

This behaviour took place up and down the country. Not only against me but fellow anti-Zionist Jews like Roland Rance. I wrote a number of letters to leading student organisers in Socialist Organiser/AWL to ask them to take this up. They never even replied. Instead we now have Randall/Ismail peddling the same falsehoods as the racists liars of UJS.

If Ismail/Randall want proof of their links and closeness to UJS, their deliberate retailing of the lie that I supported the banning of Zionist/UJS soc-

ieties is that proof. And being stupid liars they probably didn't even realise that this allegation has been copiously documented!

I note that Randall/Ismail finish their tirade with a quotation from Mark Twain in support of their "liar, liar, pants on fire" routine. Clearly they are also acquainted with another of Mark Twain's sayings: "Truth is the most valuable thing we have. Let us economise it." Unfortunately they have been so economic that there was nothing left of it in their article. ■

An Enlightened Response to Ian Birchall

Andrew Coates

IN 'So What *is* Secularism?' (*What Next?* No.30) Ian Birchall takes me to task for a defence of secularism. He begins by questioning the use of polemical style, races through a picture of the Enlightenment, offers an interpretation of the history of French *laïcité* and the Marxist approach to religion. Birchall compares the stand of those opposed to the veil to those socialists who refused to support Dreyfus, and defends, with some gusto, the political project of his party, the SWP, and Respect. Some of his points are well-taken (those concerning the abstraction of many of my formulae). Other judgements, however, are extremely contentious. Birchall fails to grapple with the nature of political secularism, its philosophical roots, the account of the French secular education system is hopelessly skewed, and his belief that Respect is "secularism in practice", is wholly misguided.

Birchall's portrait of the Enlightenment resembles Aghion's farce *Le Libertin* (on Diderot) more than a serious historical review. Voltaire, it is true, is praised for his involvement in the case of the La Barre (one could add, the Lally affair, the Sirven affair, and, above all, the Calas affair – all victims of ecclesiastical intolerance). But apparently he kept servants and was reluctant to let his acid scepticism spread to them. Bad, bad Voltaire! He and Diderot are singled out for their vacillations towards enlightened despotism. Marx is cited to show that their combat against organised religion ignored

the need to change social conditions (by the way, didn't Marx have some dubious relations with his servant Helene?). All this may well be true. Yet the complex network of ideas emanating from the Lumières contributed to a directly political fight amongst the masses. They're the origin of the concept of human rights, from the early feminist Olympe de Gouges to Tom Paine. In any case, the values of the Enlightenment, which I advocated, were rather broader: the cluster summarised by Kant's *What is Enlightenment?* (1784). That is, the freedom from the command to *obey*: "Have courage to use your *own* understanding!" It is precisely this that is threatened by a renewed acceptance of religious authority and which needs defending.

The picture of the French tradition of *laïcité* is less summary, though no less lop-sided. Birchall presents a functionalist explanation of the growth of mass secular education, endowing students with the cultural capital of republicanism in order to bolster the nation. The relentless clash, for the whole of the 19th century, between the Catholic Church and republicans over the control and content of schooling is left unmentioned. Yet this was a crucial point: the right of the Clergy to oversee all aspects of educational life. The secularists (an approximate translation of *laïc*, which includes the notion of freedom from church control as well as from religion) included Catholic "gallacians" opposed to Rome's power, progressive Christians

(against the Erastian fusion of church and state), deists (in Voltaire's tradition), and free-thinkers, atheists and socialists. (See Georges Weill, *Histoire de l'idée laïque en France au XIX siècle*, Hachette, 2004.) It's not hard to trace a very different picture of the line-up in this battle to Birchall's. Amongst the latter were the most fervent supporters of Dreyfus, such as the most important figure of French socialism, Jean Jaurès. Their nationalist opponents, for example, Maurice Barrès, explicitly attacked secular rationalist education, in *Les Déracinés* (1897) blaming it for France's military weakness. That Jules Ferry, with whom the famous 1905 Separation of Church and State is most associated, supported colonialism as well as secular education can be acknowledged. But that hardly means he backed secularism *because* he favoured imperial expansion.

The push and pull in France over secularism has endured to the present day. From the mass Catholic demonstrations in the early 1980s to protest at plans to bring their state-aided private schools under public supervision, to the contrary mass mobilisation at a project to extend religious education's rights in the early 1990s, this is a live issue. It is within the teachers' unions that support for *laïcité* is staunchest. Some allied groups, such as *La Libre Pensée*, consider the present system already far too complicit with faith institutions. This is surely right, and one needs seriously to consider the institutional framework of a schooling system which excludes so many, fails to tackle inequality ethnic as well as class), and a host of other social issues which socialists would consider priorities.

It is not surprising, therefore, that with this background that a swift response came against an Islamicist inspired campaign to promote the veil in public educational institutions (and, notably, sexual segregation). Apparently Birchall is unaware of the nature of Islamicism: from moderate and conservative wings to the most radical, the different strands are united in their opposition to secularism in any shape and form. All these shades

of politics rest on the weight of a revealed truth: a book whose authority is beyond doubt, and its project, its states, grounded on Islam. One does not have to be an advocate of Michel Onfray's "atheology" to see that there is a serious problem here.

It is one thing to accept the multicultural argument that religious figures will always be present in public life (obviously the case), and that some may be progressive, others not. It is quite another to incorporate the demands of religiously inspired political groups into the foundations of public bodies. Birchall considers that those who wish to prevent schools (the target of the ban on *all* ostentatious religious symbols) from being a battleground for those who wish to impose their "pure" style of dress, is comparable to those French *ouvriers*, like Jules Guesde, who refused to defend Dreyfus. As I have indicated, humanist socialists, like Jaurès, assassinated for his opposition to the Great War, were strong supporters of secularism. It would traduce their memory to imagine them defending any form of theological code, whether in schools or outside. Birchall further considers any "state ban" on the veil anathema, though it is hard to see how any regulation affecting the education system could be anything other than a matter of the state.

Finally, Birchall claims that voting figures demonstrate that Respect is not a communalist or religiously based party. Post-*Big Brother*, it may seem cruel to talk of its leader these days, though as a laughing stock his career is progressing well. Still, George Galloway has repeatedly stated that his organisation is the "party of Muslims", and he himself their representative. True, he has wider allies. Notably the curious figures who signed his petition to free Tariq Aziz. Perhaps it's indicative of his trajectory that one of them was a person I cited myself to demonstrate a convergence between Respect's stand and the culturalist far-right: Alain de Benoist. ■

Alliance for Green Socialism

The Alliance for Green Socialism is a political organisation devoted to the building of a peaceful, environmentally safe and socially responsible world. A world in which diversity is both respected and celebrated. A world in which relations are based on mutual understanding and not force, where rights and a decent life are available for all, not just the rich. The AGS believes this can come about by the development of a democratic, socialist and environmentally conscious society.

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