphasis on conservative Christian values in the UK.

Christian fundamentalism is consciously being used as a political tool by the US ruling class to divide and confuse the working class. It is facilitating the moves to the right in American domestic politics - for example in its opposition to abortion and gay marriage and support for creationist teaching in schools - as well as providing an ideological justification for the imperialist war drive.

The most progressive aspects of the 18th century Enlightenment - secularism, universalist ideas of human rights, rationality as against blind faith - are under threat by these forces. In this respect, incidentally, it is clear that postmodernism's attack on secular universalism in the 1980s and 90s played a part in softening up intellectuals for the current assault by religious pre-modernists.

Religion is an excellent ideological binding agent in this period, which is why it appeals to both Bush and Blair. Prior to the rise of neo-liberalism in the 1980s, nationalism/patriotism was quite an effective ideology for powerful imperialisms based on secular nation states. But as the global economy became increasingly integrated, patriotism had to be supplemented by a worldview - religion - which transcended national boundaries and conditioned people to be more accepting of authority while offering consolation to them as individuals in an unstable and insecure world.

Islam functions in the same way in countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The more desperate the ruling class to maintain its position, threatened as it is on all sides by a new phase of capitalist integration of the world economy, the more pious

and ultra-orthodox it has to become. These besieged rulers are trying to renegotiate their relationship with imperialism but remain fearful of their own working classes.

ISLAMOPHOBIA AND SECULARISM

In some ways, then, similar processes are at work in the West and in the Islamic world. But in the West the ruling classes still like to pose as the champions of the Enlightenment when this suits their political agenda, for example when they wish to whip up Islamophobia. Educational authorities in Britain and France have suddenly become heroic defenders of secularism, despite the existence of religious schools in both countries, and the Anglican church's status as the established church in the UK.

Many on the left in France have embraced this version of secularism. For example Lutte Ouvriere (Workers' Struggle) has supported the recent law against the wearing of the Islamic headscarf (hijab) in schools. The other big far left organisation in France, the *Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire*, [4] is against this law. But the LCR has previously supported teachers who have excluded students from school for wearing the hijab. [5]

Both argue that the hijab is a symbol of women's oppression. But a symbol can mean more than one thing. It can be, for instance, also be a statement of cultural identity against racism. As Jane Kelly argued in the last issue of *Socialist Outlook*, the oppressed have to decide for themselves what constitutes oppression and wage their own struggle against it. [6] Marxists reserve the right to criticise religion, but we should be in favour of individuals' right to religious expression.

The left in Britain has, if anything, bent the stick the other way. The SWP, the leading force in Respect, has on the one hand rightly sought to make alliances with Muslims radicalising as a result of the war. On the other hand, they have had a tendency to bend to political pressure on certain issues.

At the October Respect conference, the SWP correctly opposed a resolution that wished to make Respect, which is a broad-based organisation, into an explicitly secular movement. The problem was that they used arguments that questioned the importance of secularism in general. For Marxists and militant materialists secularism should remain a fundamental principle even if we do not necessarily foreground the issue in our tactics.

THE DUTY TO BE CRITICAL

The same tendency to bend to political pressure has sometimes informed the SWP's leadership of the Stop the War Coalition. They are correct to point out that the first duty of socialists in the imperialist countries in context of the Iraq war is to support the Iraqi people's resistance against occupation by organising political opposition at home. But up to now it has been left to smaller affiliated organisations like Iraq Occupation Focus to begin the process of building links with secular, anti-imperialist, civil society organisations in Iraq. These efforts should surely be taken up more broadly within the anti-war movement.

It is also part of the ABC of revolutionary Marxism that within a framework of unconditional solidarity with any struggle against oppression, one has the right and duty to be critical. Thus it is not wrong for socialists to argue that the struggles in Iraq, Chechnya, Afghanistan and Palestine will stand more chance of success with a left and secular leadership.

Marxists, for example, have always made a distinction between the methods of people's war, and individual terrorism as methods of struggle. The fundamentalist tendency to separate the world into absolute good and absolute evil leads to the notion that any method adopted by the faithful is justified, and that the infidel, and the stray sheep from one's own faith, only need to be shocked and terrified into doing the right thing.

Hence the sectarian bombings of Shias in Iraq. Hence also the beheadings of hostages, which of course represent only a tiny fraction of all deaths in the conflict, but have had a disproportionate political impact. Such methods leave the resistance vulnerable to manipulation by imperialist agents provocateurs. They also make it easier for the occupiers to 'divide and rule'. The resistance needs urgently to develop a political programme that can unite the majority of Iraqis, whether Sunni, Shia or Kurd.

RELIGION HAS TWO SIDES

To clarify our ideas on religion it is necessary to go back to basics. In classical Marxism, religion is a form of alienation. The human power to change the world, and human qualities such as love and solidarity, are alienated from human beings and deposited with imaginary supernatural entities.

Religious and other social institutions that promote religious values make this alienation worse by denying the masses the chance to develop and question their own religious ideas. Instead, these ideas are used to reinforce prevailing systems of domination based on class, gender, race and sexuality.

