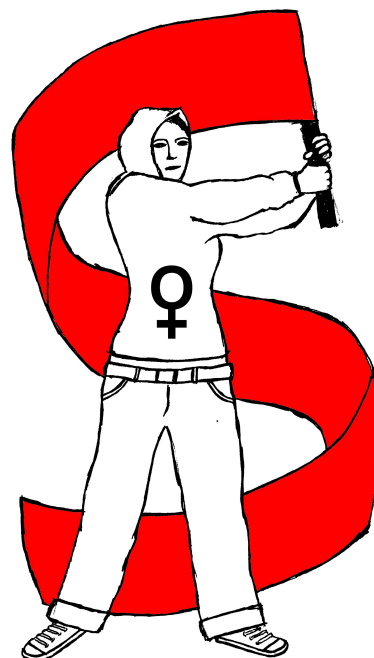# Alliance for Workers' Liberty
Discussion Bulletin

313

Islam, political Islam, "Islamophobia": background

Where does political Islam come from?

by Clive Bradley

From Workers' Liberty 2/2 (2002)

'The central axis of world politics in the future is likely to be... the conflict between 'the West and the Rest' and the responses of non-Western civilisations to Western power and values'. So wrote prominent American intellectual Samuel P Huntington, in a much-hyped article in 1993, later a book, entitled The Clash of Civilisations. Influential though the theory was, as the United States and its allies have bombed Afghanistan they have been at pains to distance themselves from it, for fear of alienating allies in the region, mainly Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, which they fear to be vulnerable to Islamist revolt. Rather, Bush and Blair have defined the war as 'civilisation' against terrorism. 'Civilisation' (not just 'western civilisation') now includes the rulers of Saudi Arabia, the military dictatorship in Pakistan, the Russian butchers of Chechnya, etc.; 'terrorism' is a concept to be widened or narrowed as the need arises.

Indeed, the signs of the revolt they fear are there. Saudi Arabia's wealthy, corrupt and repressive ruling family has been scared of Islamists since the Iranian revolution of 1979. Egypt is feared to be extremely vulnerable. In Algeria, the Islamist FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) was set to sweep elections in 1992, prompting a military coup which plunged the country into civil war.

Western governments have been obsessed with 'Islamic fundamentalism', especially since the end of the Cold War, scared the authoritarian regimes they support in the Middle East could fall to 'Islam', and then terrified as on September 11 'fundamentalism' struck right in the heart of America. But the western left has tended to take the mirror image view, regarding Islamism as a legitimate expression of anti-imperialism, consequently to be supported. Because the Islamists cry 'death to America', articulate regional and popular grievances against Israel, and generally decry 'imperialism', many on the left have identified them as progressive, sometimes progressive, or 'at heart', so to speak, progressive. Many of those now keen to find something progressive in Osama bin Laden were, when Russian troops were reducing Afghan villages to rubble, only too delighted to object to fundamentalism as reactionary; but then they saw fundamentalism as part of the imperialist camp.

Neither framework, 'clash of civilisations' nor 'anti-imperialism', grasps the complexity and nature of modern Islamism.

Terms like 'Islamism' or 'political Islam' can be misleading, encouraging the hasty reader to overlook the radical difference between Islamist politics and general Islamic religious sentiment. There are political tendencies which are broadly 'Islamic' but not 'fundamentalist'. Yet the term 'fundamentalism' can also be misleading. Christian fundamentalists believe in the literal truth of the Bible. The literal truth of the Qur'an is accepted by all religious Muslims. But modern 'Islamic fundamentalism' is essentially a political, not a religious current. It denotes not especial devoutness, or devotion to the Qur'an, but political movements whose programme is to reshape societies into a template of an 'Islamic state' which allegedly existed some 1,200 years ago. Revivalist movements, attempts to purge the life of Muslim communities of non-Islamic accretions and restore it to a more authentically Islamic form, have recurred many times over the centuries. But modern Islamism is distinctive in attempting to master the contradictions of already partly-secularised, partly-industrialised, partly-cosmopolitan societies by reverting to an imagined past and seeking to use the power of more-or-less modern military and state machines to do so.

Modern Islamism originates in the cities, not in the more tradition-bound countryside. Its core activists are drawn from the educated middle class (often young men, frustrated university graduates), not from the sections of the population most remote from scientific and 'western' culture. But it is not an offshoot or outgrowth of national liberation struggle against imperialism. In the era when mainly-Muslim countries were struggling for freedom from colonial or semi-colonial domination, more secular politics dominated. They appealed to 'the nation'; Islamists do not. Where national liberation struggle is still most sharp, among the Palestinians, Islamism was notably slower in gaining a grip.

Although some Islamist currents have been aided in their early stages by the USA or by pro-US governments which saw them as a safer channel for protest than the secular left, Islamism is not just a creation of such aid. It has its own roots. Although some Islamist currents have gained their strength in struggle against pro-US regimes, Islamism is not just a reflex, 'spontaneous' expression of 'despair and rage' against US imperialism, either. The Islamists may be violently opposed to the relative women's emancipation, the secularism, and the commercialism, which they see the USA as epitomising; they are not against capitalism, profit, inequality, or dealing with the IMF. The main target of their anger is not the remote USA, but the nominally Muslim governments and people of their own societies. They seek to replace the governments - and subjugate the people - by installing a more reactionary, more repressive, but more 'Islamic', regime.

In the countries where Islamism has risen, capitalist development has ravaged old social relationships, but not created stable new ones. Pre-capitalist society has largely been eliminated. Huge fortunes have been made out of the oil industry, in particular. Universities, televisions, radios, cassette players, cars, bureaucracies, airports, skyscrapers have mushroomed; simultaneously, huge numbers of people have been thrown onto the margins of society, and a huge class of 'new petty bourgeois' is tantalised, then frustrated, by the chaotic, lopsided development. Old exploiting classes - bazaar merchants, the religious establishment, sometimes landlords - remain, and are jostled and embittered by the process of change. While in advanced capitalist countries, most of the population is working class in the broad sense, in these societies the working class is still a minority, and there are huge numbers of marginalised sub- or semi-proletarian poor, and of distressed petty bourgeois. These are the social conditions in which Islamism emerges as a distinctive movement, combining some of the features of the 'reactionary anti-capitalism' which Marx describes in the Communist Manifesto - a first reflex reaction by displaced elements of the relatively well-off to the disruptions of early industrial-capitalist development - with some of the features of fascism.

1. The historical background

Muhammad, the author of the Qur'an and founder of Islam, died nearly 1,400 years ago. Within a very short time, his followers, from their base in what is now Saudi Arabia, had conquered large tracts of the Middle East. Islamic empires, controlling variable but large territories from India to the Atlantic, and from southern Europe to sub-Saharan Africa, were big powers from then right through into the 20th century.

For much of that time, the Muslim world was advanced and sophisticated in comparison with Christian Europe. When Europe was suffering the Dark Ages, Muslim Arab scientists invented algebra (which is an Arabic word) and brought the use of the zero and of decimal number systems from their Hindu inventors in India to the West. Islamic culture as a

whole, in literature as well, for example, was far more developed. 'The west' - Europe - was the source of barbarian hordes who periodically invaded Muslim lands, bringing slaughter and intolerance.

But European feudalism proved to be a more dynamic system than the state-centred tribute-paying system of the Islamic empires. Western Europe became capitalist. Britain seized India; the Netherlands seized Indonesia. By the middle of the 19th century, the remaining Islamic great power, the Ottoman Empire centred in Constantinople (Istanbul), was a decaying, stagnant hulk. From the 1830s, rulers in Cairo and Constantinople tried to modernise, to semi-secularise, to fend off the domination of Europe by emulating its achievements.

After World War One the whole structure came crashing down. Nearly 1,300 years of Islamic empire came to a shocking, sudden end. France and Britain divided most of the remaining Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire between them. In Constantinople, nationalists took power; established a new, aggressively secular, and Turkish state; and, without significant resistance, abolished the caliphate, the position which had been the peak of the religio-political hierarchy of the Islamic world.

More-or-less secular nationalism would dominate the politics of the Islamic world for the next 50 or 60 years. This secular nationalism was intertwined with 'Islamic modernist' tendencies, schools of thought that wanted to revive Islam but also attune it to the modern world. Saad Zaghlul, the founder of the Egyptian Wafd Party after World War One, a modernising bourgeois nationalist movement which led a popular uprising in 1919 and dominated the inter-war period, had been a student of the most important early Islamic-revivalist thinkers, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammed Abduh. Other intellectuals, notably the writer Taha Hussein, came from the Islamic-revivalist tradition but were forthrightly secular.

The Middle Eastern oil industry began in Iran and Iraq shortly before World War One, and expanded enormously after the 1930s. At first it was an enclave industry, run by foreign (mostly British or US) companies under the complacent eye of docile governments. Gradually, the local propertied classes became more assertive. The 'capitulations', arrangements which since the Middle Ages had given foreign business people immunity from local laws and local taxes, were abolished between 1923 and 1937.

After World War Two, a wave of popular movements across the Middle East which brought radical, secular nationalist governments to power. 'Arab socialism' was declared in Egypt under Gamal Abdul Nasser, whose military government introduced land reform, nationalised the Anglo-French Suez Canal, resisted a disastrous Anglo-French-Israeli invasion, and then progressively introduced more and more widespread nationalisations, and aligned with the USSR. Nasser was a popular hero across the region, copied in various states (Syria, Libya, Sudan). In Algeria, a massive and bloody war of independence against France brought radical nationalists to power in 1962; in terms of real mass participation, this was the most thoroughgoing of the bourgeois revolutions of the period.

In Iraq, a popular nationalist movement took power in 1958 under Qassim, relying to a significant degree on working-class support; the strong labour movement was dominated by the Communist Party. That regime was overthrown, bloodily; after a few turbulent years, the right wing faction of the Ba'ath Party took power, and is still there. Saddam Hussein's regime veered between pro-Western and 'anti-imperialist' policies, always savagely repressive of opposition movements and the national minorities such as the Kurds.

In Iran (a mainly non-Arab country; the majority nationality is Persian), a Nasser-type regime under Mossadeq, which nationalised the British-owned oil company, was overthrown, with CIA and British assistance, and replaced by the Shah. The Shah was extravagantly pro-Western, but carried

through, for instance in land reform, many policies similar to the radical nationalists. He was overthrown in 1979 by an enormous revolutionary movement, in which Islamists under Khomeini ultimately dominated.

In the first part of the 20th century, foreign capital had dominated everywhere: but by 1960, the bulk of economic activity in the region, with the important exception of oil, had passed into the hands of the governments or the native bourgeoisies. The next two decades saw a powerful wave of statisation. Outside agriculture and housing, the national private sector was reduced to insignificance in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Algeria, Libya, South Yemen and Iran, and severely curtailed in other countries. The takeover of the oil industry since 1973 completed that process. Then, from the mid 1970s, the governments made a reverse move, towards privatisation and, often, encouraging foreign capital; local ownership, however, remains dominant, and local state ownership substantial.

Islam played a role in the ideologies of all these movements, to varying degrees: Qaddafi in Libya (whose 'Green Book' evokes the symbolic colour of Islam) was considered by some to be an Islamic fundamentalist in the early years. The FLN in Algeria mobilised the cultural symbols of Islam as part of their nation-building project, as the common factor between Arabs and Berbers. Nasserist Egypt considered itself the centre of three worlds - the Arab, the African, and the Islamic; Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, made great play of his personal piety (he had the characteristic mark on his forehead which results from regular prayer) - though not enough to save him from assassination by Islamists. But the Islamic component in post-war nationalism played second fiddle to the secular. Even Pakistan, established specifically as a Muslim state after the partition of India in 1947, was not an 'Islamic state' in any sense that modern Islamists would recognise. In Tunisia, the most secular of the secular-nationalist states, president Bourguiba banned the hijab and broke the Ramadan fast on television. Religion was declared a private matter.

Secular nationalism scored impressive victories, particularly in achieving independence, though it failed to bring about Arab unity. But by the 1970s it was reaching the end of its rope. It had achieved about all it could achieve, and brought little but frustration and dislocation to vast masses of the population. It was running up against the limits of the capitalist world market, limits that no amount of nationalist militancy could budge. Its success now seemed a wretched and pale thing compared to the glorious Islamic past.

The Arab states were humiliated by Israel in the June War of 1967. In the 1970s, Egypt moved towards the USA both diplomatically and economically, opening the country to foreign investment; it also negotiated a peace treaty with Israel (after another war, in 1973, in which the Arab states did considerably better). Other radical states followed suit in economic policy, though not on the question of Israel. The new economic policy - Sadat called it 'infitah', opening - led to an attack on the system which had cemented popular support for the regimes. In 1977 there were strikes and riots when Sadat tried to remove subsidies from basic foods; on that occasion he was defeated, but over the next decade or so the subsidies were largely removed anyway. The state's promise of jobs to graduates began to prove costly. Soon unemployed students were a major pool of discontent. The government of Hosni Mubarak, which succeeded Sadat, became more and more repressive, especially towards Islamists, as resistance grew.

Elsewhere in the Arab world, a different process was taking place. In the oil-rich Arab states feudalistic/tribal monarchies, with colonial aid, transformed themselves into capitalist classes. In 1973, hiking the price of oil fourfold, the shaykhdoms became immensely wealthy. These ruling classes have enforced strict Islamic codes at the same time as gross inequalities have emerged as a result of oil wealth. In the biggest and most powerful state, Saudi Arabia, a tribal and puritanical Islamic sect, Wahhabism, has been the official

religion of the government.

All the regimes, pro-western or more vocally nationalist and (until 1989-91) USSR-aligned, were authoritarian, often military in origin, sometimes brutally repressive. By the end of the 1970s they had generated vast sectors in their population for whom they represented nothing but broken promises, disappointment, disruption of traditional certainties, corruption, and shiftlessness. Partly because of the relative social weakness of the working class proper, but more decisively because the left, mostly Stalinist, had tailed the secular nationalists, the left had little appeal to those disillusioned masses. The Islamist movements were growing, entering the mainstream of politics as well as the radical fringes.

2. The Islamist movements

Modern Islamist groups aim for an Islamic state, that is a government which bases itself on Islamic law, the shari'a, a system established about two centuries after the death of Muhammad and then maintained, with fluctuating degrees of erosion, into the 20th century. In the violence of its punishments (amputations, lashes, stonings, death) the shari'a naturally reflects the norms, values, and level of development of its time, 1,200 years ago. Parts of it draw on the social norms of the constantly-warring, clannish society of Arabia at the time of Muhammad; parts (notably the veiling, segregation, and subordination of women) on traditions of the extreme subordination of women in the territories the Muslim armies conquered; and parts on the need to rationalise the fact that as the Islamic empires consolidated, the Muslims came to constitute large class-divided societies, instead of being the cohesive military elite that they were at the time of the first conquest. For the Islamists, though, it has the sheen of a bygone age of harmony and order.

