

# Steering Between Islamophobia and Muslim Fundamentalism: The Position of the Left in the Debate on the Veil

Thursday 22 November 2012, by [HENSMAN Rohini](#) (Date first published: 9 November 2012).

**Contribution presented at the *Historical Materialism* conference, London, November 2012.**

## Contents

- [Introduction](#)
  - [The origin of the hijab](#)
  - [The liberal multicultural](#)
  - [The position of the Left](#)
  - [Conclusion](#)
- 

## Introduction

Islamophobia is in many ways similar to racism. Just as racism justifies the oppression of and discrimination against certain peoples on the grounds that they are inferior to the oppressors, Islamophobia, as defined by the Runnymede Trust in 1997, justifies the oppression of Muslims on the grounds that they adhere to a religion – Islam – that is seen as a monolithic bloc, static and unchanging, irrational, sexist, violent and aggressive. While use of the term ‘Islamophobia’ has been criticised by Salman Rushdie, Christopher Hitchens and others who argue that it is ‘often used to silence the critics of Islam, including Muslims fighting for reform in their own communities,’ Meera Nanda defends its use to describe ‘prejudice against Islam itself as somehow singularly evil and backward as compared to other religions’ (Nanda 2011:63). She also notes the convergence between European Islamophobia and the Hindutva Right in India with the formation of the organisation ‘The Voice of India’, set up in Delhi in 1981 and cited repeatedly in the manifesto of Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik, whose mantra – ‘the problem is not Muslims but Islam itself’ – encapsulates this view.

Racism and Islamophobia are characteristics of the political Right, and even in their milder forms are conducive to the growth of the far Right. It goes without saying, therefore, that revolutionary socialists must oppose them.

The term ‘fundamentalism’ is actually a misnomer, since there are, in the case of every religion, basic disagreements about what fundamentalists claiming allegiance to it regard as ‘fundamental,’ and what progressives claiming allegiance to the same religion regard as fundamental. Nonetheless,

the term has now passed into common usage, and will therefore be used here in its accepted sense. The object of faith, for fundamentalists, is clearly defined, absolute, and cannot be questioned. It therefore provides a stable point of reference in a world that is otherwise changing rapidly, creating all manner of insecurities. This characteristic of fundamentalism has led to its being explained as a response to capitalism and modernity: a clinging to certainty in a world where, in the words of the Communist Manifesto, 'All that is solid melts into air'. In Karen Armstrong's words, 'Fundamentalists will often express their discontent with a modern development by overstressing those elements in their tradition that militate against it. They are all – even in the United States – highly critical of democracy and secularism. Because the emancipation of women has been one of the hallmarks of modern culture, fundamentalists tend to emphasise conventional, agrarian gender roles, putting women back into veils and into the home' (Armstrong 2001: 141).

Thus fundamentalism is a very specific type of response to capitalism and modernity: a *reactionary* response. Its purpose is to provide justification and reinforcement for the domination of those who have traditionally exercised power within a community: men, religious leaders, community elders, and so on. It speaks for the oppressors whose power to oppress is being challenged by modernity and especially by democracy. It is therefore politically right-wing. It is important to distinguish between religious fundamentalism (which is not necessarily violent) and the political use of fundamentalism (which almost always is); but the abdication of the right and responsibility to think and make moral judgments for oneself makes fundamentalists easily manipulable by right-wing political leaders.

Muslim fundamentalists are no exception. Pervez Hoodbhoy, in a chilling article entitled 'Drones: theirs and ours,' begins by saying that a drone is a programmed killing machine, and goes on to describe the US drones that have wrought so much havoc in Pakistan. He then makes a dramatic switch: 'Pakistan has many more drones than America. These are mullah-trained and mass-produced in madrassas and militant training camps. Their handlers are in Waziristan, not in Nevada. Like their aerial counterparts, they do not ask why they must kill. However, their targets lie among their own people, not in some distant country. Collateral damage does not matter... The walking (or driving) drone's trail is far bloodier than that of the MQ-1B or MQ-9; body parts lie scattered across Pakistan... As a murder weapon, the human drone has no room for moral judgment, doubt, remorse, or conscience' (Hoodbhoy 2010).

The critical difference between fundamentalist interpretations of religion and progressive ones is that the latter encourage critical thinking and independent moral judgments on the part of their followers while the former absolutely prohibit any such thing. In an article on Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani schoolgirl who was shot by the Taliban because she insisted on the right of girls to have an education, Shehribano Taseer, whose own father Salman Taseer was assassinated because he tried to prevent the execution for blasphemy of a Christian woman, Aasia Noreen, writes: 'The power of ignorance is frightening...What the attack on Malala makes clear is that this is really a battle over education. A repressive mindset has been allowed to flourish in Pakistan because of the madrasa system set up by power-hungry clerics...The clerics don't teach critical thinking. Instead, they disseminate hate...What schools with a good syllabus can offer is the timeless and universal appeal of critical thinking. This is what the Taliban are most afraid of' (Taseer 2012). Clearly, Muslim fundamentalism, like all religious fundamentalisms, is politically right-wing, and conducive towards the growth of the extreme Right. It should go without saying that revolutionary socialists must oppose it.