But religion is not simply an expression of alienation, it is a protest against it. Religion is not just 'the opium of the people', according to Marx, it is 'the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world.' Thus, as I said, Islam has become a badge of identity against oppression, whether for a young woman in London or Paris wearing the hijab, or for those fighting US and British imperialism in Iraq.

Therefore to fight religious alienation by using the powers of the oppressor (the school system, laws, bombs) is itself alienating and will be self-defeating, because it will provoke resistance. In any case, the power of religion over people's minds will not disappear before the social conditions that give rise to this form of alienation also disappear.

That is why socialists cannot demand that people should be atheists. Many Marxists are also religious believers - such as senator Heloisa Helena of the Fourth International in Brazil, or some comrades of the Labour Party Pakistan who say Muslim prayers before their meetings.

Left secularists should therefore be the best defenders of individual rights of religious thought and expression, including in situations where one confessional group seeks to dominate another. However, that does not mean they should not argue against the influence of religious ideas.

NO COMPROMISE ON WOMEN'S OR GAY RIGHTS

Furthermore, if it is a question of defence of rights, that means all rights, including in cases where the rights of women, gays and young people, for example, conflict with religious dogma.

Let us be clear: within a group suffering racist oppression, those experiencing double or triple oppression as women and/or gays, have an absolute right to fight on all these fronts, as in the case of Women Against Fundamentalism in Britain in the early 1990s, or the Southall Black Sisters from the late 1970s until today, or black LGBT [7] groups.

They should not be told they have to suppress the struggle for their rights in the interests of greater unity. In fact, the fight against inequalities of power within a particular group creates the conditions for a more effective unity in the longer term.

A good recent example of this sort of conflict is the violent attempt by the conservative wing of the Sikh community in Birmingham to ban a play by a Sikh woman that raises the issue of sexual abuse within the religious community.

In this the Sikh religious hierarchy were supported by the Catholic Church and of course by Blair's New Labour. We defend the right to free expression on such issues, even

though the Sikhs are an oppressed community.

RELIGION AND STATE EDUCATION

Socialists have traditionally resisted any attempt by religious institutions to meddle in state education. Frederick Engels, Marx's collaborator, proposed the following to be adopted by Marxists in Germany in 1891:

'Complete separation of Church and State. All religious communities without exception will be treated by the State as private societies. They will lose all subsidies from public funds and all influence in the public schools.' [8]

Thus it is important for socialists in the US to oppose creationist teaching in the high schools. It is also vitally necessary, for instance, that Pakistani socialists should oppose sharia law - which entails the Islamicisation of the state, including education - without heeding the siren cries of those who would counterpose this struggle to the equally necessary fight against US imperialism.

And in Europe the fight for real secularism in education (not the Islamophobic 'secularism of fools') has to intensify. Blair has allowed religious foundations to set up schools in which classes on religion will be taught in addition to classes based on the national curriculum. At Emmanuel College in Gateshead, creationism - the doctrine that human and other life was divinely created, rather than arising through evolution - is being taught in biology lessons.

A socialist government would have to say that religion is a private affair and ought to be taught separately, in the way that many Muslim children, for example, have separate lessons now. The curriculum would have to have a definite humanist bent, challenging people to think critically about religion.

If Blair were smarter and less racist he would allow more Islamic schools. By doing so he would tie British

Muslims more effectively to their own conservative leadership in this country while at the same time boosting all religions, which would serve his ideological and political aims: to divide and weaken the working class and line sections of them up behind reaction.

THE PROPOSED LAW AGAINST RELIGIOUS HATRED

But Blair is not stupid: the government's proposed law against incitement to religious hatred is designed to achieve precisely these aims. The apparent multiculturalism of the proposal is merely cosmetic. It is intended to split Muslims and also the left and progressives generally. In its attempt to co-opt conservative religious forces in ethnic communities, it will be both a carrot with which to encourage 'moderate' Muslims to accept the dominant political agenda and a stick with which to beat 'extremists' - Muslim and secular - who step outside the consensus.

As Pragna Patel from Southall Black Sisters argues, this law 'would be used as a weapon to suppress dissent within our communities, particularly those who are more vulnerable and powerless... we can no more rely on religious leaders than we can on the state that often appeases them in the name of multiculturalism.' [9]

The proposed law will also be used against progressives who oppose the creeping Christianisation of the education sector. We should remember the State has previously legislated against the extreme right on the basis that these groups incite racial hatred, but these laws can also be used against the left. It is therefore up to the movement, not the state, to mobilise to stop racism, including when it takes the form of inciting hatred against religious groups.

AGAINST ISLAMOPHOBIA, AGAINST FUNDAMENTALISMS

In conclusion, secularism cannot be defended by a bourgeoisie that proclaims its liberal values while practicing racist oppression against Muslims and other communities. Neither can political Islamists fight anti-Muslim bigotry or Christian fundamentalism effectively. In fact, as the French Teachers' League has pointed out, 'Islamophobia is the best objective ally of Islamic fundamentalism' - they need each other. The only force that can simultaneously develop the fight against Islamophobia and against the various fundamentalisms is the secular left.