Islam, like Judaism and unlike Christianity, has generally been a religion expressed in public law rather than more abstract theology, private ethics or mysticism. Traditionally the interpretation of that law was the job of the ulema, the Muslim scholars, the rough equivalent in Islam of the Christian clergy. Khomeini in Iran, as we shall see, was an exception, but most modern Islamist theorists have not been clerics; they are Islamic 'Protestants', asserting the original text (or their understanding of it) against the worldly-wise or pliant.

The Islamists appeal - ostensibly at least - to the Umma, the broad Islamic community, rather than to 'the nation' (whether the Arab nation or a more narrowly defined one). For most modern, militant Islamists, their aim is both to revive, purge, and radicalise the Umma, and to extend it.

i. Egypt

It was in Egypt that the first Islamist organisation was founded - the Society of Muslim Brothers, by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. Arguably the early Muslim Brotherhood was closer to traditional Islamic revivalism than to modern Islamism, but in any case its history flows directly and continuously into that modern Islamism.

Egypt at the time was a British protectorate ruled by an unpopular king. The nationalist movement (principally the Wafd Party) was militant, but had proved unsuccessful, and was thoroughly bourgeois, making little effort to mobilise its popular support around social questions. The Muslim Brothers began as a conservative movement for social reform, aiming to encourage Egyptians - and later Muslims elsewhere - to rediscover their Islamic heritage and behave like proper believers. Its base, like that of later Islamist groups, was among the urban middle class, the 'effendis'.

Gradually al-Banna's organisation moved in a more overtly political direction. In the 1936-39 Arab revolt against Jewish settlers and British rulers in Palestine, they sent fighters. They played a part in making the question of Palestine, even at that early stage, an 'Arab' or regional issue. At the same time, the Brothers moved further towards armed, terrorist-type action.

They had an uneasy relationship with the nationalist parties, but by the late 1940s, when al-Banna was assassinated, had developed a considerable base.

In 1952 the Free Officers overthrew the king and kicked out the British. Some of them had links with the Brothers. For a short while the Brothers supported, and even took part in, the new government. But they were hostile to the land reform which broke the power of the landlords, and quite soon the Brothers found themselves under arrest and facing persecution. As the regime became more radical, and began to introduce 'Arab socialism' [state ownership], the Brothers opposed such atheistic heresy. They faced intense repression, along with other oppositional forces like the Communist Party. In the mid-60s, accused of an attempt on Nasser's life, thousands of them were rounded up.

One of those arrested, and executed along with other leaders of the movement in 1966, was Sayyid Qutb, who was probably the real intellectual founder of modern militant Islamism, at least in those lands where the Sunni (more Protestant-like) version of Islam dominates rather than the minority Shi'a (more Catholic-like) version centred in Iran.

Qutb developed his distinctive ideas after the Egyptian Ministry of Education, for which he worked as an official, sent him to the USA in 1948-51 to study American methods of schooling. He returned to Egypt with an uncompromising hatred for the West and all its works. Qutb's rejection of the West was not that of the conservative concerned with preserving his culture's traditions against foreign encroachments, but rather that of the 'born-again Muslim' who having adopted or absorbed many modern influences makes a show of discarding them in his search for personal identity and cultural authenticity.

After his arrest, Qutb wrote his famous work, Signposts, which is the first clear statement of the aims and worldview of the sects we now think of as Islamist, and is required reading for the cadre of these groups. Qutb defined the regime itself as part of the 'infidel' problem. Society was divided into the Party of God and the Party of Satan. The Islamist movement was surrounded by a swamp of ignorance and unbelief (jahiliyya, the term used to describe the society of Arabia before the coming of Muhammed). The creation of an Islamic government was not just a culturally preferable alternative, but a divine imperative. The method of creating it would be jihad, or holy war. (For some Muslims, jihad can mean private spiritual striving, but for Islamist groups it increasingly means, very literally, war.) It is unclear if Qutb himself would have wholeheartedly approved of the modern groups who claim his legacy; but he spelled out the main themes of modern militant Islamism.

As Sadat moved away from Nasserist state-capitalism in the 1970s, the Muslim Brothers re-emerged from their eclipse by repression. Sadat was initially warm towards them. He had broken with the USSR; his new economic policy was unpopular, and opening up dangerous space on his left (both within the regime and outside it). The Brothers were a useful counterbalance. More, Sadat flirted considerably with using Islam as a source of legitimacy as Nasserist ideology was put out to grass: he made much of his own commitment to the faith, and introduced Islamic laws - stoking communal antagonism between Muslims and Egypt's extremely large Christian minority.

The Brothers were still technically illegal, but they grew in the 1970s. And more radical schisms began to emerge. A group called the Islamic Liberation Organisation attempted a coup in 1974, seizing the Technical Military Academy in Cairo. The ILO had links with other Islamist groups abroad. In January 1973 it had published its manifesto, which claims, for

instance:

'Liberation is a means, not an end... When we fight for the liberation of Palestine, we do not fight... for the sake of getting back our homeland, but for the glorification of the word of God... We fight to transform every Dar al-kufr [reign of unbelief] into Dar al-Islam, whether its people are Muslims as in Pakistan, or infidels as in India.'

A better known group, Takfir wa Hijra (roughly, Atonement and Exile - hijra refers to Mohammed's leaving Mecca for Medina), assassinated a teacher at al-Azhar, Cairo's prestigious mosque-university, who was also minister for religious endowments. When Sadat made peace with Israel, signing a peace treaty in 1978 at Camp David, he had effectively signed his own death warrant. The militant group al-Jihad had formed cells in the army. In 1981, as Sadat was admiring his troops on the anniversary of the 1973 war, Khaled Islambouli shot him dead.

There followed a period of intense upheaval. Islamists in the town of Asyut, where they were strong, attempted an uprising which was crushed. The new regime of Hosni Mubarak began to arrest, imprison and torture Islamists or suspected Islamists in huge numbers - thousands of them - a tradition it has continued ever since.

Chukri Mustapha, an agricultural engineer considered the 'emir', or leader, of Takfir wa Hijra, expressed his ideology thus:

'God be praised. He will prepare the land for the group of the just by provoking a war between the two great powers, Russia and America... The war is inevitable, they will destroy each other. God will thus have prepared the land for the Islamic state... Following [this war] the forces of the Muslim nation will be about equal to those of its enemies. It is then that the true Jihad will start.'

As the gama'at islamiyya, the militant groups, began to grow, the Muslim Brothers moved more into the mainstream. By the end of the 70s, they had formally declared their abandonment of terrorist activity. By the late 80s, although unable to stand in elections, they formed electoral pacts, first with the Wafd, then with the so-called Socialist Labour Party (getting 17% of the vote in 1987). More importantly, they established a network of schools, clinics, and even banks - a pattern typical of Islamist movements - and made huge inroads into Egypt's professional associations, mainly among engineers, doctors, and by the late 90s, lawyers, winning a majority in the bar association. The Brothers, in other words, sank deep social roots, with cadres in the urban middle class and support from the unorganised poor. In student bodies, too, both moderate and militant Islamists have grown. Now the Brothers are the best-organised and chief opposition to the Mubarak government. In an attempt to curtail their influence, in addition to repression, the state tried to extend its control over mosques; but there are simply too many of these for such control to be effective.

Moderate and legalistic as they now are, it should not be thought that the Brothers are a benign force in Egyptian political life. When the Muslim academic Nasr Abu Zaid put forward a theory that the Qur'an was read and interpreted differently according to historical context, the Brothers declared him an apostate, drove him from the university, and tried, through the courts, to force his wife to divorce him. The couple fled to Scandinavia.

The weight of the moderate, 'reformist' Brothers provides the ideological context for the radical variants. Those have grown increasingly violent. In the 1990s, the militant groups made a turn to assassinating tourists, beginning with the murder of some Israelis in Sinai, and tourists near the pyramids. Then in 1997, an attack was launched at the ancient temple of Hatshepsut at Luxor which left 68 tourists and three Egyptians dead. Other murders have been carried out of Coptic Christians; the Nobel Prize winning author Neguib Mahfuz was stabbed; the outspoken secular journalist Farag Fuda was murdered.

Tala'at Fu'ad Qassim, of the Egyptian Islamist group Gama'a Islamiyya, justifies the murder of tourists like this:

'[Tourism]... is a means by which prostitution and AIDS are spread by Jewish women tourists, and it is a source of all manner of depravities, not to mention being a means of collecting information on the Islamic movement. For these reasons we believe tourism is an abomination which must be destroyed. And it is one of our strategies for destroying the government.'

Indeed, these attacks have crippled Egypt's tourism industry, one of its chief sources of income and foreign exchange. Qassim's group, like Islamic Jihad, has strong links in Afghanistan; Ayman al-Zawahiri of al-Jihad is bin Laden's supposed 'deputy', although there is speculation he is in fact the dominant figure. Al-Jihad seems to be the largest of the militant groups, and has built up influence in slum areas through study groups, distributing literature and audio cassettes with Islamic speeches, providing welfare services, and so on.

A truce was declared between the Islamists and the Mubarak government in 1997. Several thousand detainees were released, although 12,000 or so Islamists remained in prison. After 11 September 2001, though, a new clampdown began.

Secular, or secular-ish, and democratic forces remain alive in Egypt: Islamists are probably still a minority, there are legal left and left-of-centre political parties, and prominent intellectuals who oppose the Islamists. On the other hand, when 52 gay men were arrested on a Nile barge last year - the first time, as far as I know, there has been serious state repression of homosexuals - Egyptian civil rights groups refused to take up their case, probably for fear of Islamist-influenced public opinion.

ii. Iran

The first great victory of the Islamist movements was the Iranian revolution. There is no space here to go into detail. But Iran has shaped and influenced the growth of the Islamist groups, sometimes directly as the 'Islamic Republic' trained and funded some of them.

Iran under the Shah had undergone profound social upheaval. The capital, Tehran, for instance, mushroomed in size (although lots of it was unfinished building sites). In the countryside there was radical land reform; and the state led rapid industrialisation. The working class and 'new petty bourgeoisie' grew rapidly; old social classes, whether in the countryside or in the bazaar (the market) were squeezed (and heavily taxed, as was the mosque). Iran was the richest, most developed, and most heavily armed state in the region, regarded by the United States as its closest ally along with Israel. But the Shah's rule proved to be far more precarious than CIA experts, for instance, believed. There was widespread opposition to the Shah's so-called White Revolution in the 1960s, when Ayatollah Khomeini first emerged as an opponent of the regime, forced into exile in Iraq, and later in Paris. His speeches on cassette were to become very popular.

The movement which, by late 1978, was challenging the regime, was composed of different social actors with incompatible aims. On the one hand there were the urban poor and the industrial working class, especially but not only in the vital oil industry. A general strike was one of the forces which succeeded in toppling the Shah. There was also a large organised left, although principally in the form of guerrilla organisations - the two most important were the Fedayyin, which was avowedly Marxist (influenced, for instance, by Guevarism), and the radical Muslim People's Mujaheddin Organisation. The pro-Moscow Tudeh Party also played a role, although it soon proved to be one of the most right-wing, pusillanimous 'communist' parties on earth.

On the other hand there were the wealthy bazaari merchants,

sections of traditional classes rolled back by the White Revolution, and the mosque. These distinct social forces, with distinct aims and interests, temporarily came together for the single aim of removing the hated Shah; but almost immediately the movement fractured into virtual civil war. They came together on a huge scale. Along with the general strike, the mass demonstrations reached a scale rarely seen even in revolutionary movements: millions of people took to the streets, crippling the army's ability to repress them, and indeed splitting the army. The guerrilla organisations fought the army with some success.

For a short period, the working class was centre stage, creating independent workplace organisations, shoras, which could have been further developed in a 'soviet'direction, purging managers, taking ever more radical steps in the factories. The chances for working class revolution were very real. The left was strong and confident. Yet the shoras were quickly co-opted by the Khomeini movement; the regime almost immediately turned on the left - and on women, and national minorities - and unleashed a violent, urban mass movement against them. Left-wing organisations had their offices sacked; then the left's stronghold, Tehran university, was physically attacked by the Hizb Allah, a fascistic mass movement. Pasdaran, the 'revolutionary guards', attacked demonstrations of unemployed workers. 'Islamic laws' were introduced, women forced to wear the veil, 'prostitutes' and homosexuls executed; the Khomeini regime introduced a reign of terror. 'Imperialism' was declared the enemy, and the left identified as an arm of 'imperialism'; the American Embassy was seized in a demagogic display of anti-imperialist fervour. Then, when Iraq invaded an area of disputed territory in September 1980, the two countries embarked on an horrific eight year war.

How did Khomeini and the clergy come to dominate this revolution, and crush its alternative potential? The mosque had been an independent space during the Shah's rule, outside the regime's capacity for repression, enabling the mullahs to emerge as a leadership for a section of the masses. Religious symbols became powerful means of mobilisation (for instance in the timing of mass demonstrations). Khomeini himself, from abroad, was known as a firebrand opponent of the Shah; by the beginning of 1979 he was seen to 'personify' the revolution.

Other currents of Islamist thought had also become widely known in the decade or so before the revolution, most importantly that of Ali Shariati. Shariati was a lay intellectual who interpreted the struggle against the Shah in terms of reclaiming an indigenous cultural heritage. His ideas were far from Khomeini's, a sort of populist Islamism which even talked about socialism, and was heavily influenced by the thinking of Franz Fanon. In turn the People's Mujaheddin were influenced by Shariati. Other more moderate clerics were associated with Khomeini (some would form successive governments, subordinated to Khomeini himself and his council of experts; they were purged or resigned). Shariati cannot be held responsible for the Islamic Republic, but for sure the general currency of moderate, or even enlightened and secular-oriented, Islamism created a climate in which the profoundly reactionary variant could win leadership.

Khomeini's Islamism was able to appeal to a number of social groups and classes - to the bazaar, which had historic links to the mosque; to the dispossessed poor; to sections of the intelligentsia; and to sections of the middle class to whom he offered 'order'. '[T]he basis of the clergy's opposition to the state was a reactionary resistance to the smallest social reforms. Even its struggle against [the Shah was based] only on intransigent opposition to any change that would diminish or undermine its own traditional prerogatives and power.' Unlike Qutb and other Sunni ideologues, Khomeini proposed not merely an Islamic state but government by a hierarchy of Muslim clerics. In the end, the Islamic Republic was a hybrid of this proposed theocracy and a truncated parliament, but with the clergy firmly in control. It was never quite a totalitarian state, and opposition, especially from a working

class whose economic militancy continued throughout the next two decades, and more recently among students, survived. But the organised left was crushed or driven into exile.