The conception of Islam propagated by the Islamist Right bears a striking resemblance to the conception of Islam propagated by Islamophobes, and this makes combating Islamophobia more complicated than combating racism. 'Race' is a figment of the racist imagination, and anyone who is capable of independent thought can be convinced that it does not exist in reality. But the 'Islam' of

the Islamophobes – or something very similar to it – *does*, unfortunately, exist; one cannot combat it by pretending it doesn't.

## **The origin of the hijab**

I will use 'hijab' or 'the veil' to mean everything from a headscarf to the complete face-veil, because although these are quite different in terms of the burdens they impose on their wearers, the arguments for why they should be worn are the same. According to Reza Aslan, 'The tradition of veiling and seclusion (known together as *hijab*) was introduced into Arabia long before Muhammad, primarily through Arab contacts with Syria and Iran, where the hijab was a sign of social status...In the Ummah, there was no tradition of veiling until around 627 CE., when the so-called "verse of hijab" suddenly descended upon the community. That verse, however, was not addressed to women in general, but exclusively to Muhammad's wives...That the veil applied solely to Muhammad's wives is further demonstrated by the fact that the term for donning the veil, *darabat al-hijab*, was used synonymously and interchangeably with "becoming Muhammad's wife"' (Aslan 2011).

Other scholars agree. Asghar Ali Engineer explains the Quranic verse advising women to put a garment over their heads when going out as being in the context of a non-Islamic society where the only women who did not cover themselves in this way were slaves who were often forced into prostitution and considered fair game for sexual harassment and assault; the purpose of this advice, therefore, was to ensure that 'they could be recognised as free women' and not subjected to such treatment (Engineer 2005:63). He quotes another scholar, Muhammad Assad, who explains the crucial portion of verse 24:31 – 'And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their charms [in public] beyond what may [decently] be apparent thereof' – as follows:

*"My interpretation of the word 'decently' reflects the interpretation of the phrase illa ma zahara minha by several of the earliest Islamic scholars...as 'that which a human being may openly show in accordance with prevailing customs (al-'adah al-jariyah)'. Although the traditional exponents of Islamic Law have for centuries been inclined to restrict the definition of 'what may [decently] be apparent thereof' to a woman's face, hands and feet – and sometimes even less than that – we may safely assume that the meaning of illa ma zahara minha is much wider, and that the deliberate vagueness of this phrase is meant to allow for all the time bound changes that are necessary for a man's moral and social growth. The pivotal clause in the above injunction is the demand, addressed in identical terms to men as well as to women, to 'lower their gaze and be mindful of their chastity'" (Assad 1980:538, quoted in Engineer 2005:64).*

In N.J.Dawood's translation, the previous verse (24:30) is even more explicit: 'Enjoin believing men to turn their eyes away from temptation and to restrain their carnal desires' (*The Koran* 1990:352). Any reasonable reading of this verse (which precedes the injunction to believing women) would see it as prohibiting sexual harassment and assault under all circumstances. The two verses put together can be read as enjoining women not to try and arouse sexual desire deliberately (another verse requires them to cover their breasts), enjoining men to control their sexual desire and refrain from any form of sexual harassment or assault, and enjoining both not to engage in casual sex. This may appear puritanical according to modern Western standards of sexual freedom, but it by no means justifies the *hijab*.

The deafening silence of fundamentalist Muslim clerics concerning verse 24:30 has led to the comment that 'the exclusive focus on the *hijab* (veil) as it relates to women and the implications the veil has for the female body clearly constitute another form of veiling, this time of the prescriptions

that the Quran specifically addresses to men. By focusing on women, Muslim men have allowed themselves to be removed from any type of responsible behavior, and have ended up maintaining an inequality of the sexes, despite of [sic] Islamic prescriptions on the subject of equality, because the latter is viewed as a threat to their power and political monopoly' (Amer n.d). This is a strategy typical of religious fundamentalism. By omitting all reference to some verses, distorting others, and ignoring the historical circumstances in which they were written, it often propagates the opposite of the original teachings. Indeed, if verse 24:30 were taken seriously, there would be no rationale for the veiling of women, and advocating it might be seen as unIslamic.