This means that we must be firm in our defence of individual rights of religious expression. It needs to be demonstrated to members of oppressed communities that left secularists are the most consistent fighters for equality and civil rights. This will then make it easier to develop the struggle against integration of religion and state.

(This article first appeared in Socialist Outlook, a marxist review produced by the ISG, British section of the FI.)

Marxists and Religion - yesterday and today

16 March 2005, by **Gilbert Achcar**

First a critique of religion, as a factor of alienation. The human being attributes to the divinity responsibility for a fate which owes nothing to the latter ('Man makes religion, religion does not make man'); he/she compels him/herself to respect obligations and prohibitions which often hamper his/her full development; he/she submits voluntarily to religious authorities whose legitimacy is founded either on the fantasy of their privileged relationship to the divinity, or on their specialisation in the body of religious knowledge.



Gilbert Achcar

Then a critique of religious social and political doctrines. Religions are ideological survivals of epochs long gone: religion is a 'false consciousness of the world' - even more so as the world changes. Born in pre-capitalist societies, religions have been able to undergo - like the Protestant Reformation in the history of Christianity - renewals, which necessarily remain partial and limited so long as a religion venerates 'holy scriptures'. But also an

'understanding' (in the Weberian sense) of the psychological role which religious belief can play for the wretched of the earth.

"Religious misery is, at one and the same time, the expression of real misery and a protest against real misery. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."

From these three considerations emerges in the view of classical Marxism, one sole conclusion set forth by the young Marx:

"The overcoming (Aufhebung) of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo."

2. Nevertheless, Classical Marxism did not pose the suppression of religion as a necessary precondition of social emancipation (the remarks of the young Marx could be read thus: in order to overcome illusions, it is necessary first to put an end to the 'condition that requires illusions'). In any case - as with the State, one might say - the point is not abolishing religion, but creating the conditions for its extinction. It is not a question of prohibiting 'the opium of the people', and still less of repressing its addicts. It is only about putting an end to the privileged relationships that those who trade in it maintain with the powers that be, in order to reduce its grip on minds.

Three levels of attitude should be considered here:

Classical Marxism, i.e. the Marxism of the Founders, did not require the inscription of atheism in the programme of social movements. On the contrary, in his critique of the Blanquist émigrés from the Commune (1874), Engels mocked their pretensions to abolish religion by decree. His clear-sightedness has been completely confirmed by the experiences of the 20th Century, as when he asserted that "persecutions are the best means of promoting disliked convictions" and that "the only service, which may still be rendered to God today, is that of declaring atheism an article of faith to be enforced."

Republican secularism, i.e. the separation of Church and state, is on the other hand a necessary and irreducible objective, which was already part of the programme of radical bourgeois democracy. But here also, it is important not to confuse separation with prohibition, even as far as education is concerned. In his critical commentaries on the Erfurt Programme of German Social

Democracy (1891), Engels proposed the following formulation:

"Complete separation of the Church from the state. All religious communities without exception are to be treated by the state as private associations. They are to be deprived of any support from public funds and of all influence on public schools." Then he added in brackets this comment, "They cannot be prohibited from forming their own schools out of their own funds and from teaching their own nonsense in them!"

The workers' party should at the same time fight ideologically the influence of religion. In the 1873 text, Engels celebrated the fact that the majority of German socialist worker militants had been won to atheism, and suggested the distribution of eighteenth century French materialist literature in order to convince the greatest number.

In his critique of the Gotha programme of the German workers' party (1875), Marx explained that private freedom in matters of belief and religious practice should be defined only in terms of rejection of state interference. He stated the principle in this way: "Everyone should be able to attend his religious as well as his bodily needs without the police sticking their noses in." He added however :

"But the workers' party ought, at any rate in this connection, to have expressed its awareness of the fact that bourgeois 'freedom of conscience' is nothing but the toleration of all possible kinds of religious freedom of conscience, whereas it [the party] strives much more to free the consciences from the witchery of religion."

3. Classical Marxism only envisaged religion from the viewpoint of relationships of European societies to their own traditional religions. It took into consideration neither the persecution of religious minorities, nor above all, the persecution of the religions of oppressed peoples by oppressive states belonging to another religion. In our epoch, marked by the survival of colonial heritage and by its transposition into the imperial metropolises themselves - in the form

of an 'internal colonialism' whose original feature is that the colonised themselves are expatriates, i.e. 'immigrants' - this aspect acquires a major importance.

In a context dominated by racism, a natural corollary of the colonial heritage, persecutions of the religions of the oppressed, the ex-colonised, should not be rejected only because they are the 'best means of promoting disliked convictions'. They should be rejected also and above all, because they are a dimension of ethnic or racial oppression, as intolerable as political, legal, and economic persecutions and discriminations.