This left, famously, never knew what they were dealing with. From the outset, in the main, they supported Khomeini, accepting his 'anti-imperialism' as good coin. Some, like the Tudeh, and what came to be known as the Fedayyin Majority, continued to support him as he suppressed the left, until he turned on them. The Mujaheddin took up arms against Khomeini eventually; but by then it was far too late - and, like the secular left, the Mujaheddin were divorced from the industrial working class. Indeed, the left as a whole had little implantation among industrial workers, and was unable to affect the struggle over the shoras, for example.

But the left's error was not simply that they supported governments or had a tragic misestimation of what governments were about. They fatally misread the nature of the mass movement itself - failed to understand that a section of the mass movement was the regime's brutal battering ram against them. The Iranian revolution, certainly from the viewpoint of the organised left, was lost not in text books or speeches, but on the street.

There was a distinctive Shi'a component to Khomeini-ite Islamism in Iran. The Shi'a are a sect which diverged from mainstream Sunni Islam very early in Islamic history; they are the main sect in Iran, and numerous in surrounding areas (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, some in the Arabian peninsula and the Gulf). Unlike the Sunni Islamists, who seek to recreate the centuries immediately following Muhammed's death, which they look to as a golden age, the Shi'a reject the legitimacy of the early Caliphs, and see them as usurpers. Shi'a Islam gives more weight to the temporal authority of the contemporary ulema ('mullahs' in Persian), like Khomeini. The mullahs have historically occupied centre stage in Iranian politics. They were at the heart both of the tobacco protests of 1891-92, and the Constitutionalist movement of 1906.

'[T]he Iranian revolution [was] a direct consequence of the position occupied by the religious leadership... since the 18th century... In addition to acting as tax collectors... the mujtahids and the mullahs... were entitled to a 10 % commission on the waqf properties administered by them. Some of these... constitute very substantial properties.'

The Iranian government has particularly supported Shi'a groups abroad, for example in Lebanon. Shi'a or not, though, other Islamists looked to Iran as an example and an inspiration. The most powerful US ally in the region had fallen, and been replaced by an Islamic Republic. It shocked and terrified the West, and testified to the strength of Islam not only as a political force, but a revolutionary one. Almost immediately, Islamist groups turned the inspiration into action - in Saudi Arabia, in 1979, the hajj, or Mecca pilgrimage, saw an Islamist uprising. In the Muslim world and in the West, 'Islamic fundamentalism' became not just a lurking danger or promise, but a vital force.

Over 20 years on, the situation in Iran gives cause for some optimism. It is possible that the downfall of Islamism could start in the same country as its dramatic rise, with a popular overthrow of the Islamic Republic. A more moderate president, Khatami, was elected in 1997. His election did not change much, but it did signal a changed popular mood. Much of the Islamist mass movement has cooled and congealed into a government machine, as corrupt and opportunist as any of the regimes which Khomeini used to scorn as 'American Islam', and widely despised by young people in the cities. Student revolt broke out in 2000 against repression and censorship. The working class remains militant. And if there is anywhere militant Islamists are unlikely to seize power in the future, it is the country in which they have held it, meting out repression, for two decades.

iii. Afghanistan

In many ways the Taliban and other Afghan Islamists are different from elsewhere - the product of a more backward society, of Russian occupation, of US, Pakistani, and Saudi financial and military-training support. All these factors have created the most virulently reactionary Islamists of all - both among the Afghans themselves, and the non-Afghan forces who have used the country as a base, the so-called 'Afghan Arabs'' like Osama bin Laden.

Eighteen years of war between 1978 and 1996 made Afghanistan a veritable cadre school for Islamism. Maybe 100,000 young men from across the Muslim world came to Afghanistan to fight for Islam. They were trained and hardened militarily and ideologically. Many then went elsewhere in the Muslim world - Bosnia, Algeria, or back to their home countries - as armed prophets of the Islamist message.

iv. Algeria

In Gillo Pontecorvo's marvellous film Battle of Algiers, a Muslim woman dons Western clothes and make-up for the first time in order to go into the French quarter of the city and plant a bomb in a trendy cafe. Later we see the awful consequences of the explosion. The film dramatises a real event, which at the time, in 1956, seemed to be an epoch-marking terrorist atrocity, leaving three dead and dozens maimed. The Algerian war of independence was a bitterly-fought, bloody business in which perhaps a million people died before the French colonial authorities finally withdrew, in 1962. The war had lasted eight years; colonial rule well over a century.

The new government was formed by the National Liberation Front (FLN), the most important of the nationalist forces. Like others elsewhere, it moved quickly in a state-capitalist direction, first radically under Ben Bella, who was overthrown by Houari Boumedienne in 1965. He was succeeded by Chadli Benjedid, who held power until the coup of 1992. The Algerian revolution was far more thoroughgoing and radical than similar movements elsewhere in the Arab world, but it was more hesitant in its secularism, partly because the mosque played a role in the struggle against the French. The National Charter declared 'The Algerian people is a Muslim people... Islam is the state religion.'

The FLN formed a one-party state. It was a Muslim state, but far from an Islamic state in the modern Islamist sense. It nationalised religious schools and institutions. Although promises of women's emancipation made in the nationalist struggle were not fulfilled, they were not flatly disavowed either, not for the elite anyway. Of the women who had planted those bombs in 1956, one became the director of Algeria's Ecole Nationale d'Administration, the other the Algerian representative of the cosmetics firm Max Factor.

An Islamist movement began to emerge in the 60s and 70s, although relatively moderate and reformist; it was influenced by the Muslim Brothers. As popular discontent grew, the Benjedid government began to make concessions, promising liberalisation and democracy. In 1989, emulating the ex-Stalinists in Eastern Europe, it ended the FLN's monopoly on power, and moved towards creating a multi-party system. But no safe bourgeois opposition parties on the East European model emerged. The Islamists, grouped together in the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a coalition of groups led by the Islamist moderate Shaykh Ali Abassi Madani, became by far the largest opposition group.

The Islamists had won their first core activists among young, educated, urban middle-class men, and, as elsewhere, built their support through welfare work in the communities, among the poor and the middle class, and through the mosques. They had taken over 'minor' mosques in peripheral areas. People discontented with the FLN regime, though not necessarily positively committed to Islamist ideas, rallied to the FIS as the most effective opposition.

There were tensions in the FIS between Madani - a Francophone moderate - and Ali Belhadj, an Arab-Islamic militant, originally from Tunisia. Publicly, the FIS sometimes professed itself committed to the multiparty system, to democratic institutions, and to minority rights. But then Khomeini, right up until his victory, had said that what he wanted was the restoration of Iran's liberal 1906 constitution. Many Algerians were afraid of the growth of the FIS. There are a large number who still speak French as a first language; others are Berbers, not Arabs; and the Islamists were stridently Arabist. Algeria's significant feminist movement was alarmed. And many Algerians have strong links with the Arab community in France, 'westernised' and often relatively secular, sometimes interested in rap and rai music, which the Islamists condemned.

Unlike other regimes which have permitted political liberalisation, the Algerian government allowed the Islamists to compete in elections. The FIS's programme was relatively moderate; in economics it was positively liberal. But the tensions under the surface would explode over the next few years.

In 1990, in municipal and regional elections, the FIS swept the board. With 65% of the electorate voting, they took 55% of municipal councils and two thirds of the regional assemblies. The FLN did badly - much to their own shock and horror. In all the major cities, the FIS won huge majorities of the vote.

Governmental elections came - to be fought in two rounds. The first were held in December 1991, the first multiparty parliamentary elections since independence. The FLN had gerrymandered as much as possible, but the results were a crushing defeat for the party which had driven out the French. The FLN came third, with just 16 out of 231 seats. The FIS won 188 seats, with almost half the total vote. Second was the Socialist Forces Front, which took 26 seats. Before the second round of elections due, which the FIS was sure to win, the military intervened. There was a coup at the beginning of 1992; the army declared a state of siege, cancelled all elections, banned the FIS and arrested its leaders. More than 10,000 Islamists were held in a concentration camp; their mosques and welfare services were closed. And the country descended rapidly into civil war.

The civil war was to leave as many as 70,000 dead. It was a war, primarily, between the Islamists and the army, with both sides committing terrible atrocities. But many civilians, leftists, secular radicals and intellectuals, trade unionists and others got caught in the crossfire and were identified by the Islamists as their enemies. The Armed Islamic Group (GIA) was responsible for the worst atrocities; but the unofficial armed wing of the FIS itself, the Islamic Salvation Army, AIS, carried out similar attacks.

The Socialist Forces Front condemned both the repression and the Islamists. Many of its supporters fell victim to Islamist attack. At the peak of Islamist violence, women not wearing the hijab (veil) were gunned down at bus stops. Men and women were prevented from travelling on trains together. The rai artist Cheb Hasni, was murdered in 1994; thousands demonstrated in protest in the city of Oran. Large numbers of leftists, feminists and others fled the country, mainly to France.

Not until the late 90s, did the killings subside. In further elections, though the FIS was banned, other Islamist parties, making a bid for a more moderate image, polled well.

As elsewhere, state repression in Algeria had the effect of unleashing the most reactionary elements of, and aspect of, the Islamists. The military's effort to 'eradicate' the 'fundamentalists' an objective it was keen to show off to western governments - did not, and could not, succeed. The broad left was placed in a terrible position, vulnerable to both the forces of the state and the Islamists. For sure there were

divisions among the Islamists. Their leaders sometimes condemned the more extreme actions of the military wings. And clearly the FLN government, and then the army, bears a huge responsibility for the civil war. But the Islamists demonstrated their true character in the way their side of the war was prosecuted. As in Iran, they simultaneously and violently opposed both the government and the forces of genuine progress.

v. Palestine

It was only after the 1967 war that distinct Palestinian nationalist movements emerged. The Palestine Liberation Organisation was taken over by these nationalist movements, the biggest of which was Yasser Arafat's Fatah, and embarked upon armed struggle against Israel. It gained some success in putting the issue on the political map, but made little headway in terms of defeating Israel. After the 1973 war, the PLO - which had declared its objective to be a 'secular democratic state for Muslims, Christians and Jews' in all of Palestine - moved towards trying to find a diplomatic solution, although a 'rejection front' formed which was opposed to this. Crushed in Jordan in 'Black September' 1970, the PLO guerrillas retreated to Lebanon, which soon - partly, though by no means entirely, as a result - collapsed into a devastating civil war. Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 left some 20-30,000 dead and drove the PLO leadership from the country. Then an uprising, or intifada in the occupied territories ultimately forced Israel to the negotiating table. A profoundly inadequate peace deal was signed in 1993, though that collapsed in 2000. At the time of writing, the future of 'peace' is very uncertain.

From its emergence as a distinct force, Palestinian nationalism was perhaps more strongly secular than any other Arab nationalism outside Tunisia. There is a significant Christian minority among the Palestinian Arabs, and some of their important thinkers and leaders have come from it. The 'secular democratic state' in all Palestine was in effect code for the destruction of Israel, but that the PLO chose that code was testimony to their non-Islamist intentions. In the occupied territories, especially the West Bank, the Communist Party had considerable weight, and controlled a number of municipalities from the 1970s onwards. The PLO had a vocal would-be Marxist (although in truth, ultra-nationalist) left. Partly as a result of the Palestinian people's dispersal and unusually high level of formal (and non-Islamic) education, influence from outside, and Western, intellectual sources was always strong.

Until the intifada of late 1987, the secular nationalists had never considered the Islamists much of a problem or threat. There was an Islamist movement in Gaza, but it had little weight in the more sophisticated (and less poor) West Bank. Among students, for example at Bir Zeit university, the Islamists were a negligible force.

Today all that has changed. Islamists are a growing influence even in the West Bank and among university students. As the post-Oslo Palestine Authority has proved corrupt and repressive, and has failed to bring about meaningful independence, the left has declined sharply, and the Islamists have grown.

The biggest Islamist group is Hamas - the Islamic Resistance Movement. Hamas emerged from the Gaza wing of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, in the first place concentrating on purely social matters - charitable works, schools, making propaganda for Islamic forms of personal behaviour, the typical fare of the Islamists. For this reason they were looked on favourably, and supported, by Israel as an alternative to the PLO. After the beginning of the original intifada in 1987/8, Hamas took a more political turn. But one of its first ventures into 'opposition to Israel' was to effectively initiate, and sanction, a campaign to force Palestinian women to wear the hijab - a campaign which meant unveiled women were stoned in the street. Eventually, the Palestinian leadership

condemned this campaign, although making some concessions to the idea that dressing modestly is a patriotic duty. Throughout the first intifada, Hamas remained aloof from the struggle, naming its own days for specific actions, for instance, and focusing on Islamic rather than national or political questions.

With the second intifada in 2000, Hamas did not engage in fighting with the Israeli troops; they left that to the nationalist militias, principally of Fatah. Hamas' contribution was to launch suicide attacks inside Israel. More recently, they seem to have begun commando raids, beginning with an attack on a Jewish settlement in Gaza.

The Palestinian leadership created this space for them. Arafat's Authority has more members in the security forces than it has teachers; and a major aspect to the negotiated deal in 1993 was that Arafat take over policing Arab territories from Israel, which was increasingly unsure of the point of doing it. Much of the repression is necessarily aimed at the Islamists. In addition to its repressiveness, and failure to bring about a just settlement, the Palestine Authority is notoriously corrupt: in the midst of great, and worsening, poverty, officials flaunt the wealth they have gained through corruption; association with these authorities has tarnished the old-style nationalists.

Hamas' evolution, in sum, has been from a deeply conservative social movement into an aggressively chauvinist one which increasingly does nothing but destroy any possibility of peace between Israelis and Palestinians. That Israeli public opinion is today heavily behind Ariel Sharon, the most hawkish leader in its history, is largely a result of Hamas' suicide attacks (and the inability of many Israelis to understand the sources of Palestinian frustration). Clearly, Hamas' actions have quite wide support among Palestinians, who are poor, and desperate, and losing. But that does not change the reactionary character of these actions.