According to all these scholars and many others, the hijab was not a requirement except for Muhammad's wives until some time after he and they had passed away. So how and why did it come to be seen as an essential element of Islam? Apart from the attempts to reinterpret the scriptures in such a manner as to suggest that they enjoined it on women, how was it justified?

One argument was to make the purely contextual advice to women – to cover themselves in order not to be mistaken for slave girls or prostitutes – into a norm. However, this makes little sense under different circumstances, especially in a predominantly Muslim society where the male relatives who are supposedly the guardians of the women in their family are the very same predators who are a menace to all other women. There were Muslim women who pointed out the anomaly. A delightfully witty example is the short story *Sultana's Dream* written in 1905 by Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain, who came from what is now Bangladesh but was then part of British India. One evening a woman whom Sultana takes to be her friend Sister Sara invites her out. Sultana accepts, thinking they will be walking in a garden, but soon finds to her consternation that it is broad daylight and she is walking in crowded streets unveiled. She also notices that although she meets more than a hundred women, there is not a single man in sight.

*"Where are the men?" I asked her.*

*"In their proper places, where they ought to be."*

*"Pray let me know what you mean by 'their proper places'."*

*"Oh, I see my mistake, you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors."*

*"Just as we are kept in the zenana?"*

*"Exactly so."*

*"How funny," I burst into a laugh. Sister Sara laughed too.*

*"But dear Sultana, how unfair it is to shut in the harmless women and let loose the men."*

(Hossain 1993:11)

Clearly, the argument that weak women needed to be protected from predatory men was not convincing. So the fundamentalists turned the tables in a classic manoeuvre of blaming the victim: it was women who were made out to be temptresses by nature, and men who had to be protected from them. Given these assumptions, it made perfect sense to shut women indoors and hide them behind veils. As a fatwa issued by the Conseil Européen des Fatwas et de la Recherche put it, 'We are determined to convince the Muslim woman that covering her head is a religious obligation...Thus, by her dress, she presents herself as a serious and honest woman who is neither a seductress nor a temptress' (cited by Bennoune 2011:17-18). The implication is that Muslim women (and indeed all

women) who do not cover their heads are seductresses or temptresses who are neither serious nor honest.

Such arguments are by no means unique to Muslim fundamentalism. In India, a predominantly Hindu country, there are shockingly numerous instances where sexual assaults on women are blamed on the victims. Nor does this happen only in Third World countries. 'Reclaim the night' and 'Slutwalk' parades in Europe and America are aimed precisely against allegations that women provoke sexual assaults by being out after dark or by the clothes they wear. These arguments obviously belong to a right-wing, misogynistic definition of gender relations, and the Left has no difficulty identifying with the protests against them. Yet this rejection of right-wing arguments and practices somehow does not seem to apply to the tradition of hijab which belongs with them. Why not?

### **The liberal multicultural response to the veil**

The debate on the veil, with its epicentre in France, took off in the context of two developments. One was the growth of Muslim fundamentalism worldwide from the 1980s onwards, with the appearance of the veil in countries and communities where it had never been traditional; and the other was the spread of racism and Islamophobia in Europe and America, which intensified post-9/11. This was the backdrop against which the French law banning ostentatious signs of religious affiliation in state schools was proposed and finally passed in 2004. What made the issue complicated for anti-racists was the way in which the xenophobic Right in Europe and North America used the veil to justify their Islamophobia.

For liberal multiculturalists, the issue was simple. Liberal multiculturalism has a strong element of Orientalism in it: ethnic and religious minorities are seen as more or less undifferentiated, monolithic and irreducibly different from the majority. However, the attitude to them is positive rather than hostile, which has led to its being described as 'Orientalism in reverse' (Achcar 2007). The way to defend Muslims, according to this view, is to defend the right to wear the veil. Joan Scott's book, *The Politics of the Veil*, is basically a polemic putting forward this view. While her trenchant critique of the vicious racism and Islamophobia of the French Right is absolutely correct, her response constantly essentialises Muslims as a homogeneous community. Time and again one comes across contradictions between her academic integrity and her ideological position. For example, she concedes at the beginning that 'Headscarves (or veils) are worn by only a small fraction of Muslim women' (Scott 2007:4), from which one might logically conclude that the Islam practised by the vast majority has no place for them. Yet she alleges that 'By banning the headscarf, the state declared *those who espouse Islam, in whatever form*, to be literally foreigners to the French way of life' (my emphasis, *ibid.* p.149). Here the vast majority of Muslim women and girls who do not wear the headscarf are discounted, and only those who wear it are counted as 'those who espouse Islam'.