To be sure, the religious practices of colonised peoples can appear as very retrograde in the eyes of the metropolitan populations, whose material and scientific superiority was in line with the very fact of colonisation. Nevertheless, it is not by imposing their way of life on the colonised populations, against their will, that the cause of the latter's emancipation will be served. The road to the hell of racist oppression is paved with good 'civilising' intentions, and we know how much the workers' movement itself was contaminated by charitable pretensions and philanthropic illusions in the colonial era.

Engels however had indeed warned against this colonial syndrome. In a letter to Kautsky, dated 12 September 1882, he formulated an emancipatory policy of the proletariat in power, wholly marked with the caution necessary so as not to transform a presumed liberation into a disguised oppression:

"The countries inhabited by a native population, which are simply subjugated, India, Algiers, the Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish possessions, must be taken over for the time being by the proletariat and led as rapidly as possible towards independence. How this process will develop is difficult to say. India will perhaps, indeed very probably, produce a revolution, and as the proletariat emancipating itself cannot conduct any colonial wars, this would have to be given full scope; it would not pass off without all sorts of

destruction, of course, but that sort of thing is inseparable from all revolutions. The same might also take place elsewhere, e.g., in Algiers and Egypt, and would certainly be the best thing for us.

"We shall have enough to do at home. Once Europe is reorganised, and North America, that will furnish such colossal power and such an example that the semi-civilised countries will follow in their wake of their own accord. Economic needs alone will be responsible for this. But as to what social and political phases these countries will then have to pass through before they likewise arrive at socialist organisation, we to-day can only advance rather idle hypotheses, I think. One thing alone is certain: the victorious proletariat can force no blessings of any kind upon any foreign nation without undermining its own victory by so doing."

An elementary truth but still so often ignored: any 'blessings' imposed by force equal oppression, and could not be perceived otherwise by those who are subjected to them.



4. The question of the Islamic scarf (hijab) condenses all the problems posed above. It allows us to outline the Marxist attitude in all its aspects.

In most countries where Islam is the religion of the majority, religion is still the dominant form of ideology. Retrograde, more or less literal, interpretations of Islam serve to maintain whole populations in submission and cultural backwardness. Women especially and intensively undergo a secular oppression, draped in religious legitimisation.

In such a context, the ideological struggle against the use of religion as a means of submission is key in the fight for emancipation. The separation of religion and the state should be a demand prioritised by the movement for social progress. Democrats and progressives must fight for the freedom of every man and woman in matters of unbelief, of belief and of

religious practice. At the same time, the fight for women's liberation remains the very criterion of any emancipatory identity, the touchstone of any progressive claim.

One of the most elementary aspects of women's freedom is their individual freedom to dress as they like. When the Islamic scarf and, a fortiori, more enveloping versions of this type of garment, are imposed on women, they are one of the numerous forms of everyday sexual oppression - a form all the more visible as it serves to make women invisible. The struggle against the requirement to wear the scarf or other veils is inseparable from the struggle against other aspects of female servitude.

However, the emancipatory struggle would be gravely compromised if it sought to 'free' women by force, by resorting to coercion, not with regard to their oppressors but with regard to women themselves. Tearing off religious garb by force - even if it is judged that wearing it denotes voluntary servitude - is an oppressive action and not an action of real emancipation. It is moreover an action doomed to failure, as Engels predicted: the fate of Islam in the ex-Soviet Union as well as the evolution of Turkey eloquently illustrate the inanity of any attempt to eradicate religion or religious practices by coercion.

'Everyone should be able to attend his/her religious as well as his/her bodily needs' - women wearing the hijab or men wearing beards - 'without the police sticking their noses'.

Defending this elementary individual freedom is the indispensable condition of an effective fight against religious diktats. The prohibition of the hijab paradoxically legitimises the act of imposing it in the eyes of those who consider it an article of faith. Only the principles of freedom of conscience and of strictly individual religious practice, whether in relation to clothing or anything else, and the respect for these principles by secular governments, allow legitimate and successful opposition to religious coercion. The Koran itself proclaims 'No coercion in religion'!

Moreover and at the risk of challenging freedom of education, the prohibition of the Islamic scarf or other religious signs in state schools in the name of secularism is an eminently self-defeating position, since it results in promoting religious schools.

5. In France, Islam has been for a very long time the majority religion of the 'indigenous' people in the colonies and it has been for decades the religion of the great majority of immigrants, the 'colonised' of the interior. In such a case, every form of persecution of the Islamic religion - numerically the second religion of France, though it is very inferior to the others in status - should be fought.

Compared with religions present on French soil for centuries, Islam is underprivileged. It is victim to glaring discrimination, for example concerning its places of worship or the domineering supervision that the French state, saturated with colonial mentality, imposes on it. Islam is a religion vilified daily in the French media, in a manner that is fortunately no longer possible against the previous prime target of racism, Judaism, after the Nazi genocide and the Vichy complicity. A great amount of confusion laced with ignorance and racism filtered through the media, maintains an image of an Islamic religion intrinsically unfit for modernity, as well as the amalgam of Islam and terrorism, facilitated by the inappropriate use of the term 'Islamism' as a synonym for Islamic fundamentalism.