There is, of course, a strong element of straightforward, non-Islamist nationalism in Hamas' growth. But they have redefined the national question in religious terms. If the PLO once wanted a secular state, Hamas wants an Islamic one, in which there is no place for Jews or even Christian Arabs. 'The Jews' are intruding on Muslim, not Palestinian, or even Arab, land. Hamas have received financial support from the Saudi regime, which also sees the issue in these terms. It seems likely that images of Palestinian demonstrations holding up Hamas placards and flags exaggerate the real strength of Hamas. Yet they are, unquestionably, a growing force, beginning to eclipse Fatah.

vi. Others

There is no space here to go into detail about other countries where Islamists have been powerful. In Sudan, a military coup backed by the Sudanese Muslim Brothers took power in 1989. In Sudan the Brothers had superficially moved in a moderate direction. In practice, they proved as repressive and reactionary as elsewhere. A powerful movement of workers' strikes had gripped Sudan in the late 1980s, and there were moves by the Khartoum government to end the war with the non-Arab, often Christian forces in the south of the country. It was to head off both these developments that the army intervened. The government has been savagely 'Islamic' and brutal towards the southern rebels: famine has gripped the southern areas as a result of the war.

In Lebanon, Muslims - both Sunni, and (especially) Shi'a - were effectively second class citizens in the sectarian, 'confessional' system established after the Second World War. As that system began to break down, and civil war broke out in the mid-70s, the Shi'a Muslims formed a 'movement of the dispossessed' with their own party, Amal (Hope). But the civil war - with Israeli and Syrian intervention, crippling action by the various militias, and so on - soon started to reduce the

country to rubble. More radical Islamist groups, principally the Hizbollah (Party of God) were backed, both financially and with personnel, by Iran. It was these groups who attacked US marines, kidnapped Westerners, and eventually drove out the Israeli army from the south. Amal remained more moderate and secular; its leader is a bourgeois lawyer who lives in the United States.

In Syria there was, from the late 70s, growing conflict between Islamists - primarily the Muslim Brothers - and the Ba'ath government. This culminated in a 1982 uprising in the town of Hama, which was brutally repressed; the most conservative estimates suggest over 10,000 people were killed.

Tunisia under Bourguiba was one of the militantly secular Arab states, and also had one of the strongest workers' movements. In 1978 there was a powerful general strike, from which the Islamists, led by Rashid Ghannoushi, stood aside. Later they recognised their mistake, and began to take a more active role in social and political struggles. Although influenced by the Muslim Brothers, Ghannoushi's Islamic Tendency Movement, now known as the Renaissance Party (Ennahda), moved towards a more 'Tunisian' identity. Again, state repression has 'radicalised' the Tunisian Islamists.

Turkey's governments have been aggressively secular since Ataturk modernised the state in the years after World War One. These governments have been sometimes elected and sometimes the product of coups - though always repressive, for instance towards the Kurdish minority, whose very existence was denied (and in the early days of the post-Ottoman regime, genocidally repressive towards Armenians). In the 1980s, the Islamist Welfare Party led by Necmettin Erbakan emerged - containing within it moderates and militants - which in 1995 won 21% of the vote, and 150 seats in parliament, making it the biggest party. Welfare formed a coalition, with Erbakan as prime minister. In the event, Erbakan proved more pragmatic than many expected: he 'did not pull Turkey out of NATO but did turn to the International Monetary Fund for assistance... declared his friendship with the United States and Europe, and described Welfare as the 'guarantor of secular rule'.' He also honoured Turkey's agreements with Israel. Secular forces militantly opposed Welfare in power - from the left and from within the state. In 1997 Erbakan was forced to resign, and in 1998 Welfare was banned; it regrouped as the Virtue Party.

3. Why Islamism?

The nature of capitalist development in the region itself in part accounts for the emergence of Islamism. A huge educated or semi-educated middle class has been created which was promised the fruits of development but has not seen them. The working class is relatively small. A large class of pauperised peasants (not quite peasants, but small farmers certainly) remains. Population growth, and migration from the countryside, has produced overcrowded cities in which there are large numbers of marginalised poor. Pre-capitalist forms of social organisation have survived - the family; the mosque. And as economic crisis has deepened, as the welfare systems put in place by state-capitalist regimes such as Egypt's have disintegrated, these old social structures have proved their worth to millions of people.

The nationalist regimes were experienced as bureaucratic, authoritarian, and repressive. The 'socialist' vocabulary of many of them means that in some countries, at least, the population has experienced something of a mild form of Stalinism: socialism is identified with a discredited, failed past. There is now a huge crisis of bourgeois culture: the authoritarian, now mainly pro-Western states, which once, like Egypt, were culturally vibrant, are stagnating. In the last year, only around 300 books were published in Egypt - compared to over 4,000 in Israel, for example.

The left largely identified itself with the state-capitalist project. This is true both of the nationalist left, and the mainstream communist parties: Egypt's disbanded to join Nasser's Arab Socialist Union in the 1960s. Left critics of authoritarian governments have often focused more on economic policy than on questions of democracy or, still less, workers' rights. And of course with the collapse of the USSR, the Stalinist and nationalist lefts have been adrift and in crisis.

Culturally, the Islamists appeal to a sense of past glory; it is relevant that the Islamic, and Arab, pasts are imperial ones. The power of the West is viewed as a source of 'humiliation'. This is an ideology which appeals in particular to the young educated men who tend to form the activist base of the Islamist groups. Three or four decades ago, on the whole, these men would have been more likely to have turned to the nationalist movements, with their secular agendas. But those older bourgeois nationalisms, whether in earlier forms, or in the shape of the 'Arab revolution' of the 1950s and 60s, remained the preserve, to a large extent, of westernised, urban classes. There was a considerable rift between the cultures of these classes and the mass of the population. As the nationalist revolutions ran out of steam, and disillusionment set in, a section of the disappointed petty bourgeoisie began to look to more 'indigenous' cultural and political references; to some extent the desire to link up with the dispossessed masses through Islam was an expression of a sort of masochistic guilt on the part of young Western-oriented men who felt detached from 'their own people'. And those cultural, religious reference points had remained intact, and indeed resilient, throughout the secular nationalist period. Conversely, the secularity of Nasserist and other nationalisms had more feeble roots in popular culture than it sometimes seemed.

One effect of the Arab revolution was what could be called the 'de-cosmopolitanisation' of Arab society: the Jewish, Armenian, and Greek bourgeoisie in Egypt were the first targets of the state-capitalist drive in the 1950s; Alexandria, for instance, which had been a 'multicultural' city in which up to a dozen languages were commonly spoken, was 'Arabised' by the 1960s, diminishing the social weight of non-Islamic communities; large sections of the bourgeoisie had not been Muslim. The effect of this was a narrowing of political life, a loss of pluralist diversity. Even though there is a large Coptic Christian minority in Egypt - perhaps 12 million strong - the Nasser regime was almost completely Muslim in personnel. The Copts had often been seen as opponents of independence and supporters of the British - under whose rule some of them prospered. In the Nasser period they suffered discrimination, but not persecution - though that changed as Sadat flirted with Islamism. But the exclusion of Copts from the centres of power at the height of the secular nationalist period had its consequences.

Elsewhere, nationalists from Christian backgrounds have been important, even central - yet their relationship to the Islamic heritage of the societies in which they live has been deeply problematic for them. Michel Aflaq, founder of the Ba'ath Party (factions of which rule in Syria and Iraq), was a Greek Orthodox Christian, but he wrote in 1943: 'Europe is as fearful of Islam today as she has been in the past. She now knows that the strength of Islam (which in the past expressed that of the Arabs) has been reborn and has appeared in a new form: in Arab nationalism.' Bernard Lewis, perhaps the leading contemporary Orientalist, argues that the main 'Western value' that Christian Arab nationalist intellectuals have succeeded in transmitting to broad popular culture is European anti-Semitism, which is now a core idea of modern Islamism in a way that it never was for Islamic ideologies in the past.

It should not be thought that the growth of Islamism was or is automatic or inevitable. The Islamist movements are disunited and fragmented, and by their very nature are likely to remain so: one person's ideal Islamic state is another's infidel heresy. Energy consumed on issues of dress and suppressing impermissible entertainments has limited power

to build mass support. The Islamists not only fail to have solutions to the social and economic problems of the population, they fail even to pretend to offer solutions other than the general and abstract one of a return to an imaginary, harmonious past. Probably most Muslims remain suspicious of or hostile to the Islamists. Outside Algeria, they have not been in a position to win elections. In power the Islamists become - and can be seen by millions to have become - as corrupt, as ineffectual, and even more repressive, than the regimes they replace.

Alternatives do exist. There have been powerful moments of working class action in the history of the region. Iran is described above. It is by no means the only example, though it is the most impressive.

Workers' strikes were a feature of Egyptian life prior to the 1952 coup. Indeed, one of the regime's first actions was to execute the leaders of militant strikes. Later, too, workers played a role: in 1977, it was a combination of rioting and a near general strike which forced Sadat to reinstate subsidies on basic foods. Striking workers and the urban poor united to chant 'O hero of the crossing, where is our breakfast?'

In Iraq, a period of intense working class militancy followed the 1958 revolution, and the labour movement's support for the regime was a source of its strength. Its defeat was the foundation of the Saddam Hussein dictatorship which has been in power since 1968. There continues to be a workers' movement in Algeria. Tunisia is often considered to have the biggest and best organised workers' movement in North Africa. It was partly to defeat militant trade union action that the Sudanese military took power in 1989.

It remains true that the Middle East, or the Arab world at least, has never seen working class action on the scale, or of the type, that we have witnessed elsewhere, for instance in South America, South Africa, or south or south-east Asia. This absence of militant workers' movements has shaped political opposition as the bourgeois regimes have gone into crisis. It cannot be stressed enough that just as the victory of the Khomeiniite Islamists influenced the subsequent growth of Islamism, so too did the defeat of the working class alternative which was present in the Iranian revolution. Defeats have their cost. The majority of the population across the region is under 25: they have grown up in a world shaped by the outcome of the Iranian revolution.

4. Socialists and Islamism

The distinction sometimes made is between those Islamists which are 'anti-imperialist' and those which accommodate to imperialism and local regimes, with the strong implication that the 'anti-imperialist' type is preferable. This raises the question as to what is meant by 'anti-imperialism', and whether it is a meaningful guide for a socialist response. In the case of Islamist groups, the more 'anti-imperialist' they are, the worse - the more anti-democratic, the more violent towards secular, feminist and progressive opponents, the more chauvinistic towards foreigners, the more repressive they would be in power. 'Anti-imperialism' without a positive, democratic and anti-capitalist programme is a reactionary, demagogic force.

The Islamists appeal to a range of social classes, though their membership and cadre tend to come from the urban, educated middle class. They are the product of modern social and political developments, and are therefore in an important sense modern movements. Though Islamism sometimes appeals to old social classes, and certainly gets support from them (from the bazaar, from some sections of the mosque hierarchy, from the Saudi royal family, from landlords and tribal chiefs in the case of Afghanistan), it is wrong to see it as simply the festering sore of pre-capitalist society. It is the product, on the whole at least, of capitalism.

Ideologically, although sometimes Islamists address

themselves to 'modern' political questions, their answers are backward looking - idealising the early Caliphate, glorifying the Islamic past, resenting economic development which can not be reversed. Many militant Islamists identify with the salifiyya tradition. That school of thought was founded by Muhammed Abduh, one of the early modernising Islamic revivalists. He advocated, for instance, rights for women. But its stress on the salafi - the early followers of the Prophet - has translated, within the modern Islamist movements, into a profoundly reactionary viewpoint.

Politics and ideology have their own weight. There is on the left a type of sociological reductionism which reads the Islamists as 'petty bourgeois', and therefore simply a variant of standard petty bourgeois nationalism. This is quite false. There are other movements which seek through extreme violence to recapture some idealised past - the Khmer Rouge springs to mind. But the Islamists' 'discourse' is quite different from most nationalist movements, certainly from any which have had progressive, liberatory potential.

In so far as they are violent and reactionary, and especially in so far as they can mobilise a mass movement which, as in Iran, can attack and crush the left and the workers' movement, there are strong parallels between the Islamists and fascism. They are not identical to fascism, but a close enough analogy to be called 'fascistic'. The significance of this was clear in Iran: relations between the left and the Islamists were of violent confrontation; the left's task was not simply to intervene in an inchoate mass movement and 'win it over'. The same thing can be seen in Algeria. Often the central issue is day-to-day self-defence.

Other Islamists are more moderate, and concerned with 'social reform' rather than violent politics. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has evolved in this direction. Of course, such movements can evolve suddenly in the other direction, as the history of the Brotherhood in Sudan shows. In Algeria, the apparent commitment to democracy of at least a large part of the FIS collapsed when their electoral victory was denied them. European fascism, these days, often professes a parliamentary focus, rather than concentrating on fighting on the streets and burning immigrants alive in hostels; that lesson should not be lost on us.

Even when moderate and reformist, the Islamist groups are best understood as conservative, right-wing movements, concerned with enforcing social conformity, especially on women and 'apostates', and a threat to religious and other minorities. The reformist Islamists are less fiercely reactionary than their militant counterparts, but not in any sense progressive.

Military-bureaucratic repression of the Islamists - as in Algeria in the 1990s, or Egypt in the 1960s or since the early 1980s - is no sort of answer the left can support. Even if the repression pushes the Islamists back for a while, it simultaneously pushes back the left, and often only prepares the way for the Islamists to re-emerge, more militant, implacable, and widely-supported than before. The one place where repression seems to have 'worked' is Iraq - where the state is even more repressive than anywhere else in the region, and structured quite closely to a totalitarian system.

They have to be defeated 'from below'. The problem for the left is that where the Islamists, reformist or militant, have built a solid base in communities, the left has not. Even - or, indeed, especially - in student and professional associations where secular nationalists thought themselves impregnable, they have been outflanked. There are energetic organisations across the region attempting to do grass-roots work - civil rights groups, women's organisations, trade unions, of course, and so on. But many of these are wilfully unideological bodies, which simply can't compete with the integrated worldview of the Islamists. The poor, the working class and the middle classes want political answers - the growth of Islamism shows this. So if the left is to compete it needs to be politically clear.

In South Africa, in the 1970s, leftist activists, including many students, played a vital role in starting and building independent trade unions. By the mid-80s these were often strong, militant, and well-organised, and with a firm sense of their own independence from the mainstream nationalist movement, the ANC and its internal surrogates. But as the mass movement rose in the late 80s, the limited political tools of the trade unions proved inadequate to resist the power of the bourgeois nationalists and Stalinists; the trade union movement was largely co-opted by the ANC. That sort of cooption is even more likely to occur in mainly Muslim countries where Islamists have established roots in communities.

