

So What *is* Secularism?

Ian Birchall

ANDREW COATES' article 'In Defence of Militant Secularism' (*What Next?* No.29) calls for a reply. In attempting to produce one, I shall try to avoid the polemical style which Coates has adopted.

Thus he puts the word "Islamophobia" in inverted commas, as though no such phenomenon existed. Worse, the Anglo-Saxon left also get inverted commas, as though those of us who happen to disagree with Coates on this issue have been excluded from the left. And the Respect Coalition is dismissed as "so-called". Coates may disagree with the politics of Respect; that is his absolute right. For him to suggest that we are masquerading under a false name is a quite different matter.

There is a long tradition of this sort of writing on the left (and, if needs must, I am quite good at it myself). But I don't think it helps rational debate. I shall attempt to avoid such slurs in my reply. I don't question Coates' sincerity as a socialist. I just think he is wrong.

To begin with the Enlightenment. Coates is absolutely right to defend the Enlightenment tradition (widely repudiated by post-modernism). But the Enlightenment must be understood in historical terms. When Voltaire and his comrades were alive, the Church in many respects was the main enemy. The absolute king ruled by divine right. Blasphemy could be punished by death, as in the case of the chevalier de La Barre, who was tortured and executed in 1766 for failing to take off his hat to a religious procession; Voltaire courageously took up the case.

At the same time the Enlightenment was predominantly bourgeois. The leading Enlightenment figures had a deep distrust of the masses. There is a story – perhaps apocryphal, but reflecting much that he wrote – that when one of Voltaire's visitors started a conversation about atheism, Voltaire sent the servants out of the room, worried that if they lost their fear of God they would murder him in his bed. And those who are so shocked by George Galloway's formal politeness to Saddam Hussein should look at Voltaire's relations with Frederick the Great – or Diderot's with Catherine the Great.

Marxism is in a sense a product of the Enlight-

enment, but it also involves a dialectical critique of the Enlightenment. Marx rejected as idealist the notion that the main task of revolutionaries is to attack religion. What Marx argued – in the full text of the famous "opium of the people" passage ('Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'; see <http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>) – is that religion is the product of social conditions, and will only disappear when those social conditions disappear. Will religion vanish with the socialist revolution? I suspect the process may take some time. What is fairly certain is that neither Coates nor I shall be there to see.

The tradition of *laïcité* in France is also much more double-edged than Coates suggests. Universal state primary education, based on the principles of *laïcité*, was introduced in France in 1882. Partly this was, as elsewhere, a response to the need for literacy in a modernising economy. But there was another reason. France was a large, and mainly rural, country. A great many peasants had only the vaguest notion that they were French citizens. Yet in every village there was a priest. The rulers of the republic were afraid that too many peasants would follow the politics of the Vatican rather than of Paris. The schools were designed to give children a sense of the nation they belonged to. (It is no coincidence that the politician most associated with universal education, Jules Ferry, was also the architect of the French colonisation of Indochina.)

The strategy succeeded. In 1914 (despite the courageous opposition of a certain number of *instituteurs* and *institutrices*) the regime succeeded in mobilising the French peasantry into the trenches to defend "their" Republic against the Germans.

And as any observer of French political life knows, *laïcité* has all too often served as an alibi for those who have been willing to make disrespectful jokes about the Virgin Mary to cover up for the fact that they aren't prepared to fight any real social grievances. The whole history of the Radical Party is there to prove it. And I suspect that many of those shouting loudest in the current furore over the hijab are those who have no intention of leading a fight against poverty, exploitation, unemployment or racism.

I find Coates' definition of secularism – “the freedom of the public sphere from religious dogma” – profoundly unhelpful, because it is so imprecise. If he means that there should be complete separation of church and state, then I have no problems. The Church of England should be disestablished, the blasphemy laws abolished, and religious education in schools replaced by an objective consideration of the role of the various religions as a part of History and Social Studies.

I'll go along with all that, though I don't think they are issues which inspire much passion among most citizens. And even here there are certain contradictions. I am so bored by the whole issue of House of Lords reforms that I can't even remember if the bishops are still in the House of Lords. Of course they shouldn't be. Nonetheless in practice they might be more willing to speak out against, say, the invasion of Iraq, than many of the superannuated Labour MPs and trade-union bureaucrats who are there as “representatives of the working class”.

But Coates apparently wants to ban religion, not just from the apparatus of the state, but from “the public sphere”. Now the fact is that a great many people hold religious beliefs, and inevitably their political conduct will be influenced by their beliefs. Those of us who are atheists may deplore this, and those of us who are Marxists may offer a sociological explanation. But we can hardly prevent it happening.

It is true that there are “those crazed by God”. (I'm more afraid of the Christian fanatics in the Pentagon with nuclear weapons than of the Islamic variety.) But there are also many cases of a very different sort. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were both motivated by religious belief; would Coates have excluded them from the “public sphere”? I have many disagreements with Bruce Kent, but any anti-war activist must respect his tireless and courageous campaigning. If someone comes to my union meeting and proposes a day of prayer instead of strike action, I shall politely demur. But if they say: “God made us all equal, but those bastards in management earn ten times what we get”, I shall applaud and leave the theological discussion till later.