Of course, the official and dominant discourse is not overtly hostile; it even makes itself out to be benevolent, its eyes fixed on the considerable interests of big French capital - oil, arms, construction etc., in the Islamic lands. However, colonial condescension toward Muslim men and women and their religion is just as insufferable for them as open racist hostility. The colonial spirit is not confined to the right in France; it has long been rooted in the French left, constantly torn in its history between a colonialism blended with an essentially racist condescension expressed as paternalism, and a tradition of militant anti-colonialism.

Even at the beginning of the split of the French workers' movement between social democrats and communists, a right wing emerged among the communists of the metropolis themselves (without mentioning the French communists in Algeria), particularly distinguishing itself by its position on the colonial question. The communist right betrayed its anti-colonialist duty when the insurrection of the Moroccan Rif, under the leadership of the tribal and religious chief Abd el-Krim, confronted French troops in 1925.

The statement of Jules Humbert-Droz about this to the Executive Committee of the Communist International retains certain relevance:

"The right has protested against the watchword of fraternisation with the insurgent army in the Rif, by invoking the fact that they do not have the same degree of civilisation as the French armies, and that semi-barbarian tribes cannot be fraternised with. It has gone even further, writing that Abd el-Krim has religious and social prejudices that must be fought. Doubtless we must fight the pan-Islamism and the feudalism of colonial peoples, but when French imperialism seizes the throat of the colonial peoples, the role of the CP is not to combat the prejudices of the colonial chiefs, but to fight unfailingly the rapacity of French imperialism."

6. The duty of Marxists in France is to fight unfailingly racist and religious oppression conducted by the imperial bourgeoisie and its state, before fighting religious prejudice in the midst of the immigrant populations.

When the French state concerns itself with regulating the way in which young Muslim women dress themselves and exclude from school those who persist in wearing the Islamic scarf; when the latter are taken as targets of a media and political campaign whose scale is out of proportion with the extent of the phenomenon concerned and thus reveals its oppressive character, perceived as Islamophobic or racist, whatever the intentions expressed; when the same state favours the well-known expansion of religious communal education through

increasing subsidies to private education, thus aggravating the divisions between the exploited layers of the French population - the duty of Marxists, in the light of everything explained above, is to be resolutely opposed.

This has not been the case for a good part of those who call themselves Marxists in France. On the question of the Islamic scarf, the position of the Ligue de l'Enseignement (the League for Education), whose secularist commitment is above all suspicion, is much closer to genuine Marxism than that of numerous bodies that claim it as their source of inspiration. Thus, one can read the following in the declaration adopted by the Ligue, at its June 2003 general meeting at Troyes:

"The Ligue de l'Enseignement, whose whole history is marked by constant activity in support of secularism, considers that to legislate on the wearing of religious symbols is inopportune. Any law would be useless or impossible.

"The risk is obvious. Whatever precautions are taken, there is no doubt that the effect obtained will be a prohibition, which will in fact stigmatise Muslims....

"For those who would wish to make the wearing of a religious symbol a tool for a political fight, exclusion from state schools will not prevent them from studying elsewhere, in institutions in which they will have every opportunity to find themselves justified and strengthened in their attitude....

"Integration of all citizens, independent of their origins and convictions, passes through the recognition of a cultural diversity, which should express itself in the framework of the equality of treatment that the Republic should guarantee to everyone. On these grounds Muslims as with other believers, should benefit from freedom of religion in the respect for the rules that a pluralist and deeply secular society imposes. The struggle for the emancipation of young women in particular goes primarily through their schooling and respect for their freedom of

conscience and their autonomy: let us not make them hostages to an otherwise necessary ideological debate. In order to struggle against an enclosed identity, secularist pedagogy, the struggle against discrimination, the fight for social justice and equality are more effective than prohibition."

In its report of 4 November 2003, submitted to the Commission on the application of the principle of secularism in the Republic, the Ligue de l'Enseignement deals admirably with Islam and its representations in France, of which only some excerpts are quoted here:

"The resistance and discrimination encountered by the 'Muslim populations' in French society are not essentially due, as is too often said, to the lack of integration of these populations but to majority representations and attitudes which stem in large part from an old historic heritage.

"The first is the refusal to recognise the contribution of Arab-Muslim civilisation to world culture and to our own western culture....

"To this concealment and rejection is added the colonial heritage ... bearer of a deep and long-lasting tradition of violence, inequality and racism, which the difficulties of de-colonisation, and then the rifts of the Algerian war amplified and reinforced. The ethnic, social, cultural, and religious oppression of the indigenous Muslim populations of the French colonies was a constant practice, to the point that it is echoed in limitations to its legal status. It is thus that Islam was considered as an element of the personal statute and not as a religion coming under the 1905 Law of Separation (of Church and State - trans).