Another instance of essentialising Muslims occurs when she says 'There are not many Muslim voices in this book, in part because there weren't many to be heard during the debates' (*ibid.* p.10), yet later observes that 'many Muslims told pollsters they did not oppose such a law' (*ibid.* p.14), thus admitting that she simply does not count Muslims as Muslims if they did not oppose the law; only Muslims who opposed it are 'real' Muslims. In fact, Muslim women were highly visible and vocal in protests against the headscarf being worn in schools, making their views clear in numerous demonstrations, on TV and radio shows, and in women's magazines. Zazi Sadou of the Rassemblement Algérien des Femmes Démocrates took a leading role in this battle, as did other prominent women from Muslim communities. Thus, to present opposition to the headscarf being

worn in schools as coming solely from the racist Right is itself a distortion of the truth (Hélie-Lucas 2011:75-78).

The idea of 'them' as fundamentally different from 'us' comes through in Scott's argument that the headscarf 'could also be a simple form of self-defense, a way of avoiding abuse at the hands of one's brothers or male neighbours, hence a way of escaping oppression rather than submitting to it' (my emphasis, *ibid.* p.140). But would one ever say of an Occidental woman who, say, stopped using contraceptives because she was subjected to domestic violence when she used them, that *she had 'escaped oppression rather than submitting to it'*? Wouldn't one say, rather, that she had settled for one form of oppression in order to avoid another? Yet for the Oriental woman, being beaten into submission is seen as 'escaping oppression'!

Finally, Scott comes perilously close to racism when she rubbishes the critique of the veil offered by Chahdortt Djavann, 'whose claim to expertise was her own experience in Iran,' and who 'offered sensationalist tales of women's lack of freedom in Muslim countries' (*ibid.* p.163), as though it is obvious that a Euro-American woman would know more about Iran than a woman who was born and brought up there. If Scott is right about Iranian women wearing the veil willingly, why would they need 'morality police' to enforce it? Why would you have stories like this one?

*"I politely [told] her to cover herself up," said Hojatoleslam Ali Beheshti, an Iranian cleric in the city of Shamirzad in Semnan Province, describing a recent encounter with a woman he believed was improperly veiled.*

"She responded to me by saying: 'You [should] close your eyes.'"

The cleric...said he repeated his warning to the "bad hijab" woman, which is a way of describing women who do not fully observe the Islamic dress code that became compulsory following the 1979 revolution.

"Not only didn't she cover herself up, but she also insulted me. I asked her not to insult me anymore, but she started shouting and threatening me," Beheshti said. "She pushed me and I fell to the ground on my back. From that point on, I don't know what happened. I was just feeling the kicks of the woman who was beating me up and insulting me."

*He said he was hospitalized for three days following the attack.*

I'm not a supporter of violence, but as a woman who grew up in Iran and was harassed many times for appearing in public in a way that was deemed un-Islamic, I understand the frustration that woman in Semnan must have felt and why she lashed out at the cleric...

Young girls often cite the mandatory hijab as one of the main reasons they want to leave Iran and move to another country. Women being mistreated by the police because of their hijabs have become a common scene on the streets of the Iranian capital and other cities, especially during the hot summer months when the hijab crackdown intensifies. (Esfandiari 2012)

Martha Nussbaum's position is more nuanced. She correctly locates the debate on the veil as one between religious freedom and women's human rights. In an article where she weighs the arguments for religious liberty against those supporting a ban on the veil, she writes that 'When Turkey banned the veil long ago, there was a good reason in that specific context: because women who went unveiled were being subjected to harassment and violence' (Nussbaum 2010). She thereby concedes that women's human rights take precedence over religious liberty when the two principles collide; put differently, there can be no religious liberty to violate another person's human rights. Yet when she continues, 'But in today's Europe women can dress more or less as they please; there

is no reason for the burden to religious liberty that the ban involves,' she reveals considerable ignorance about what is really happening in the suburbs of Paris, where, in Karima Bennouné's words, it is not the law of the Republic but the 'Law of the Brothers' that prevails: 'Not-being-veiled has led to a range of terrible consequences for women and girls, including social stigma, family pressure and violence, attacks in the community, and even death. Young *beur* women in the banlieues have been attacked and gang-raped, in the ritual known as the *tournante*, and even murdered for wearing miniskirts, appearing "loose", or being disobedient' (Bennouné 2011:24). Is this so very different from the context in which Turkey banned the veil?

There is a world of difference between the nice, safe, Europe of Nussbaum's imagination and the 'gang-rape hell' of the Paris suburbs (George 2004). Given this context, it is understandable why so many Muslim women supported the ban on the headscarf in public schools in France, because it teaches girls and boys that girls who do not wear it are fair game for physical and sexual abuse. In her pamphlet *Down with Veils!* Djavann writes, 'To impose a veil on a minor is, strictly speaking, to violate her, to use her body, to define it as a sexual object meant for men' (Djavann 2003:12); by making minor girls responsible for 'guarding their chastity' in this way, it legitimates the sexual abuse of children who do not wear it. In that sense, girls who wear the headscarf constitute a risk to girls who do not.