Coates should look at the Marxist tradition. In 1905 Lenin was keen to develop a relationship with Father Gapon, though he was criticised by many Bolsheviks for being too sympathetic to this clergyman who turned out to be a police agent. But as Krupskaya pointed out, “Gapon was a living part of the revolution that was sweeping Russia”. (N.S. Krupskaya, *Memories of Lenin*, London, 1970, p.104.) Earlier, in 1903, the Bolsheviks had launched a paper called *Rassvet* (Dawn) aimed specifically at members of religious sects, of whom there were over ten million in Russia. After the Russian Revolution Trotsky argued for a sensitive and non-sectarian approach to Muslims, and in

particular rejected any attempt to put Muslim nationalism on the same level as Russian nationalism:

“And this uniform conception must consist in a non-uniform attitude to Great Russian and to Muslim nationalism: in relation to the former, ruthless struggle, stern rebuff, especially in those cases when it is displayed in the administrative and governmental sphere, in relation to the latter – patient, attentive, painstaking educational work.” (A. Richardson [ed], *In Defence of the Russian Revolution*, London, 1995, p.181.)

Where does this leave the hijab? Coates claims it is oppressive. I have my doubts. My old mother, a very proper Christian lady, used to wear a headscarf – whether to quell lust or just in order to look respectable I don't know. The “simple fact” is that in the customs of most societies men and women dress differently. The logic of Coates' position – that women should not wear the hijab because men don't – is that women should be obliged to bathe topless in public swimming pools.

Moreover, it is quite clear that for the state to ban the hijab will undoubtedly have consequences the exact opposite of what Coates wants. The more the hijab is banned, the more it becomes a symbol of resistance, and the more young people will be pushed towards fundamentalism. When socialist organisations refuse to admit women wearing the hijab, they turn those women, and their associates, away from socialism. Over a hundred years ago many French socialists refused to support Dreyfus, on the grounds – as the syndicalist Emile Pouget put it – that he was “one of their richest officers, an Alsatian Yid called Dreyfus”. That is where “class-related politics”, understood in a crudely literal fashion, leads. Many Jews became totally disillusioned with socialism. The result, in terms of recruitment to Zionism, is one we are still living with today.

Even if it were true that the hijab is oppressive, that would not justify a state ban. It has always been central to the socialist tradition (as distinct from Enlightenment elitism) that the emancipation of the oppressed is the task of the oppressed themselves. It greatly amuses me that Trotskyists who oppose state bans on fascists by reciting the appropriate quotes from Trotsky are quite willing to see the agents of the selfsame bourgeois state snatching scarves from young women's heads.

One of my most vivid memories of the great anti-war demos was two young Asian women, marching side by side and sharing a megaphone, taking it in turn to shout anti-imperialist slogans. One wore the hijab, the other did not. Now I suspect that in private they have fierce arguments – and if my opinion were of any relevance, I would be on the side of the bare-headed one. But it is they, and they alone, who must determine whether they are oppressed and how to liberate themselves.

Coates charges that Respect has abandoned

class in favour of faith “communities”. But the overwhelming majority of British Muslims are working class or not very prosperous shopkeepers etc. In my own local area we got the breakdown of Respect votes in the 2004 elections ward by ward. In Edmonton Green ward Respect got over 11 percent. In the neighbouring, and more affluent Grange ward we got less than 2 percent. At the same time the local authority published figures on life expectancy. Men in Edmonton Green live, on average, eight-and-a-half years less than their Grange neighbours (72.2 as against 80.8, a difference of twelve percent). The simple reason is poverty. Certainly there are a lot of Muslims in Edmonton Green. But I see that result as a class vote rather than a community vote.

Finally, in Bethnal Green and Bow both the Tories and the Liberals stood Muslim candidates

in the general election. Therefore Muslims who voted for George Galloway, the Respect candidate, were voting for his programme rather than on the basis of religious affinity. Doubtless it is the values of their faith that makes them oppose Bush and Blair’s murderous war. But they chose a resolute opponent of the war rather than a Muslim who has joined a pro-war party (or an inconsistent and unreliable opponent of the war, in the case of the Liberal Democrats). That Muslims, Christians and socialists should join in opposing Bush and Blair’s criminal war is entirely to be welcomed, and something that most Muslims, with their long tradition of tolerance, will approve, even if they do not accept the term “secularist”. To me, as an atheist, such secularism in practice is far more relevant than the abstract version which Coates is pushing. ■

Islamophobia Watch

Islamophobia Watch was initiated in January 2005 as a project to document material in the public domain which advocates a fear and hatred of the Muslim peoples of the world and Islam as a religion. Islamophobia Watch has been founded with a determination not to allow the racist ideology of Western imperialism to gain common currency in its demonisation of Islam.

‘You wouldn’t even think they’re non-Muslims such is their analysis of the cancer of Islamophobia’ – Osama Saeed, Muslim Association of Britain

‘Islamophobia-watch has excelled itself ... in grovelling before Islamist reaction’ – Pete Radcliff, Alliance for Workers’ Liberty

www.islamophobia-watch.com

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