"For the whole duration of colonisation, the principle of secularism never applied to the indigenous populations and to their religion because of the opposition of the colonial lobby, and in spite of the requests of the ulema (Muslim scholars - trans) who had understood that the secular regime would give them freedom of religion. Why should we be surprised then that for a very

long time secularism for Muslims was synonymous with a colonial mind-police! How should we expect that it would not leave deep traces, as much on the previously colonised as on the colonizing country? If many Muslims today still consider that Islam should regulate public and private civil behaviour, and tend sometimes to adopt such a profile, without demanding the status of law for this, it is because France and the secular Republic have ordered them to do it for several generations.

"If many French people, sometimes even amongst the best educated who occupy prominent positions, allow themselves to make pejorative appraisals of Islam, whose ignorance vies with their stupidity, it is because they subscribe, most often unconsciously while denying it, to this tradition of colonial contempt."

A third aspect gets in the way of the consideration of Islam on a footing of equality: it is that Islam as a transplanted religion is also a religion of the poor. Unlike the Judeo-Christian religions whose followers in France are spread across the whole social chessboard, and in particular unlike Catholicism, historically integrated into the dominant class, Muslims, whether French citizens or immigrants living in France, are situated for the moment in their great majority at the bottom of the social ladder.

There the colonial tradition still continues, since the cultural oppression of the indigenous populations was added to economic exploitation, and since the latter has for a long time weighed very heavily on the first immigrant generations, while today their heirs are the first victims of unemployment and urban neglect. The social contempt and injustice that strike these social categories affect every aspect of their existence, including the religious dimension. No one is offended by the scarves on the heads of cleaners or catering staff in offices: they only become the object of scandal when worn with pride by girls engaged in studies or women with managerial status.

The lack of understanding shown by

the main organisations of the extra-parliamentary Marxist left in France of the identity and cultural problems of the populations concerned, is revealed by the composition of their electoral slates in the European elections: both in 1999 and 2004 citizens originating from populations previously colonized - from the Maghreb or from sub-Saharan Africa in particular - have been outstanding by their absence at the tops of the LCR-LO slates, by contrast with the French Communist Party slates, a party so many times stigmatized for its failures in the antiracist struggle by these two organizations. In so doing they are at the same time depriving themselves of an electoral potential amongst the most oppressed layers in France, a potential which the results obtained in 2004 by an improvised slate such as Euro-Palestine demonstrated in a spectacular fashion.

7. In mentioning "those who would wish to make of the wearing of a religious symbol a tool for a political fight", the Ligue de l'Enseignement was alluding, of course, to Islamic fundamentalism. The expansion of this political phenomenon in the West amongst people originating from Muslim immigration, after its strong expansion for the last thirty years in Islamic countries, has been in France the preferred argument of those wishing to prohibit the Islamic scarf.

The argument is a real one: like the Christian, Jewish, Hindu and other fundamentalisms aiming to imposed a puritan interpretation of religion as a code of life, if not as a mode of government, Islamic fundamentalism is a real danger to social progress and emancipatory struggles. By taking care to establish a clear distinction between religion as such and its fundamentalist interpretation, the most reactionary of all, it is necessary to fight Islamic fundamentalism ideologically and politically, as much in the Islamic countries as in the midst of the Muslim minorities in the West or elsewhere.

That cannot however constitute an argument in favour of a public prohibition of the Islamic scarf: the Ligue de l'Enseignement has explained this in a convincing fashion. More generally, Islamophobia is the

best objective ally of Islamic fundamentalism: their growth goes together. The more the left gives the impression of joining the dominant Islamophobia, the more they will alienate the Muslim populations, and the more they will facilitate the task of the Islamic fundamentalists, who will appear as the only people able to express the protests of the populations concerned against "real misery".

Islamic fundamentalism is, however, heterogeneous and different tactics should be adopted according to concrete situations. When this type of social programme is administered by an oppressive power and by its allies in order to legitimate the existing oppression, as in the case of numerous despotisms with an Islamic face; or when it becomes a political weapon of reaction struggling against a progressive power, as was the case in the Arab world, in the 1950-1970 period, when Islamic fundamentalism was the spearhead of the reactionary opposition to Egyptian Nasserism and its emulators - the only appropriate stance is that of an implacable hostility to the fundamentalists.

It is different when Islamic fundamentalism plays the role of a politico-ideological channel for a cause that is objectively progressive, a deforming channel, certainly, but filling the void left by the failure or absence of movements of the left. This is the case in situations where Islamic fundamentalists are fighting a foreign occupation (Afghanistan, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, etc.) or an ethnic or racial oppression as in those situations where they incarnate a popular hatred of a politically reactionary and repressive regime. It is also the case of Islamic fundamentalism in the West, where its rise is generally the expression of a rebellion against the fate reserved for immigrant populations.

Indeed as with religion in general, Islamic fundamentalism can be "at one and the same time, the expression of real misery and a protest against real misery", with the difference that in this case the protest is active: it is not "the opium" of the people, but rather "the heroin" of one part of the people, derived from 'the opium' and substituting its ecstatic effect for the

narcotic effect of the latter.

