

Why we should defend Secularism

Wednesday 24 October 2007, by [COWPER Alex](#) (Date first published: December 2004).

In recent debates on the British left, comrades of the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) have downplayed the importance of the fight for secularism today. They argue that because of the war on terror, the overriding need is to combat Islamophobia and build alliances with Muslim communities under attack. In this context secularism becomes a weapon of the right, not the left. Alex Cowper argues that on the contrary socialists can only fight effectively against Islamophobia if we are also prepared to put forward a left secularism, although this does not imply that we should impose secular ideas on all broad movements. Moreover, a greater danger to the world than Islamic fundamentalism is the influence of Christian fundamentalism, not only in the United States, but also in the UK - as was shown recently by the orchestrated outrage against the TV screening of 'Jerry Springer - The Opera'. Only a thoroughgoing secularism can ultimately defeat this kind of reactionary movement.

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, [\[1\]](#) is against this law. But the LCR has previously supported teachers who have excluded students from school for wearing the hijab. [\[2\]](#)

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. [\[3\]](#) 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 [\[4\]](#) 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.' [\[5\]](#)

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.' [6]

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.

P.S.

* From Socialist Outlook n° 5, Winter 2004. Socialist Outlook is a marxist review produced by the ISG, British section of the FI.

Footnotes

[1] French Section of the Fourth International (LCR).

[2] See, however, the LCR public statement, 21 October 2004: 'It is obvious that the law on religious symbols has settled nothing. This is confirmed by the outrageous manner in which it has been implemented, without any spirit of compromise, against young Sikhs or high-school students who had abandoned the veil/scarf for the bandana. In these circumstances the LCR, which has always fought against the wearing of the veil/scarf as a symbol of the oppression of women, condemns these exclusions. These exclusions are even more scandalous as in Alsace the Concordat allows the presence in schools of the Church, priests and religious symbols.'

[3] Jane Kelly, 'Only the Oppressed Can Decide', *Socialist Outlook*, No.4, Autumn 2004.

[4] Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender.

[5] In his comments on the Erfurt Programme of the German Social Democrats.

[6] Letter to the Guardian, 27 December 2004.