In Britain, there is a similar messy situation, with Islamophobes demanding a ban on the veil (Al Jazeera 2010), right-wing Muslims in the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) issuing a fatwa that the veil is a requirement of Islam and women cannot question it without risking apostasy (Gilligan 2011), and progressive Muslims disagreeing in the strongest possible terms (Alibhai-Brown 2009). While the debate has been less shrill than in France, the consequences for women and girls who refuse to conform to the religious code of honour symbolised by the veil are equally horrific; for every Banaz Mahmod or Shafiea Ahmed murdered for failing to comply with it, there are thousands of others whose brutal abuse never hits the headlines (Raza 2012; Hundal 2012). As in France, progressive Muslims have had to struggle against the tendency of the state and others to accept self-appointed 'leaders' like the MCB as representatives of the community as a whole; for example, British Muslims for Secular Democracy contradicted an 'information and guidance' document concerning Muslim pupils in state schools issued by the MCB, pointing out that the 'MCB being an umbrella body for mainly mosques and other religious organisations is not a representative body for all Muslim parents in Britain and therefore the views expressed in the document should not be considered by the school or the government as the collective will of the numerous Muslim communities in Britain' (British Muslims for Secular Democracy 2007).

## **The position of the Left**

The issue of the headscarf ban split the Left, with a large section opposing it. The statement by the International Committee of the Fourth International [1] is a good example of the arguments put forward:

*The headscarf ban is a discriminatory measure that encourages right-wing forces...*

From the standpoint of the struggle for social equality and the objective interests of working people, the fundamental consideration in evaluating such a measure is: does it contribute to or impede the development of the international unity and political consciousness of the working class? This measure clearly works against both, encouraging anti-immigrant and communalist sentiment and fueling divisions within the working class.

From the standpoint of democratic rights, the law violates basic rights of religious freedom and



gives the French state new powers to intervene in matters of individual thought and expression. It is...a government fiat that abridges the right of individuals to express, in a manner that does not harm the rights of others, their personal religious beliefs.

Many of the law's proponents claim that it is directed against the oppression of women, as symbolized by the headscarf. This, however, is a sophistic argument. It is impossible to attribute a democratic and "liberating" character to a law that stigmatizes an entire category of people, based on their religious observances." (Lefebvre 2004)

The influence of liberal multiculturalism is evident in the claim that 'the law violates basic rights of religious freedom,' and 'abridges the right of individuals to express, in a manner that does not harm the interests of others, their personal religious beliefs'. As we have seen, wearing the headscarf is not harmless: it puts girls who do not wear it at risk. Secondly, the claim that the law 'stigmatizes an entire category of people, based on their religious observances' shares the Orientalist approach of ignoring differences among Muslims and lumping them all in the same category symbolised by the hijab. In Britain, the Socialist Workers' Party went even further when it formed an electoral alliance (Respect) with the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), which is affiliated to the 'moderate' fundamentalists of the Muslim Brotherhood, and invited a prominent member of the MAB to be part of their electoral slate (Achcar 2005).

Once you acknowledge differences among Muslims, you have to ask: whose religious rights are being violated by the law? Clearly, not those of the vast majority of Muslim girls who do not wear the headscarf, nor of the men and women who agree with them, nor of the girls who wear it only in order to avoid physical and sexual abuse. On the contrary, their religious freedom *not* to wear the headscarf would be impaired by failure to pass the law, since that would reinforce the power of those who force girls and women to veil. It is only the religious freedom of girls who *want* to wear the headscarf, and the men and women who support them, that would be denied. But these are, as we have seen, proponents of a right-wing version of Islam.

The reasons why women support explicitly patriarchal right-wing politics are complex, and cannot be gone into here; all we can do is to recognise that this happens. Millions of women voted for the Nazi party despite its stated agenda of restricting women's concerns to children, church and kitchen, and not all of them would have been rabid anti-Semites or hardcore fascists. Many would have done so because they had not bothered to think through the consequences of Nazi power for themselves and others. Similarly, only a minority of the women and girls wearing the hijab voluntarily would be hardcore fundamentalists; many would do so because they have not questioned the belief that they will go to hell if they don't wear it, nor figured out the consequences for others if they do. But in both cases, such women share responsibility for the oppression unleashed by right-wing forces.