Trade-unionist and community activism alone cannot defeat the Islamists. Politics, and socialist ideas firmly based on democratic and egalitarian principles, are not an optional extra in the building of a genuinely progressive movement; as long as no alternative framework for discussing politics develops - alternative to Islamism and old-fashioned nationalism - the Islamists are likely to keep the upper hand. But this is not to say that trade unionism and community activism are not important. One of the sources of the Islamists' strength is their claim to offer an integrated moral system - their critique of the West is a moral one (for example, that Western women are degraded, Muslim women have more dignity, and so on). Trade unionism offers an alternative moral system - a concept of solidarity different to the Islamists'; an alternative, class-based sense of community. It also offers models of genuine, and working class, democracy. The organic process of organisational growth will take time and effort. But it is the essential task now for socialists; insurrectionary fantasies are a hindrance. One measure of the bankruptcy of the 'anti-imperialist' conception is that in focusing on the 'revolutionary' aspect of Islamism, and presumably imagining the region to be poised on some sort of revolutionary transformation, it ignores the real questions, for socialists, of how a powerful workers' movement can be built.

The state and bourgeois liberal parties are no allies in the struggle to build that movement. But secular and liberal individuals, intellectuals and so on, certainly are, or can be. The strategic task for socialists in Muslim countries is to open the space for working class organisation to flourish and democratic issues come to the fore without losing political independence or subordinating workers' struggle to a schema such as 'first bourgeois democracy, then the struggle for socialism'.

A central aspect of political rebirth in the Muslim world will be to question hoary notions of 'imperialism' and 'Zionism', challenging the idea that all social evils are the fault of Western 'neo-colonialism', or identifying Israel as the oppressor of all Muslims, or all Arabs, rather than the Palestinians. One element in popular fury against Israel, even if it is not the only one, is that the reactionary regimes have been making demagogic use of the issue for 50 years. A democratic anti-imperialism, the purpose of which is to build international workers' unity, will recognise the rights of the Israeli Jews, and vehemently oppose the anti-Semitic demonisation of them by the Islamists.

Creating a genuine, democratic anti-imperialism, and working-class movements, is an urgent task. Without such an alternative, the immediate future in the Muslim world looks bleak: either the continuation of the existing authoritarian, corrupt and repressive regimes (perhaps slightly modified with US prodding), or Islamic reaction, potentially in a violent and fascistic form, in many countries. The toppling of Hosni Mubarak, for instance, by an 'Islamic revolution' led by al-Jihad would not be a blow against imperialism, but a blow against democracy and progress, however awful the regime it replaces. The fall of the Pakistani dictatorship at the hands of friends of the Taliban - giving them access to nuclear weapons - would be an appalling tragedy.

There is hope. The working class of Iran, Algeria, Tunisia, and potentially other countries like Egypt and Iraq, as well as Pakistan and India and further east, holds out that hope. Indeed, Indonesia, which has the largest Muslim population in the world, but so far has seen little militant Islamism, and where an independent workers' movement is beginning to stir, is probably the biggest cause for hope of all.

Our task is to build solidarity with those workers' movements, and with the forces now preparing the way for them.

Muslims, Christians, Marxists, free speech: the Muhammad cartoons dispute. An attempt at a dialogue. [2006]

By Sean Matgamna

Q. What for socialists is the issue in the uproar over the cartoons depicting Muhammad?

A. Whether or not the devotees of a religion should be allowed to enforce the precepts, rules, and customs of a set of religious believers on people who do not voluntarily accept that religion and its rules. (Or - and this is important, too, for many of Islamic background - on people who, accepting much of the religion, disagree with some of its rules and customs).

The idea that because (most) Muslims do not picture Muhammad, nobody else should either, is the demand for compliance with Muslim rules by non-Muslims.

The fight against the rule of the religious and the imposition of what they believe on non-believers - such things as the imposition on Protestants, Jews, and others in Ireland in 1925 of the Catholic ban on divorce - has been, and still is, one of the core struggles in establishing bourgeois-democratic civilisation against old tyrannies.

Q. Isn't it that the uproar comes from people feeling that their religion has been insulted, and so they themselves have been insulted too?

A. Talk of "insult" here is specious ideologising. The "insult" consists in non-Muslims defying the custom of (most) Muslims that "The Prophet" is not drawn or painted. Why should non-Muslims comply with that rule? Why should they let a religious group decide to outlaw something which to non-Muslims is trivial? Why - and that is the issue now - should they be compelled to by violence and the threat of violence? Why should self-respecting socialists and secularists let themselves be compelled?

Because Muhammad is exclusively the property of Muslims? The depiction of Muhammad is a question on which non-Muslims should defer to Muslims? But that is just another form of the demand that non-Muslims comply with the customs of a religion which they reject.

In a world where Islam is only one mindset, why should we comply?

The demand that non-Muslims should defer is inescapably a demand that Islam should be privileged above other world-views. It should be above criticism, or at least above harsh and "abusive" criticism. The religious should dictate the terms on which their enemies criticise them, and what in their doctrine is to be held above expression of contempt and derision, above criticism, or even the "criticism" implied in disobedience by non-believers to the rules and customs of the religious, such as the one against depicting Muhammad graphically.

Rules and customs of Islam should be enforced on non-believers under threat of outcry, murder, and general mayhem, or - and this is now being demanded by "moderate" Muslim leaders in Britain - enforced by the British and other states.

In fact, the demand that is growing up around us - it is implied for example in the statement of Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor on the issue - is that all major religions should have that privilege. The Muslim outcry encourages others of the religious to demand for themselves what the Muslim bigots enforce by threats and violence.

The Muslim demand for suppression of the cartoons, backed up by raucous demonstrations, blood-curdling threats, the burning of embassies, trade boycotts, etc., is the thin end of the wedge of a demand for Muslim or general religious privilege.

Why should that stop at the enforcement on non-believers of the Muslim prohibition on picturing Muhammad? Why should it stop at the prohibition of such mild and trivial (to non-Muslims) "criticism" of Islam, and not go on, feeding on the success of intimidation, to object to all critical or hostile comments on Islam, or on all major religions?

The pressure of Islam has already led to Blairite attempts to legislate against the freedom of hostile criticism of religion.

Q. But surely the cartoons, and even more their reproduction in European papers (and two Jordanian papers, and one Malaysian), were a "provocation"? It would have been better in the current situation not to publish them.

A. Perhaps. Or even, yes, it would have been better not to have let the cartoon business become the issue it has.

Would we, socialists, have published those cartoons to start with? No, surely, we would not. The one about Paradise "running out of virgins" strikes me as funny, apt, and to an important point about Islamism. Even so, caricature on that level, and in a society where there is racism against people who are easily identifiable as Muslims, is too much of a blunderbuss weapon. It can ricochet too widely.

The cartoons have, however, been published. Free speech is now the issue. Free speech includes the right to say things others may feel "provoked" by. "Freedom is for the one who disagrees". The issue of freedom only arises when someone says things you disagree with so strongly that you might want to stop him or her saying them.

The issue now is posed by the situation created by the Danish newspaper's decision to publish, and the reaction to it. It is not now a discussion on the wisdom or otherwise of the Danish editor's decision, but of confronting the attempt to revenge the publication and forcibly inhibit and forbid such things in future.

Given the actual choices, we cannot but defend free speech - and, immediately, that is also to defend the most vulnerable, those in mainly-Muslim countries who do not agree with the politico-religious bigots. This is a major mobilisation of political Islam - and in Syria and Lebanon of other reactionary Arab political forces, such as the Ba'thists, for their own political purposes.

It is impossible to separate what spontaneous element there may be the Muslim outcry now from the politically-motivated mobilisation which led up to it, over four months. We cannot defer to the spontaneous indignation without also deferring to the political Islamists who engineered it. But we should not defer to reactionary bigotry even if it were entirely a raw and spontaneous Islamic popular movement.

When the Danish embassies in Damascus and Beirut are burned in the name of religion, and when demonstrators in

London (who have been justly denounced by British Muslim leaders as "fascists") call for death to those who offend Islamic sensibilities, then opponents of religion and of Islam face a new challenge. I repeat: not the least important part of that is the duty that falls to us to support those in Muslim countries for whom the raucous bigots are an immediate danger and for whom the current demonstrations cannot but be a force of intimidation and repression.

Q. But it is not just religion. Religion is the vehicle in the Muslim countries - and even in Europe - for social feelings, for resentment at being excluded and discriminated against, or living in a world dominated by the commercial-capitalist big powers.

A. Undoubtedly.

Q. So we can't just respond to it in terms of religion, or of the implications for traditional Western liberties of the uproar and the attempt to intimidate the enemies of Islam.

A. Very successful intimidation! We oppose exclusion, discrimination, etc. as such. We defend the oppressed and excluded Muslims as people, not as Muslims (except to defend their right to freely practise their religion, as a religion). We defend the singers; we are mortally hostile to the song, and to all similar songs.

We can not - with the excuse that we think that "really" it is something else - support, or quietly tolerate, Islamic or other religious bigotry, still less the fascists of political Islam.

Whatever else in society and politics and international relations provides Islamic reaction with space and nourishment to breed, political Islam is first and foremost itself - a virulent politico-religious movement which, in alliance with Christian reaction and encouraged by it, threatens the liberties of bourgeois-democratic society. It poses a mortal threat to the liberties in the winning and shaping of which - including the right of dissenters, heretics, and atheists not to be dictated to by religion - the labour movement and the left have played an irreplaceable part; liberties without which labour movements could not exist, and, in a broader sense, the quality of general bourgeois-democratic civilisation would be enormously diminished.

Q. But we have to take account of the social, and in the Middle East anti-imperialist, dimensions in the Islamist movement.

A. Yes - by trying to give them rational, progressive, democratic, achievable expression, and by helping those in Muslim countries and communities who do that.

It is not only Islamic reaction that has a distorted social content. So too, in a country like Britain, do working-class racism and working-class BNP votes.

Working-class racism is often rooted in real grievances against injustice and exploitation, expressed in ignorant scapegoating against immigrants, refugees, etc., rather than in politically lucid animosity towards those who are actually responsible for social exclusion, poverty, and general oppression. Socialists do not - and, on pain of committing suicide as socialists and democrats - defer to such prejudices.

Q. But in fact it was right-wing papers who published the offending cartoons - the original Danish paper and the first papers to follow in France, Germany, etc. Why should we back them?

A. Because we are in favour of free speech for such papers. We qualify that when "free speech" is direct racial, religio-racial, or anti-gay, etc. incitement. Nothing like that is involved here.

Q. But surely the generally right-wing character of those

papers played some part in determining their stand.

A. Perhaps. Probably. Certainly their version of "free speech" has a big element of bourgeois hypocrisy in it. Free speech for the owners of newspapers! Even so, there is in established bourgeois democracies a general commitment to free speech. In some countries, there is a strong historically-rooted hostility to clerical dictation. If some of the bourgeois-democratic right-wing press aggressively assert and exercise the right to disagree with and caricature Islam, that is no bad thing.

Q. But the decent liberal papers haven't reproduced the cartoons - the Guardian, the Independent, the Observer, etc.

A. The Irish Times, traditionally a paper of the Protestant religious minority in Catholic Ireland, printed an old dissenting Muslim portrait of Muhammad. Libération in France printed three of the cartoons. The point about the Guardian, Independent, etc. is that they are "invertebrate liberals" - without principles or guts or historical perspective. In this affair they have once more confirmed that.

They are generally less assertive on issues like free speech and criticism of Islam than some of the less liberal bourgeois-democratic press. What Trotsky wrote about the Norwegian Social Democrats of the 1930s, constrasting them favourably with the the old Norwegian bourgeois-democratic functionaries, is sometimes still true.

"I soon had occasion to become convinced, by experience, that the old bourgeois functionaries sometimes have a broader viewpoint and a more profound sense of dignity than Messrs. 'Socialist' Ministers".

Additionally, the British press is likely to have experienced pressure from the Government not to "make things worse" for British troops in Iraq.

Q. But surely there was a racist element in some of the cartoons - stereotyping Muslims, branding them all and their religion as "terrorist"?

A. The liberal press, in self-excuse, has promoted that interpretation, at least of the cartoon showing Muhammad with his turban turning into a bomb.

But there is nothing overtly racist in the cartoons. A cartoon is not a finely-balanced paragraph or thesis.

By expressing criticism of the politics of some Muslims in terms of archetypal Islam (the figure of Muhammad) the cartoons may open the way for people to identify all Muslims with some (the terrorist) Muslims. I doubt that anyone not already rabid with hostility to Muslims as people would interpret the cartoon as other than a comment on some (terrorist) Muslims.

Cartoons by their nature caricature, exaggerate, lampoon, and play with stereotype images. To demand otherwise of cartoons, as a condition of publication, would be to outlaw political and "social content" cartoons as a genre!

In this case it would be to set up the targets as judge of what can be published about themselves - the sort of Muslims (and there are other sorts too, of course) who demonstrate against the cartoons, and the sort who provided the "story" which prompted the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten to commission the cartoons (by mounting the threats of physical violence so that the Danish children's author who found illustrators he asked too scared to do drawings of Muhammad for his book).

Q. Excuses! The cartoon of the turban/ bomb is obviously racist!

A. If that was what the cartoonist intended, of course we

reject it, and say we reject it. But, to repeat, there is nothing overtly racist in the cartoon.

Read what a thoughtful Muslim writes (Guardian letter, 6 February).

"I am a Muslim. I believe in and recite the Kalima. I am in a rage over the cartoons. I have managed to see them, since there are many sites now where they are available, and my rage is that they are an accurate representation. Political cartoons are wonderful. They are a mirror which cuts away the superficial and shows by exaggeration what the cartoonist sees as the heart of the issue...

"If a Danish newspaper commissions cartoonists to find an image of the Prophet Muhammad, where are they going to find the imagery to capture in their cartoons? They are going to see it in the face that the Muslim world presents. And it isn't pretty.

"It is the face of the bomb ticking away above the brain, destroying reason. It is the face of the sword guarding repressed, hidden and frightened women. About a vision of paradise as a male voluptuous fantasy inspiring people to kill innocents and themselves. They could have shown other ugly scenes from state executions to anti-semitism and intolerance of other religions and viewpoints. The scariest image I saw was of the placards outside the Regent's Park mosque saying: 'To Hell with free speech' and 'Behead those who insult the prophet'. The Qur'an and the Al-hadith are venerated and recited, but not read, studied and acted upon".

The writer, Rafiq Mahmood, sees the cartoon not as an attack on him, but as a cruelly accurate caricature of rising forces in the Muslim world - of people like bin Laden and the Iranian ayatollahs.