In all these types of situation, it is necessary to adopt tactics appropriate to the circumstances of the struggle against the oppressor, the common enemy. While never renouncing the ideological combat against the fatal influence of Islamic fundamentalism, it can be necessary or inevitable to converge with Islamic fundamentalists in common battles - from simple street demonstrations to armed resistance, depending on the case.

8. Islamic fundamentalists can be objective and contingent allies in a fight waged by Marxists. However it is an unnatural alliance, forced by circumstances. The rules that apply to much more natural alliances such as those practised in the struggle against Tsarism in Russia, are here to be respected a fortiori, and even more strictly.

These rules were clearly defined by the Russian Marxists at the beginning of the 20th Century. In his preface of January 1905 to Trotsky's pamphlet *Before the Ninth of January*, Parvus summarised them thus:

"To simplify, in the case of a common struggle with casual allies, the following points can be applied:

- 1) Do not merge organisations. March separately but strike together.
- 2) Do not abandon our own political demands.
- 3) Do not conceal divergences of interest.
- 4) Pay attention to our ally as we would pay attention to an enemy.
- 5) Concern ourselves more with using the situation created by the struggle than with keeping an ally."

"Parvus is profoundly right" wrote Lenin in an article in April 1905, published in the newspaper *Vperiod*, underlining the definite understanding, however (very appropriately brought to mind), that the organisations are not to be merged, that we march separately but strike together, that we do not conceal the diversity of interests, that we watch our ally as we would our enemy,

etc.

The Bolshevik leader would enumerate many times these conditions over the years.

Trotsky tirelessly defended the same principles. In *The Third International After Lenin* (1928), in his polemic about alliances with the Chinese Kuomintang, he wrote the following lines particularly apt for the subject under discussion here:

"As was said long ago, purely practical agreements, such as do not bind us in the least and do not oblige us to anything politically, can be concluded with the devil himself, if that is advantageous at a given moment. But it would be absurd in such a case to demand that the devil should generally become converted to Christianity, and that he use his horns.... for pious deeds. In presenting such conditions, we act in reality as the devil's advocates, and beg him to let us become his godfathers."

A number of Trotskyists do exactly the opposite of what Trotsky advocated, in their relationship with Islamic fundamentalist organisations. Not in France, where Trotskyists, in their majority, rather bend the stick the other way, as has already been explained, but on the other side of the Channel, in Britain.

The British far-left has the merit of having displayed a greater openness to the Muslim populations than the French far-left. It has organised impressive mobilisations with the massive participation of people originating from Muslim immigration against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which the government of its country participated. In the anti-war movement, it even went as far as allying itself with a Muslim organisation of fundamentalist inspiration, the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), the British arm of the main 'moderate' Islamic fundamentalist movement in the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood (represented in the parliaments of some countries).

There is nothing reprehensible in principle in such an alliance for well-defined objectives so long as the rules

laid out above are strictly respected. The problem begins however with treating this particular organisation, which is far from representative of the great mass of Muslims in Britain, as a privileged ally. More generally, British Trotskyists have tended, during their alliance with the MAB in the anti-war movement, to do the opposite of what was stated above, i.e. 1) mixing banners and placards, in the literal as well as figurative sense; 2) minimising the importance of the elements of their political identity likely to embarrass their fundamentalist allies of the day; and finally 3) treating these temporary allies as if they were strategic allies, in renaming 'anti-imperialists' those whose vision of the world corresponds much more to the clash of civilisations than to the class struggle.

9. This tendency was made worse by the passage from an alliance in the context of an anti-war mobilisation to an alliance in the electoral field. The MAB as such did not, to be sure, join the electoral coalition *Respect*, led by the British Trotskyists, its fundamentalist principles preventing it from subscribing to a left programme. However, the alliance between the MAB and *Respect* translated for example into the candidacy on the *Respect* slate of a very prominent leader of the MAB, the ex-president and spokesperson of the Association.

In doing this the alliance passed de facto to a qualitatively superior level, unacceptable from a Marxist point of view: While it can be legitimate indeed to enter into 'purely practical agreements' that 'do not oblige us to anything politically' other than the action for common objectives - as it happens, to express opposition to the war conducted by the British government together with the United States and to denounce the fate inflicted on the Palestinian people - with groups and/or individuals who adhere otherwise to a fundamentally reactionary conception of society, it is utterly unacceptable for Marxists to conclude an electoral alliance - a type of alliance which presupposes a common conception of political and social change - with these sorts of partners.

In the nature of things, participating in the same electoral slate as a religious fundamentalist is to give the mistaken impression that he has been converted to social progressiveness and to the cause of workers' emancipation both male...and female! The very logic of this type of alliance pushes those who are engaged in it, in the face of the inevitable criticism of their political competitors, to defend their allies of the day and to minimise, even to hide, the deep differences that divide them. They become their advocates, even their godfathers and godmothers within the progressive social movement.