Thus for Marxists to support *only* the right to wear the veil is, in the first place, a failure of solidarity with progressive Muslims locally, especially women, who are fighting for the right *not* to wear it. Secondly, such a position ignores the connection between what happens in the countries to which Muslims have migrated and what happens in their countries of origin, with tolerance of the oppression of women in the former (e.g. France and Britain) helping to encourage crimes against women and growth of the far Right in the latter (e.g. Algeria, Iran and Pakistan). Thirdly, the idea that condoning the veil or headscarf in Muslim communities has no impact outside those communities was blown apart by the so-called 'grooming scandals' in Rochdale in May and October 2012, where men of Pakistani origin were found to have been abusing English girls. One of the Muslim men interviewed after the first child sex abuse ring was exposed asked on TV, 'What were these girls doing outside after dark?' The implication was that 'they are sluts, they deserve what they get'. What was most appalling was that this man, like the rapists in the suburbs of Paris, did not seem to understand that the abusers had committed a crime. These men are so deeply immersed in



the politics of the veil that they cannot see anything wrong in the sexual abuse of children who by their definition are 'sluts'. Muslim fundamentalism is also a massive threat to gay human rights (Tatchell 1995). It is naïve to imagine that endorsing the Right within immigrant communities will not have the effect of reinforcing right-wing politics both in their countries of origin and in the countries where they have settled.

The failure to understand this occurs partly because these Marxists have not understood the difference between religion as such and religious fundamentalism, and partly because they have abandoned the original Marxist position on secularism (which demands a complete separation of religion from state power) in favour of a semi-secularist position that the state should show equal respect to all religions. India is the prime example of the latter form of secularism, and demonstrates its fatal weaknesses. A virulent form of the majority religion – Hinduism – is so deeply inscribed in the state that Muslims and other members of minority communities can be butchered in pogroms with almost complete impunity; at the same time, completely innocent Muslims can be framed, arrested, incarcerated and tortured for years on end before they are released for lack of evidence against them. It is abundantly clear that Muslims have neither equal protection of the law nor equality before the law, both of which are core values of democracy. But instead of defending these values, 'equal respect for Islam' takes the form of the state bowing down to the wishes of self-appointed leaders of the community, who, for example, have retained a form of Muslim family law in which a man can divorce his wife by saying 'talaq' ('I divorce you') three times. Needless to say, a woman cannot divorce her husband in the same manner. Practically all Muslim women and many men oppose this practice as unIslamic, and it certainly violates the principle of equality before the law and equal protection of the law, yet it stays on the statute book. Significantly, it is not Muslim fundamentalists but secular activists who have waged a committed struggle for justice for Muslims.

It is simply unrealistic to expect state functionaries to be familiar with and take positions on theological disputes within each religion; it is simpler for them just to accept what the fundamentalists say. Thus 'equal respect for all religions' becomes 'equal respect for the fundamentalists of all religions', and equality before the law falls by the wayside. This is undoubtedly better than a theocratic state, but still far from being a full defence of democratic rights.

Marxists need to recognise that while secularism as the separation between state power and religion is not a sufficient condition for democracy, it is a necessary condition; they should demand that the state be involved only in ensuring that the human and democratic rights of everyone without exception are respected equally, regardless of religion. This form of secularism is perfectly compatible with freedom of religion, so long as religious practices do not violate anyone's human rights. Ideally, it would mean that state institutions including schools should be free of religious symbols and that state functionaries and employees do not wear such symbols, as a visible pledge that they will not discriminate between members of the public according to their religion. But what about members of the public, including schoolchildren? Banning school students from wearing religious or political symbols seems to go a step too far in the direction of clamping down on freedom of expression, *except* in cases where the symbols insult or threaten other pupils. Thus if a child comes to school wearing a swastika badge, no matter how innocently, it would be legitimate to demand that he or she take it off, because it is a symbol that insults and threatens pupils belonging to groups whom the Nazis tried to exterminate and who are still under threat from neo-Nazis. Similarly, if a girl comes to school wearing a hijab, no matter how innocently, it would be legitimate to demand that she take it off because it is a symbol of the women and girls who have been subjected to beatings, gang-rapes, acid attacks and murder in its name, and an insult and threat to girls who do not wear it.

For girls outside school, older students and women, the only principled position on the hijab that the Left could support is that all women and girls in all countries should have the right to wear it or not

wear it, free of coercion from the state, their communities or their families. So long as there is pressure to wear the veil, the idea that wearing it is a matter of 'choice' is an illusion:

*"The truth is that mental, emotional, physical, social or legal coercion over the issue of the veil immediately takes away the "freedom" of the "choice."*

Men have no right to exercise control over women in any way, shape, or form. Their opinions have no validity in what concerns women's bodies and lives. Recruiting, paying, or giving some women a portion of the patriarchal privilege in order that they may influence and coerce other women over the issue of the veil, whether by "gentle persuasion" or out-and-out blackmail, is merely another trick men use to exercise control over and dominate women.