Q. But the cartoons are perceived by most Muslims as racist.

A. Are they? The outcry has been fomented by the political Islamists, rather than welling up spontaneously from below. Isn't the cry that the cartoons are "racist" just a translation into the language and concerns of bourgeois-democratic society of a religio-political resentment and intolerance of criticism and mockery? Doesn't it represent the cynical construction of an additional, "good" reason for resentment to rationalise the religious backlash? And this while the political Islamists - indeed, much of the Arab press - routinely publish viciously racist, Nazi-level cartoons about Israelis and Jews in general.

Q. But Islam is felt by Muslims to be not just a religion, but the prime element in the identity of Muslim communities.

A. Maybe. Yes. But it does not follow that if we criticise Islam, or outrage its bigots by refusing to be bound by Islamic rules, then we become "racist", or should meekly let ourselves be intimidated by the charge that we are "racist". The social and political cost of us acquiescing in Islamic bigotry would be enormous - especially for the unbigoted, the reformists of Islam and the unbelievers, in Muslim communities and countries. The cost of the acquiescence of so much of the liberal and kitsch-socialist press is and will be enormous.

Q. Even if you have to allow for cartoons to be a bit off-colour, or "unfair", surely there are some which are simply unacceptable - the Nazi-style anti-Jewish cartoons, for example?

A. Of course. None of the cartoons which triggered the uproar came within many political miles of that. Of course we have standards of what is and is not acceptable. They are not the standards of the religious fundamentalists! Or of the self-exculpating invertebrate "liberal" press who pretend that, instead of being cowardly and treacherous to the cause of secularist free speech, they are sensitive liberal anti-racists.

Q. But - you admit it - some of the cartoons do stereotype. They do indict Islam as terrorist. Not all terrorists are Islamic!

A. Indeed! There are Jewish religious terrorists, like the crazed man who shot the Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. There are Christian terrorists, like those who bomb abortion clinics in the USA. There are elements of religious fanaticism among Lebanese Christians, among Serbs, and on both sides in Northern Ireland. The non-Muslim Tamil Tigers use suicide bombings.

But nonetheless the overwhelming weight of religious-linked terrorism in the world today is Islamist terrorism. For no other religious figure than Muhammad would a children's author in Denmark find illustrators too scared to draw that figure.

Compare and contrast Irish Catholic Republicanism with political Islam here. There is in Irish Catholic Republicanism a distinct strain of hunger for martyrdom. But not self-killing in acts of mass murder. Where an Islamic terrorist can think suicide and mass murder is a sure route to a Technicolour personal harem in Paradise, a Catholic, however strong the yearning for martyrdom, is told by his church that deliberate suicide, not to speak of suicide as a weapon of mass murder, would precipitate him straight to the fires of hell, "for all eternity".

The point here is not that the Catholic Church is "not so bad". History knows Catholic cults of death other than the modern Irish Republican strain. The medieval crusaders were encouraged to go and "reclaim the Holy Land" from Islam by Popes promising them that if they died they would go straight to heaven. Among Spanish Civil War Catholic fascists, you found a cult of death similar to that of the crusades. The point is the awfulness of political Islam now.

Political Islam, in power in Iran from 1979, and out of power, has an inbuilt propensity to terrorism in its doctrines, its traditions, and its idea of a holy war against the modern infidel world. In its doctrine of martyrdom, it has a continuously active incitement to believers to gain entry to Paradise by acts of war on non-believers, including suicide combined with mass murder.

Of course it is social and political conditions which activate this propensity and mobilise people to give it bloody meaning. But activated it is. It is a force in politics and in society. Long a force in some Muslim countries, political Islam is now a force in international politics

Without political-Islamic violence, and the threat of it, there might be more bourgeois liberals willing to insist on the elementary democratic right of the citizen not to be bound by the rules of a religion which he or she does not voluntarily accept.

Q. But socialists should downplay this, or else anti-Islamist feeling will hit ordinary Muslims.

A. We can't help defend Muslims against racist persecution by pretence or by lying. Nor in that way can we help reformists and secularists within the Muslim communities against the bigots. We must tell the truth. And for the left to restore itself to anything like political sanity, it must start by telling itself the truth. It must start by refusing to go with the invertebrate liberals and the Sharia-socialists in rationalising submission to Islamist reaction as good, progressive, egalitarian, anti-racist politics.

Q. But the cartoons go beyond telling the truth. They caricature.

A. Irepeat; in general, the idea of freedom for cartooning and caricature, if it is real and not sham, has to include licence to exaggerate and be "unfair". As cartoons, I can't see anything in them that is not more or less fair comment on a real

situation, or anything that can be ascribed to a special racist, or even religious, animus.

The cartoon showing Muhammad on a cloud telling ragged suicide bombers, just arrived to claim their rewards, that they are "out of virgins" - in what respect is that not a perfectly legitimate mockery of the Islamists' obscene religious incitement to devotees to gain a paradise of harems and Hollywood "Arabian Nights" luxury for themselves by murdering citizens in London, New York, or Israel? It is offensive? Good! The point is that it is true! The same point has been made by way of contemptuous words a dozen times in Solidarity and Workers' Liberty.

Q. Even so, we should be restrained and sensitive.

A. We should be restrained tenderly sensitive about comment on that political-Islamist obscenity? Don't be ridiculous! For sure we should not be "sensitive" under compulsion to the feelings of people who do not denounce the suicide-bombing aspect of Islam today - who in fact encourage it, cheer it on, and provide suicide-bombers for it.

Q. But there are double standards. Similar caricatures aimed at Christianity would provoke outrage.

A. Would they? In fact it's the other way round. If the Islamists are allowed to prevail in the affair of the cartoons, that will set a new benchmark for Christian bigots to demand deference as they have not been able to for some years now.

Only through a long, slow, and faltering process have we won the freedom to mock Christianity which we now have in Britain. As recently as 1977, the editor of Gay News was given a suspended prison sentence and a heavy fine (with another fine for the newspaper itself) for publishing "a blasphemous libel concerning the Christian religion, namely an obscene poem and illustration vilifying Christ in his life and in his crucifixion". Appeals right through to the House of Lords and the European Court of Human Rights failed to reverse the conviction.

At the beginning of the row, Gay News had declared, in an editorial: "In case Gay News readers are in any doubt, there is no such crime as 'hurting people's feelings'." They found out that there was, for Christian bigots' feelings!

If the Islamists can establish that "hurting the feelings" of Muslims - or hurting the feelings which they ascribe to, and sometimes hellp evoke in, Muslims - is to be forbidden, then the Christians will be quick to demand that once again their "feelings" should enjoy the same deference too.

Q. But there is racism against those who are Muslim in Britain and in Europe! Racists will join in hostility to Islamism while citing "good reasons" - ostensibly to defend "free speech", etc.

A. Undoubtedly. We face a complex reality. Among people and communities who are victims of racism, the vociferous elements tend to be (though not all of them are, of course) also aggressive, self-righteous opponents of many of the freedoms in bourgeois society which it has taken us decades and even centuries to win - in this case, the freedom of non-believers from forced compliance to rules and limits imposed by their religion on its believers.

Under their typical leaders (even many of the "moderate" ones), the Muslim communities in Britain and in Western Europe generally are, as well as being the target of racists and other sorts of bigots, including Christian religious bigots, also a powerful force for social reaction and regression. The once-cowed forces of Christian bigotry are ranging themselves around the Muslim leaders, translating Muslim demands for protection and privilege into demands for protection and privilege for religion in general. "Us too!"

We have seen quite a lot of that recently. It is one of the most alarming things in British society. We are seeing what may be the start of some variant in Britain of the organised militant Christian opposition to abortion which is so strong in the USA and which has sometimes taken the form of terrorism against the buildings and personnel of abortion clinics.

If we do not stand up now to defend free criticism of religion from the forces of religio-social reaction, Muslims, Christians, and others, we may soon have to confront those forces, augmented and encouraged by success, and some of them perhaps, as in the USA, using small-scale terrorism against abortion clinics and medical staff or other things which "insult" and "outrage" the ultra-religious.

In addition, the Muslim communities (under their typical leaders) are a virulent source of anti-semitism dressed up as "anti-Zionism", whose impact now, on "liberal" society and on the pseudo-left, is powerfully poisonous, and whose implications for the future are ominous.

Q. Well, then! We are against racism. That is our first and foremost concern. We must defend the Muslim communities, and oppose caricatures and stereotyping that are racist, or can shade into racism.

A. We are against racism, indeed! We are for the defence against racism and scapegoating of all Muslim people as of all victims or potential victims of bigotry.

But we are for the defence of all the freedoms which we and our predecessors - consistent democratics, secularists, labour movement people, socialists - have won for the citizen in liberal bourgeois society. It is in that framework that we fight racism and bigotry. In no other framework is it possible to fight racism in a progressive, integration-promoting, humanly-liberating way.

We are consistent democrats! We are consistent secularists. And we are either consistent democrats, or we are not democrats at all. If we are not consistent secularists, demanding an end to privileges for all religions and opposing religious schools, then we are not serious democrats at all, and still less are we serious socialists.

Freedom and democracy and secularism here are indivisible. The ideas that our "anti-racism" obliterates our other concerns is the idea that political self-immolation is a duty. This, in practice, is the governing idea of the "moderation-in-all-things" "invertebrate liberals". Expressed in other terms - of pseudo-militant "anti-racism" and "anti-imperialism" - it is the governing idea of the pseudo-socialists who know only what they are against (imperialism, capitalism, racism, etc.), and have excised from their outlook and their politics what socialists are for, positively.

Socialists must combine defence of the legitimate rights of people who are or may be victims of racial bigotry with militant opposition to the same people when they, on their own or in alliance with Britain's traditional reactionaries, assault our hard-won liberties.

The history of the SWP is one of accommodating to a succession of "hyphen-economisms". In 1969 we justly accused them of "Catholic-economism" in Northern Ireland. Their present course might be named "Islamic-economism". The common thread is accommodation to different "constituencies" or desired constituencies on their own political terms.

All such "hyphen-economisms" have the fault, as regards Catholics, Muslims, or whatever, which Lenin identified in the relations of the prototype Russian "economists" to the "trade-union"-level workers. They leave the "constituency" as it is. Instead of playing the proper role of Marxists, that of educators and raisers-up of consciousness, they play the political chameleon to their chosen "constituency".

Our job in relation to the Muslim communities - or their youth, and their "heretics", and their dissatisfied oppressed women - is to educate their best elements towards working-class unity, away from Islamic politics, and eventually away from Islam. We cannot do that if we sacrifice our own political identity by hysterically merging it - in the name of "anti-racism", and in international politics of "anti-imperialism" - with that of the reactionary bigots and militant obscurantists of the Muslim communities.

We are concerned not only with "defending" those communities against racists. We are interested in dividing the forward-looking elements from the others, the progressive young from the elders sunk in superstition, the working class from the petty bourgeoisie, the younger women from the mindsets that condemn them to acquiesce in age-old inequality and oppression of women within their communities and families.

If mimicking the dominant Islamic mindset might, now, give us a better "hearing" from some Muslim workers, it would be at the cost of shedding an irreplaceable part of what we, as working-class consistent democrats and socialists, need to say to them. It would be a futile exercise in political self-elimination.

In the 1950s socialists called some supporters of McCarthyite repression "police-state liberals" (driven by their hostility to Stalinism). Now, for example in the astonishing SWP welcome for the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections, we have "Sharia socialists", people who, driven by "anti-imperialist" opposition to advanced capitalism, accommodate to authoritarian, medieval-minded, religio-fascist Islamism.

We are concerned to integrate workers from the Muslim communities into the labour movement; to unite them with the rest of the working class; to win them to socialism, secularism, contempt for the presently dominant Islamic bigots and the bigots' mindset, and comprehensive rejection of it. Otherwise our anti-racism is just flaccid liberalism.

I repeat: to do what we have to do presupposes that we preserve and aggressively assert our own identity - including the militant secularist element in it.

Q. But we are not vulgar secularist preachers! It is only in struggle that the youth of Islam will begin to emancipate themselves and slough off their religious ideas.

A. Indeed! But the generally true definition of how people will be emancipated en masse cannot be an excuse for shedding our responsibility to educate the small numbers who can and must be reached before we reach the mass - and without the preparation of whom now there will be no, or a much slower, general enlightenment in future. It cannot be an excuse for a reactionary chameleon adaptation to Muslim identity, or to aggressive political Islam. Or for a cowardly refusal to counterpose our own identity now to the dominant religio-communalist identity.

Q. Aren't you substituting secularism and hostility to religion - specifically to Islam - for anti-racism and anti-imperialism? Aren't you relapsing into anti-religious concerns that for most of West European society are already anachronistic? Religion is dying anyway. Britain is irreversibly secular.

A. Are you sure that you are not being anachronistic? Religion is on the offensive. In Britain, the different religious bodies engage in what Americans call political "log-rolling", backing each others' demands for repression of critics and those who offend.

It would be foolish to believe in the "inevitability of progress" here. Regression is possible. Over the last decades, the Middle Eastern countries have regressed from a secularising nationalism to Islamic chauvinism.

How long it may be before the Muslim communities in Western Europe dissolve and integrate, we don't know. It may take generations. The long-term trends in Britain and Europe may be for the decline of old religion. Even within such a trend there can be - and is - limited, sectional, revival.

In any case we should not, by smug fatalism about the future, immobilise ourselves as an active force working to shape the future. Here and now, we have to assert our own secular, anti-religious identity.

Q. As I say - vulgar secularism!

A. The Marxist movement has defended freedom of religion. For example, the German Social Democrats defended the German Catholic Church from persecution during Chancellor Bismarck's Kulturkampf. But the Marxists combined defending freedom of religion with the demand for "freedom of atheistic propaganda".

Who, even 16 years ago, when the demonstrations against Salman Rushdie erupted, would have said that early in the 21st century we would have to defend freedom for atheistic propaganda against the recent attacks by the Blair government?

We are secularists and we are militant atheists. We speak out on these things in all conditions in which they are given immediacy by the society around us.

Who can seriously argue that they do not now possess an immediacy in Britain which they have not had for many decades?

One of the inbuilt weaknesses of the left in Britain - in the broadest historical sense, including the liberals - is that we have not for centuries had a historical experience of struggle against repressive religion comparable to that far more recently in Catholic countries like France, in which secularism is deeply lodged in the foundations of the left.

It is true that it was as late as 1855 that special civil disabilities were lifted from Jews, and a mere 26 years earlier that they were lifted from Catholics. But there were very few Jews in Britain, and, before mass Irish immigration, not all that many Catholics (except, of course, in Britain's internal colony, Ireland itself, where the national and religious oppression of the "helot nation" were fused).