Lindsey German

Lindsey German, a central leader of the British Socialist Workers Party and of the Respect Coalition, signed an article in The Guardian described as "wonderful" on the MAB website. Under the title "A badge of honour", the author energetically defended the alliance with the MAB, explaining that it is an honour for her and her comrades to see the victims of Islamophobia turning towards them, with a surprising justification for the alliance. Let us summarise the argument: the Muslim fundamentalists are not the only people to be anti-women and homophobic, Christian fundamentalists are equally so. Moreover, women speak more and more for the MAB in anti-war meetings (as they do in meetings organised by the mullahs in Iran, it could be added). The fascists of the BNP (British National Party) are much worse than the MAB.

Of course, continued Lindsey German, some Muslims - and non-Muslims - hold views on some social issues that are more conservative than those of the socialist and liberal left. But that should not be a barrier to collaboration over common concerns. Would a campaign for gay rights, for example, insist that all those who took part share the same view of the war in Iraq?

This last argument is perfectly admissible if it only concerns the anti-war campaign. But if used to justify an

electoral alliance, with a much more global programme than a campaign for lesbian and gay rights, it becomes altogether specious.

10. Electoralism is a very short-sighted policy. In order to achieve an electoral breakthrough, the British Trotskyists are playing, in this case, a game that risks undermining the construction of a radical left in their country.

What decided them, is firstly and above all an electoral calculation: attempting to capture the votes of the considerable masses of people of immigrant origin who reject the wars conducted by London and Washington (let us note in passing that the alliance with the MAB, was made around the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and not around the Kosovo war - and for a good reason!). The objective in itself, is legitimate, when it is translated - as has been the case - into the concern to recruit amongst men and women workers and young people of immigrant origin, through a particular attention paid to the specific oppression that they experience, and through the promotion to this end of left men and women militants belonging to these communities, notably by placing them in a good position on electoral slates - everything in short which the French far left has not done.

But in choosing to ally electorally - even though in a limited way - with an Islamic fundamentalist organisation like the MAB, the British far left is serving as a stepping stone for the former organisation's own expansion in the communities of immigrant origin, whereas it should be considered as a rival to be ideologically fought and restricted from an organisational point of view. Sooner or later this unnatural alliance will hit a stumbling block and will fly to pieces. Trotskyists will then have to confront those whom they have helped to grow for the mess of pottage of an electoral result, and it is far from sure that the results owe much to their fundamentalist partners anyhow.

All we need to do is look at the arguments used by the fundamentalists in calling for a vote for Respect (and for others, such as

the Mayor of London, the left Labourite Ken Livingstone, much more opportunist than the Trotskyists in his relations with the Islamic association). Let us read the fatwa of Sheikh Haitham Al-Haddad, dated 5 June 2004 and published on the MAB website.

The venerable sheikh explains that it is obligatory for those Muslims living under the shadow of man-made law to take all the necessary steps and means to make the law of Allah, the Creator and the Sustainer, supreme and manifest in all aspects of life. If they are unable to do so, then it becomes obligatory for them to strive to minimise the evil and maximise the good.

The sheikh then underlines the difference between a vote for one of a number of systems, and voting to select the best individual amongst a number of candidates within an already-established system imposed upon them and which they are unable to change within the immediate future.

"There is no doubt", he continues, "that the first type is an act of Kufr [impious], as Allah says, 'Legislation is for none but Allah', while voting for a candidate or party who rules according to man-made law does not necessitate approval or acceptance for his method." Therefore "we should participate in voting, believing that we are doing so in an attempt to minimise the evil, while at the same time maintaining that the best system is the Shariah, which is the law of Allah.

"Voting being lawful, the question is then posed for whom to vote.

"The answer to such a question requires a deep and meticulous understanding of the political arena. Consequently, I believe that individuals should avoid involving themselves in this process and rather should entrust this responsibility to the prominent Muslim organisations.... It is upon the remainder of the Muslims therefore to accept and follow the decisions of these organisations."

In conclusion, the venerable Sheikh calls on the Muslims of Great Britain,

to follow the electoral instructions of the MAB and ends with this prayer: "We ask Allah to guide us to the right path and to grant victory for law of our Lord, Allah in the UK and in other parts of the world."

This fatwa needs no comment. The deep incompatibility between the intentions of the Sheikh consulted by the MAB and the task that Marxists set for themselves or should set for themselves, in their activity in relation to the Muslim populations, is blatant. Marxists should not seek to harvest votes at any price, as opportunist politicians who stop at nothing to get

elected do. Support like that of Sheikh Al-Haddad is a poisoned gift. It should be harshly criticised: the battle for ideological influence within populations originating from immigration is much more fundamental than an electoral result, however exhilarating.

The radical left, on one or another side of the Channel, should return to an attitude consistent with Marxism, which it proclaims. Otherwise, the hold of the fundamentalists over the Muslim populations risks reaching a level which will be extremely difficult to overcome. The gulf between these populations and the rest of the men

and women workers in Europe will find itself widened, while the task of bridging it is one of the essential conditions for replacing the clash of barbarisms with a common fight of the workers and the oppressed against capitalism.

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