Here's what freedom of choice really looks like when it comes to the niqab, the hijab, the burqa, and the abaya:

"Nothing happens if you wear it. Nothing happens if you don't wear it. Now, it's up to you."

Then stand back and let the woman decide for herself. And stay out of it, for good.

And for those of you who feel a hijab or a niqab or a burqa or an abaya is not a prison, but a symbol of empowerment, I want to ask you why a piece of cloth on your head or face has so much sway over your lives that it transforms you from a whore into a virtuous woman. (Bina Shah 2011)

In other words, the whole assumption that women and girls who wear the headscarf or veil are virtuous and those who do not are temptresses who are fair game for physical and sexual assault in this life or are condemned to hell in the next makes 'free choice' illusory; only if it is understood that wearing the hijab does not make women and girls more virtuous than those who do not wear it does the choice become truly 'free'.

Like the liberal multiculturalists, these Left groups seem unable to understand that 'As in all religions, various interpretations of the text lead to very different interpretations of how a Muslim woman should behave. Islam, like other religions, is hugely diverse: there is a wide range of theological and political positions in Islam, stretching from liberation theology to fundamentalism. In recent history, progressive interpreters of the Qur'an have been persecuted, jailed, exiled or killed, and their written work censored, banned and disappeared from libraries and book shops. Nevertheless, despite lack of visibility today, liberals always existed and fought courageously for an enlightened approach to their sacred texts' (Hélie-Lucas 2012). By making the veil a symbol for Islam as such, Left groups deny this diversity and endorse the Islamist Right, thereby becoming complicit in the persecution of left-wing Muslims.

The ultimate irony is that far from combating racism and Islamophobia, this reinforces the Islamophobic conception of Islam as a sexist, misogynist religion. To 'defend' Muslims in Europe and America by endorsing the hijab is analogous to 'defending' Christians in countries where they have been subjected to pogroms (like India, Pakistan and Egypt) by endorsing the Vatican position on abortion and contraception. It should be obvious that the Left in the latter countries should combat prejudice against Christians by emphasising, among other things, that most of them do not share the barbaric misogyny which condemned a young woman to a painful death rather than remove an unviable foetus from her body while its heart was beating (BBC 2012). Similarly, the Left in the former countries should emphasise, among other things, that most Muslims do not share the misogynistic view of women and girls who do not wear the hijab as temptresses who can legitimately be abused. In both cases, it is critically important to emphasise the gulf that exists between progressives and the fundamentalist Right who share the same religion.

## Conclusion

Once we recognise the fact that Islam (like other religions) is hugely diverse and that Muslims are divided along political lines, it becomes much easier to steer between Islamophobia and Muslim fundamentalism, because both are on the Right, and both have very similar conceptions of Islam. It goes without saying that the Left has to fight against all manifestations of racial and communal discrimination and abuse, but it is equally obligatory for the Left to fight against all manifestations of sexual discrimination and abuse. The first requirement for doing this in the context of Islamophobia is to explain to people in Europe and America, most of whom are clueless about Islam, that it is a complex and diverse religion, and that the veil is a symbol only of its fundamentalist, right-wing versions. The second requirement is to offer full support and solidarity to the Muslim women and men who are actually fighting racism and patriarchy, often at great risk to themselves, instead of ignoring them or pretending they don't exist. Finally, it needs to be recognised that revolutionary socialists should not fight against some forms of oppression while condoning others; for example, it is necessary to fight against imperialism, racism, Islamophobia, sexism and homophobia simultaneously, even if this makes the struggle far more complicated and dangerous.