Though the Established Church was a powerful force in British society well into the 20th century, the "compromise" of science and religion worked out in the late 17th century allowed for an immense freedom of thought. (God is the "first cause", but all the "secondary causes" which he set in motion have to be explored and explained empirically and scientifically).

We have had it comparatively very easy, certainly in the last decades. The suicidal antics of the pseudo-left with Islamist groups are the measure of how much we need to take stock and reorient.

Q. But it is not just religion. You admitted it, at least in part: religion is the mask for political and social resentment.

A. Yes, but we do not don that mask. Still less do we, like so much of the pseudo-left now, engraft that mask onto what was our face! Nor can we be meek and gentle and accommodating with those who do.

The question of working-class unity is centrally involved here. Apart from all other considerations, for the left - beyond the need to defend communities against the physical attacks of racists and non-Islamic fascists - to assume the religious identity of one community, is necessarily to exclude ourselves from the possibility of playing the role we must

with the working class in general, that of advocates, promoters, and organisers of working-class unity.

The idea that we go beyond physical "defence" of Muslim people to "defend" the ideas, doctrines, rules, and customs of Islam is a recipe for political, intellectual, and moral suicide by the left.

Working-class unity cannot be built around accommodation to Islamic communalism and sectionalism, any more than it can by accommodating to Protestant or Catholic communalism in Northern Ireland. That would be to exclude all the other sections of the working class - not only non-Islamic working-class bigots and racists, but also decent labour movement people, and secularising Muslims too. The labour movement can not but, in its majority, be hostile to the regressive tendencies of the militant Islamists.

Q. There are very big difficulties in convincing other than a minority of Muslims - and initially, perhaps, not a big minority - of that.

A. Yes. But the difficulties are not so big as those in the way of convincing the British labour movement, or any other labour movement built on secularist and non-sectarian lines, to defer to political Islam and communalist Islam!

Our role can not but be that of advocates of working-class unity on the basis of treating religion - all religion, of course - as a private matter vis-a-vis society, the state, and the labour movement.

Within that framework, and as part of it, we defend the Muslim communities against bigotry and racism. And within that framework, and as part of it, we advocate that the broad labour movement should do the same.

The consequence of the alternative - identification with the Muslim communities in the manner of the benighted "Islamist-economists", Respect and the SWP - would, all proportions guarded, over time generate something resembling the communalism in Northern Ireland that has crippled the labour movement there for generations, and still cripples it.

The British state, with its crypto-Catholic prime minister and its astonishingly short-sighted and irresponsible promotion of "faith schools", is already doing its best, by segregating children, to promote and fit such communalism. So too, in its political foolishness and habitual irresponsibility, is the kitsch-left.

Our responsibilities in this situation have already been set out.

Real and invented differences on Political Islam: The Sharia socialists

Sean Matgamna

"But [against the state] socialists cannot give support to the Islamists either. That would be to call for the swapping of one form of oppression for another, to react to the violence of the state by abandoning the defence of ethnic and religious minorities, women and gays, to collude in scapegoating that makes it possible for capitalist exploitation to continue unchecked providing it takes 'Islamic' forms.

"It would be to abandon the goal of independent socialist politics, based on workers in struggle organising all the oppressed and exploited behind them, for a tail-ending of a

petty bourgeois utopianism which cannot even succeed in its own terms.

"The Islamists are not our allies. They are representatives of a class which seeks to influence the working class, and which, in so far as it succeeds, pulls workers either in the direction of futile and disastrous adventurism or in the direction of a reactionary capitulation to the existing system – or often to the first followed by the second".

Chris Harman, The Prophet and the Proletariat

The following are all, more or less indisputable, plain matters of fact.

• A large proportion of Muslims in Britain and Europe are among the most downtrodden, oppressed, poverty-afflicted targets of racism.

• Some who are hostile to Muslims as people, the British National Party fascist Nick Griffin for a noxious example, sometimes present themselves as hostile only to Islam as a religion.

• The outlook of many strongly religious Muslims (as of many strongly religious people of other religions) in Britain often has more in common with pre-Renaissance Catholic Europe than with the world of 21st century secular or only superficially religious people.

• Very far from all Muslims have that mindset. According to the rueful calculation of the Islamist Tariq Ramadan, only 40 to 50% of Muslims in Europe are "practising" even on a very loose definition.

• Powerful currents of political Islam exist among the devout, feeding demagogically on their sense of grievance and alienation.

• The political-Islamist groups feed off real social and economic grievances and alienation, and off a mix of religious self-righteousness and religious outrage against the broad society in which they live.

• In their criticism of the modern bourgeois world, those Islamist currents sometimes say some things socialists say, and criticise, some of what we criticise; but as alternative they offer the utopian and reactionary project of "recreating" the Islamic world which they think once existed.

• Broadly speaking, they are near-equivalents of the religio-fascist movements of Europe in the mid 20th century — the Falangists and Francoists of Spain, the Blueshirts of Catholic Ireland, the Salazarists of Portugal, etc. Those movements too criticised aspects of capitalism — as indeed did the Catholic church — and had in them elements of what Marx and Engels called "reactionary socialism". They criticised aspects of capitalist society, but to it counterposed not enlightened working class socialism, but return to an imaginary and half imaginary past. In reality while being socially and culturally regressive they all served capitalism.

• Political Islamists in the west are linked to parent movements in the Muslim world — to people and organisations who, where they rule, crush with horrendous and sustained violence, and where they do not rule, terrorise and murder, secularists, international socialists, lesbian and gay people, advocates of female equality, and those who embrace and actively promote the alien culture of the West.

• The forces of traditional Christian reaction and bigotry and their desire for privilege for their own religion are being encouraged and energised by the example of Islamist militancy.

• In response to the outcry against the cartoons depicting Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper on 30 September 2005 many Western governments have offered abject apologies (Denmark) or placating noises. These include Britain, whose government was already attempting, under Muslim pressure, to inhibit hostile comment on religion. Much of the Western liberal press has expressed little or no solidarity with the right to free expression for the Danish cartoonists or the newspaper which published them. They have tended to blame the cartoonists, and the right-wing Danish paper which published them. In the past, some of these papers blamed Salman Rushdie for "offending" Muslims and "provoking" the Ayatollah Khomeini into issuing a sentence of death upon him.

• It is likely that governments like the British have privately influenced newspapers against publishing or saying anything that "would make the situation worse".

• The religio-fascist Islamist groups and other currents of Islamic opinion less politically defined than they are, subscribe, passively or more or less actively, platonically or as practitioners, to the Islamic doctrine of the jihad, understood as active warfare against the non-Muslim world and, often, against the "ordinary" people of Muslim countries whom they consider to be morally blameworthy for not actively supporting their cause.

• The outcry against the Danish cartoons is being fomented, organised, and used by political-Islamist movements and governments (Iran and Saudi Arabia) to mobilise the support of Muslims and Muslim communities worldwide.

• The consequence of the great rallying of political Islam to denounce the Danish cartoons can not but be the strengthening of the clerical-fascist movements of political Islam — and in the first place against dissenters, unbelievers, socialists, lesbians, gays, feminists etc. in the Muslim-majority countries and in Muslim communities elsewhere.

Which of that list of statements is untrue? What is not there that should be in a list of the dominant facts in the cartoons furore?

If those are the facts, then it will be one of two things with socialists (and, for that matter, liberals).

Of course we have to fight racism and discrimination against Muslims and Muslim communities in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. Either, while doing that, we will find a way to combine that defence of those communities with opposition to them where they are bases of political, cultural, and civic reaction — where they are champions of intolerance, bigotry, and sanctified, petrified, age-old ignorance, trying to spread it from the large areas in the Muslim world where it is the norm, into the bourgeois democracies of the West.

Or, we cease to be socialists and democrats ourselves. In the name of combatting racism and imperialism, we capitulate to reactionary Islamism.

The Socialist Workers' Party is now a living, or half-living, embodiment of what happens when socialists — for good "anti-racist" and "anti-imperialist" reasons, as they like to believe — turn themselves into mouthpieces and echoes of reaction — here reactionary political Islam — and politically eviscerate themselves in futile devotion to an "anti-imperialism" that embodies only a negative opposition to capitalism and imperialism, and absolute anti-capitalism from which the positive working-class socialist alternative has been excised.

The quotation at the top of this article is from Chris Harman, one of the long-time leaders of the SWP and until recently editor of Socialist Worker. It is taken from a 1994 pamphlet. The pamphlet's conclusions, are full of hedges and qualifications, but the quotation establishes that when the SWP were still trying to be Marxists, they agreed more with us than with themselves now!

Now they throw themselves wholeheartedly behind the Muslim demand for the suppression of hostile comments on Islam — or justify those who in the name of Islam commit mass murder by way of an explosive homicidal suicide, which they believe will gain them entry into Paradise.

They translate the Islamist outcry into the language of the guilt-ridden and politically disoriented Guardian-reading middle-class liberal left. The issue, they insist, is "racism".

The issue of free speech, of asserting and defending the right — in principle, the right of anybody, whatever their politics — to condemn, mock, satirise, and denounce a religion; of helping those in the Muslim world who work to win that right there — these things are of no account. The SWP can see nothing there, but — "racism".

Any criticism of the religious practices of an oppressed community — racism!

And surrender to imperialism, too!

Resistance to the mobilisation and its demands — racism! The Islamist political mobilisation around the world, to demand the suppression everywhere of hostile comment on Islam — anti-racism!

The entire liberal-left Establishment, from the Government down to the Guardian, has scurried to placate the Islamists — and all the SWP can see is that there hasn't been enough of the scurrying.

The entire British press has complied with the demands of the religio-fascists who have organised the international outcry, and what does Socialist Worker see? Only racism. Some of the press have talked about the issue of free speech! Racism! Racism, racism, all is racism!

At the very least, measured by any sane standard, this is a one-sided picture. In reality it is an utterly false construction on the facts. It is using the cry of "racism" as a moral blackjack to stop awkward questions being asked, inside the SWP and outside, about their descent into sharia socialism.

Socialist Worker reiterates the virtuous parrot cry — we are against racism! — to disguise their abject surrender to political Islam.

"The socialists" have made themselves into toadies and outriders for Islamist reaction!

Less than two years ago one of the editors of Solidarity wrote an open letter to Chris Harman, who was then editor of Socialist Worker and is the only one of the International Socialist "old guard" still in the leadership of the SWP.

Commenting on the failure of their hopes in the London Assembly and Euro-elections of 2004, the open letter said this:

"What if [Lindsey] German was a London Assembly member and something like another Salman Rushdie-Satanic Verses affair blew up? She would 'be a fighter' for 'Muslims' [as their election literature had promised] on that sort of question? Certainly she'd be under immense pressure to be exactly that. But she would then suddenly rediscover her socialist principles? The SWP would?

"You would risk losing the position you had demeaned yourself and the 'socialism' you claim to represent to get, and refuse to be a 'fighter for Muslims'?

"Your record over recent years suggests that in such a crisis, you would not act as democrats, secularists or socialists. You would continue down the road you are on now" (Sean Matgamna, Solidarity 3/54, 24 June 2004).

Even while still having only a few local councillors elected to public office as "fighters for Muslims", the logic of full-scale accommodation to political Islam has in a short time eaten like a voracious cancer into the political vitals of the SWP.

What, Solidarity asked, if a new Rushdie affair arises, something like the Iranian-organised campaign from 1989 to silence and threaten death to writer Salman Rushdie, who had written a novel offensive to Muslims. We addressed the question to people who at that time (or so we thought) would probably have been as horrified as ourselves at the idea of doing anything but defending Rushdie's, and anyone else's, right to write or draw whatever they liked about Muhammad and Islam, as about Christ, Martin Luther, the Pope, the Prophet Abraham, the Buddha.

In 11 Feburary 2006 Socialist Worker, the supple-spined academic Alex Callinicos, in the course of advocating what the political Islamists advocate over the cartoons, reassesses the Rushdie affair in the light of the SWP's current politics.

"The book caused great offence among Muslims, including many in Britain, and led to the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini issuing a judgement (fatwa) condemning Rushdie to death…

"Socialist Worker defended Rushdie's right to publish The Satanic Verses. But we also recognised the real anger and hurt the novel caused among Muslims in Britain and other Western societies.

"The book, rightly or wrongly, came to symbolise the humiliation and discrimination Muslims suffered, and indeed continue to suffer.

"The Rushdie affair marked the beginning of a campaign by many Western liberal intellectuals to portray Islam as a uniquely dark, barbaric religion… [it] paved the way for contemporary Islamophobia".

In other, less weaselling, words, they no longer "defend Rushdie". If Rushdie's book were published tomorrow, they would be in the forefront of organising protests! Lindsey German spoke at the Trafalgar Square rally organised by the Muslim Association of Britain (an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood) to protest at the cartoons.

The SWP now uses a reckless demagogy reminiscent of the Stalinists in their heyday. A demagogy all-too reminiscent of fascism but all too-befitting to the British allies of clerical-fascism here and in the Middle East.

They point to the political and social exclusion of the Muslim communities of Britain as if that outweighed everything else involved. They ignore the fact of the great wealth and power of those who have set the pace in the agitation over the cartoons and spurred on the political Islamists here (not, it should be noted, the Muslim communities in general: the demonstrations have been small).

They point to double standards and hypocrisy in the Danish paper which published the cartoons. Apparently it campaigned in 1984 against an erotic cartoon image of Jesus. Double standards… And, faced with such double standards, socialists respond not by demanding consistent freedom to use and caricature iconic images, but… what? Consistent repression and opposition to free comment on religion?

SW writes of "bigoted" cartoons which portray all Muslims as terrorists.

But the only truth in the comment is that the use of Muslim stereotypes in a cartoon might convey that idea — all Muslims are terrorists — to some people. That is why socialists would not use such stereotypes. It is not an argument for socialists hysterically joining in a political-

Islamist campaign to rule out free comment, which, if it is free, has to include the right to make hostile and "hurtful" comment.

As it stands, SW's attitude is implicitly to come out against all cartoon caricatures as a form of political comment!

They solve all the problems, cut through all the complexities of the real situation, by refusing to see anything but "racism" and "anti-racism". All is racism!

In a world in which international terrorism, rooted in political Islam and in certain aspects of the Muslim religious tradition, is a major factor; in which rampant Muslim clerical-fascism is a powerful force in many countries; in which the Islamists can generate and organise a world-wide campaign to impose their "standards" on countries like Denmark and Britain - why, here there is no issue but "Islamophobia", anti-Muslim racism! Innocent Muslims are being scapegoated! Socialists must concentrate all their efforts on "fighting Islamophobia", for, as the wise editorial in Socialist Worker puts it, "in its wake comes further racism".