**Rohini Hensman**

### **References**

- Achcar, Gilbert, 2005, 'Marxists and Religion – yesterday and today,' *International Viewpoint*, 16 March. Available on ESSF (article 259), [Marxists and Religion — Yesterday and Today.](#)]]
- Achcar, Gilbert, 2007, 'Orientalism in Reverse: Post-1979 Trends in French Orientalism,' 4<sup>th</sup> *Edward Said Memorial Lecture*, University of Warwick, 20 November
- Alibhai-Brown, Yasmin, 2009, 'Wearing the burqa is neither Islamic nor socially acceptable,' *The Independent*, 13 July,  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/yasmin-alibhai-brown/yasmin-alibhaibrown-wear-the-burqa-is-neither-islamic-nor-socially-acceptable-1743375.html>
- Al Jazeera, 2010, 'UK minister rejects veil ban calls,' 18 July,  
<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2010/07/20107181778114793.html>
- Amer, Sahar, n.d., 'Uncovering the Meaning of the Veil in Islam,'  
[http://www.unc.edu/depts/europe/conferences/Veil2000/Veil-sa/veil\\_islam-amer.PDF](http://www.unc.edu/depts/europe/conferences/Veil2000/Veil-sa/veil_islam-amer.PDF)
- Aslan, Reza, 2011, *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam*, Random House
- Armstrong, Karen, 2001: *Islam: A Short History*, Phoenix Press, London
- Assad, Muhammad, 1980, *The Message of the Qur'an*, Gibraltar
- BBC, 2012, 'Woman dies after abortion request "refused" at Galway hospital,' BBC News, 14 November, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20321741>
- Bennoune, Karima, 2011, 'The Law of the Republic versus the "Law of the Brothers",' *Women Living Under Muslim Laws Dossier 30-31: The struggle for secularism in Europe and North America*, pp.11-42
- British Muslims for Secular Democracy, 2007, 'Response to "information and guidance" document by Muslim Council of Britain', *Secularism is a Women's Issue*, 28 March,

<http://www.siawi.org/article4.html>

Djavann, Chahdortt, 2003, *Bas les voiles*, Gallimard, Paris (tr, Marieme Hélié-Lucas)

Engineer, Asghar Ali, 2005, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi

Esfandiari, Golnaz, 2012, 'Cleric beaten up by "badly veiled" woman,' Radio Free Europe RadioLiberty, 18 September, <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/24711685.html>

Gilligan, Andrew, 2011, 'Muslim Council: women cannot debate wearing veil,' *The Telegraph*, 16 April,  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/8455955/Muslim-Council-women-cannot-debate-wearing-veil.html>

George, Rose, 'Obituary: Samira Bellil,' *The Guardian*, 13 September,  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2004/sep/13/guardianobituaries.france>

Hélié-Lucas, Marieme, 2011, 'A South-North transfer of political competence: Women of migrant Muslim descent in France,' Women Living Under Muslim Laws Dossier 30-31: *The struggle for secularism in Europe and North America*, pp.43-85 Available on ESSF (article 26976), [France: Why are women of migrant Muslim descent at the forefront of the struggle for secularism?.](#)]]

Hélié-Lucas, Marieme, 2012, 'Veil-S', Secularism is a Women's Issue, 28 April,  
<http://www.siawi.org/article3550.html> Available on ESSF (article 26985), [On 'Veil-S'.](#)]]

Hoodbhoy, Pervez, 2010, 'Drones: Theirs and Ours,' Viewpoint online, November,  
<http://www.viewpointonline.net/drones-theirs-and-ours.html>

Hundal, Sunny, 2012, 'The left cannot remain silent over "honour killings",' *New Statesman*, 4 August,  
<http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/politics/2012/08/left-cannot-remain-silent-over-honour-killings>

Lefebvre, Alex, 2004, 'France: National Assembly bans Muslim headscarves in schools,' World Socialist Web Site, 18 February, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/feb2004/scar-f18.shtml>

Nanda, Meera 2011, 'Ideological Convergences: Hindutva and the Norway Massacre,' *EPW*, Vol.46 No.53, 31 December

Nussbaum, Martha, 2010, 'Veiled Threats?' *New York Times*, 11 July,  
<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/07/11/veiled-threats/>

Raza, Anaam, 2012, 'Community Woes,' *News on Sunday* Special Report, August,  
<http://jang.com.pk/thenews/aug2012-weekly/nos-26-08-2012/spr.htm#1>

Sakhawat Hossain, Rokeya, 1993, *Sultana's Dream*, Narigrantha Prabartana, Dhaka

Scott, Joan Wallach, 2007, *The Politics of the Veil*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford

Shah, Bina, 2011, 'Nudity, Niqab and the illusion of "free choice",' *The Express Tribune*, 28 November, <http://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/9105/nudity-niqab-and-the-illusion-of-free-choice/>

Taseer, Shehribano, 2012, 'The girl who changed Pakistan: Malala Yousafzai,' *The Daily Beast*, 22 October,  
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/10/21/the-girl-who-changed-pakistan-malala-yousafzai>

[.html](#)

Tatchell, Peter, 1995, 'Islamic Fundaamentalism in Britain,'

<http://www.petertatchell.net/religion/islamic.htm>

*The Koran* (parallel edition), 1990, tr. N.J.Dawood, Penguin Books, New Delhi

The Runnymede Trust, 1997, 'Islamophobia: a challenge for us all,'

<http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/islamophobia.pdf>

---

## Footnotes

[1] There are different organizations named Fourth International. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is a different one from the Fourth International (FI) - which has an IC! - which publishes International Viewpoint. Note from ESSF.