The SWP might well summarise their present politics thus: the religious bigotry, the clerical-fascism, and the religious terrorism of the oppressed is not the same as that of the oppressor. That is what they are saying, even if they do not say it quite so bluntly.

It is a recipe for socialist political suicide.

But the SWP, we fear, is still what it has always been — a havering, confused, half-hearted, eclectic, "centrist" organisation. It fears to draw the full implications of what it is now saying.

For, comrades, if the way to fight "Islamophobia" and "the further racism that comes in its wake" is to champion and mimic political Islam, to adopt its slogans and demands, and to equate socialists like ourselves who refuse to do the same with the BNP (which you do in your editorial of 18 February) — then, ask yourselves, is that enough?

Isn't there an altogether better, more whole-heartedly, more wholly affirmative, way of doing things here? Shouldn't the leaders of the SWP discuss converting to Islam?

Other erstwhile European Marxists have done that — most notably Roger Garaudy, a one-time prominent dissident in the French Communist Party. "Carlos the Jackal" Ramirez converted in jail. Yvonne Ridley, the one-time Daily Express hack who now graces Respect platforms, and whose head-covered photo the SWP likes to display, converted to Islam.

Political accommodation is not enough, comrades of the SWP! Do the decent thing! Go the whole hog! Convert, comrades, convert!

Real and invented differences on political Islam 2: When Lindsey German replied to her critics

By Sean Matgamna

"The British are... doing all in their power to foster the Moslem Brotherhood, a clerical-fascist organisation in Egypt... [the Muslim Brotherhood] refused to participate on 21 February, 1946, "Evacuation Day" as this was a real anti-imperialist movement and not a communal one..

"Slogans of solidarity among Moslem, Christian and Jewish workers were shouted throughout the demonstrations, and the fascist leader Ahmed Hussein, who tried to worm his way into the demonstration, was howled down and not allowed to speak."

Tony Cliff, writing in 1946

In the Guardian on 13 July 2004, under the headline "A badge of honour", the most subtle thinker in the SWP leadership, Lindsey German, replies to critics of the SWP's political bloc with Islamist clerical reaction. In fact, she evades the issues.

She deploys ideas that are common to both the SWP and to, say, Solidarity in order to hide what is distinctive in what the SWP is doing.

Of course socialists are for freedom of religion, including Islam.

Of course we defend Muslim people, immigrants and those born in Britain, from discrimination, scapegoating and racist attack.

Of course we defend them physically and champion equality.

Of course we work to draw immigrants and their children into the labour movement.

Of course we explain to ignorantly self-righteous, non-Muslim people how Muslims come to have the ideas and practices they have.

Of course we have stood and will no doubt again stand side by side against racists with Muslim priests and others we define as reactionary - that is, with people against whose influence on Muslim workers we fight, and against whom within the Muslim communities we support their progressive opponents.

Of course we do not make any of these things conditional on Muslims' abandoning their religion and their sense of a distinct identity.

Of course socialists understand that drawing Muslims or Catholics, or whoever, into action is a more important, and also a more productive way of educating them away from religion, than playing would-be anti-religious schoolmaster to them. We do not raise religious questions in a way that disrupts or makes impossible the involvement of religious people in a progressive struggle.

So far, the SWP says nothing we do not say.

And, as a matter of fact, others on the left, including Solidarity (and its predecessor Socialist Organiser), have a rather better record in defending Muslims from racist attack than the SWP has. On an infamous occasion the SWP took its people off to an Anti-Nazi League carnival instead of defending Brick Lane in East London against an announced fascist march through the immigrant area, at the same time as the carnival. The fascist march was, they insisted, a "provocation". Indeed! Against the Bangladeshis in Brick Lane? It was, the SWP insisted, a provocation - against the Anti-Nazi League carnival.

The problem is that the SWP does more than what any even half-way alive socialist does. The SWP does things which no self-respecting socialist, secularist or decent liberal would be seen dead doing!

As the strapline on German's article says: "The left doesn't have to compromise any principle to defend and work with Muslims - on the contrary."

Indeed, we don't "have to", but the SWP has and does. In

German's strange Guardian article, for example.

Marxists are for "freedom of religion", but we do not champion any religion or assume the role of, so to speak, its "godparents", explaining, recommending and justifying the religion and its doctrines, or its practices.

We do not help reactionary priests reinforce their hold on the minds of those brought up in their religion.

When we ally with religious people in a common struggle, we do not disrupt that work by pushing their religion and our irreligion to the forefront. Indeed. But neither do we laud their religion, nor appeal for their votes by describing ourselves as the "best fighters" for Muslims (or Catholics, Jews or whoever), as "Respect (George Galloway)" - that is, the SWP under its strange, new hat - did and does.

Socialists cannot emancipate people sunk in religious communalism inside ghettoes where imams and the rich have a very strong grip if, minimally, they do not maintain their own identity, and work to break young Muslim people from their religious background.

Even when we explain "strange" religious practices to backward white workers, we do not - unlike Socialist Worker (in October 2002) did with the Taliban restrictions on women - endorse them, or appear to endorse them, or pretend that they are not as abhorrent, as some of the beliefs of, say, fundamentalist Christians.

We convey to Muslims, by our behaviour as well as by our words, respect for them as people, not respect for their ideas: we are for the singer, but not for the reactionary song. We act as honourable, self-respecting people, who take our own secular ideas and traditions seriously. We are honest and candid with our temporary allies, treating them with the respect they deserve as thinking people. As people fully our equals - not as people to be soft-soaped, condescended to and manipulated.

Serious socialists do not, like the SWP, side with the establishment in the Muslim communities, with "the mosque". Other than during the physical defence of a Muslim area under immediate attack, socialists would never enter into political partnership with clerical-fascists, like the Muslim Brotherhood. If we point out that Muslim fundamentalists are no worse in their beliefs than, say, Christian or Jewish or Hindu fundamentalists are in theirs, or point to the absurdity of the fascist degenerates of the brute BNP denouncing Muslims for their beliefs and practices, it is not to pretend, as German does in the Guardian, that, therefore (!) Muslim fundamentalists and Islamist clerical fascists aren't so bad after all.

German's apologia is as gamey as SWP practice.

She notes the new "politicisation amongst Muslims" as a result of recent wars and the Israel-Palestine conflict.

She thinks it is a "badge of honour" that Muslims "should look to organisations like the Stop the War Coalition to help defend them" and that "the overwhelming majority of those so politicised do not turn to fundamentalist groups but to socialists, trade unionists and peace campaigners." That would be good, were it true. Ms German "forgets" that the STWC prominently involved the oldest Islamist organisation in existence, the Muslim Brotherhood, through its British offshoot, the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB)!

It would be hard to find a place to pin the "badge of honour" on Ms German's chest already covered as it is with the badges of shameful capitulation to Arab and Islamist chauvinism!

But don't run away with the idea that Ms German is simply a blustering ignoramus. She knows what she knows.

She admits that "some Muslims" hold views on "some issues" that are "more(!) conservative(!) than (!) those of the socialist and liberal left". Those who would persecute and kill gays, compel women to veil themselves, and impose Islamic clerical rule on society - the Muslim Brotherhood - are indeed a little bit "more (!) conservative (!) than(!)" most socialists and labour movement people! But we must not be "sectarian".

She asks: "Would a campaign for gay rights, for example, insist that all those who took part share the same view of the war on Iraq?" Indeed, it wouldn't and it shouldn't

But, Ms German, the SWP and the Muslim Brotherhood/MAB imposed on the February 2003 march against the war on Iraq the Arab-Islamic-chauvinist slogan on the Israel-Palestine conflict, "Freedom for Palestine" (meaning all of pre-1948 Palestine, including Israel). You insisted on writing it up on banners and placards alongside the slogans against the war. You rejected the proposal from Solidarity that the slogan should be "Israel out of the Occupied Territories" and "Two states - a Palestinian state alongside Israel". Wasn't that "sectarian"?

Didn't that exclude almost all Jews?

That, by the way, is palpable proof that the SWP functioned not as working class socialists with an independent voice and independent democratic programme for solving the Jewish-Palestinian problem but as vicarious Islamic-Arab chauvinists.

But German is outraged at the charge that there was anything anti-semitic in it: "Charges of anti-semitism, support for terrorism, homophobia and sexism abound, as in the attack on Yusuf al-Qaradawi and the Muslim Association of Britain in recent days." Defending itself, the SWP is committed now to defending all things Islamic - here, Qaradawi. For all things Islamic are now holy to the SWP, amen!

Qaradawi thinks Muslim states should jail and kill homosexuals, that women should know their place, that human bombs killing Israel civilians are a legitimate weapon against Israel: is he, therefore, homophobic, sexist, Hamas-supporting? Don't be ridiculous! The subtle Ms German knows what she knows! He is not a clerical-fascist reactionary - only more(!) conservative(!) than(!) Ms German and her comrades.

And "just because women wear the hijab, for example, does that mean that they are more oppressed than other women?" Of course not. Don't be ridiculous!

She cites young hijab-wearing Muslim women speaking at meetings to prove it: these articulate, educated, young women - some of them supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood - you are meant to understand, gentle reader, are typical of Muslim women in Britain and elsewhere. Of course, they are nothing of the sort. And even if they were, it would not prove her point.

Militant women reactionaries played a noticeable part in the regressive and reactionary Islamic counter-revolution in Iran 25 years ago. Political idiots - ourselves among them - could point to that as proof that the Islamists were for women's equality. But Ms German is impervious to facts, historical or contemporary.

"Those who argue that the MAB are fascists... are dangerously wide of the mark." But the Muslim Brotherhood admits that MAB is its front! What does the SWP actually think of the MB, which in some countries are reactionary terrorists, and in all Islamic states stand for an authoritarian regime imposing sharia law? (The Muslim Brotherhood also wants to restore the pre-1918 Turkish empire, the Caliphate!)

The Muslim Brotherhood is not clerical-fascist? What then should we call an organisation that advocates and fights for authoritarian Islamic regimes in the Islamic world and eventually all over the world?

How does she get around the fact that many of her readers - and thinking SWPers - know what the MAB/MB is? No problem: she insists that the BNP's views on gays are as bad as or worse than those of Qaradawi. And? And that should recommend tolerance of Qaradawi's views and those of the Muslim Brotherhood to socialists?

If the rules of logic still apply to the leaders of the SWP, that is what she seems to say. But why stop there? Surely the coupling of Qaradawi and the BNP works the other way around too?

Why not lend a sympathetic ear to the BNP itself? After all, properly understood and interpreted, the viciously reactionary ideas and practices of the BNP are only a misguided and perverted form of revolt against our capitalist society by young, mainly working class people. If we excuse the MAB/MB leaders, why not extend that tolerance to the poor misguided idiots with real grievances against capitalist society who foolishly look to racist scapegoating and the BNP for a solution? Why not? Because "the clerical fascism" of the oppressed is not as bad as the fascism of an oppressor people like the native white English?

That way, beginning as Ms German does, lies political lunacy and moral and political suicide!

German recalls that the German Nazis "scapegoated" "gays, trade unionists, gypsies, socialists and above all Jews... in the interests of a German imperialist super-state". Well, actually, Ms German, they did not "scapegoat" socialist or communists. We really were the mortal enemies of everything they cherished, defended and aspired to. Fighters for a radically different alternative to capitalism! Weren't we? (And some of us still are...)

They scapegoated Jews, etc, but against socialists and communists they fought the class struggle of the bourgeoisie to suppress the labour movement, which really was their enemy... Ms German's point?

"British Muslims... are struggling to uphold their rights and culture in an environment of pervasive racism - a racism used to uphold the policies of the new imperialism." You follow that? They are, we should understand, the victims of the new... Nazis?

They "struggle" in these conditions to "uphold their rights and culture". Note the coupling here: "rights and culture".

Of course, socialists and democrats are automatically and unconditionally for Muslims' equality as citizens.

But that does not mean we champion, endorse, defend or approve of their "culture" or say it's automatically as good as any other culture (including our socialist culture?) There are many things in their culture we despise and fight against.

For example, we are for the existing bourgeois state repressing and severely punishing those who mutilate the genitals of young girls. This practice is not confined to Muslims, but it is part of the culture of some Muslims.

We are against bigoted Muslim, as against bigoted Christian attitudes to gays, to women, etc. Aren't we? Isn't Ms German? Isn't the SWP, anymore?*

With this virtuously "anti-racist" nonsense, German lines herself and the SWP up with the worst of the woolly, guilty, middle-class, "tolerate anything", Guardian liberals.

We live in a world in which social workers who had some idea of the ill-treatment of little Victoria Climbie by her religious - Christian - aunt, who tortured and eventually killed her, did nothing to stop it because they "respected" "cultural differences". Such "tolerance" is no part of serious Marxist, or even serious Liberal, politics.

Ms German's message is that Islamic reactionaries are alright, really, when you compare them to the new imperialists who are... akin to the old Nazis?

In fact, of course, the picture she presents is grossly exaggerated. The "old" imperialists needed racism, because they believed in and practised the rule of master races... The idea that the "new imperialism" - which wants to set up native rulers in Iraq - needs "racism" of that sort is downright nonsensical.

She presents the attitudes and measures of the bourgeois state to the Muslim community as if they come not from a typically crude and brutal and, yes, racism-infected state response to real threats from Islamist terrorism - a real threat, for example, to commit indiscriminate mass murder on the London Underground - but from an intrinsic "racism". To question that is to invite the epithet "racist".

Socialists fight specific injustices that are inevitable products of this situation. We do not pretend that Islamist terrorism is not a real threat to ordinary working people, whose defence from terrorism we favour, even by the existing bourgeois state.

German's hysterical exaggerations serve to justify the SWP's politics. They play the same role for the SWP as the notion of capitalism always being in an insoluble crisis and on the verge of collapse, played over decades to license and justify all sorts of craziness in pseudo-Trotskyist organisations like the WRP (on which the SWP more and more seems to be modelling itself).

They pretend that "racist" assault on the Muslim community is so all-embracing, so pervasive, so much of an immediate threat, and therefore the need to fight against it so urgent, that there is no space for socialists to assert their own identity. Socialists must commit political and moral suicide, in the interests of "defending" the Muslim communities!

And not only must Marxists defend them, but we must defend all their ideas and practices as well! That, I repeat: is political and moral suicide!

Ms German ends: "It would be a catastrophe for the left to bow to the witch-hunt and turn its back on the Muslim community."

Yes! But so also is it a catastrophe for the "left" to colour itself Islamic green, write, as the clever Ms German writes, reactionary political idiocies and commit political suicide.

The choice for the left is not between one or other of these catastrophes. We can and do defend the Muslim communities against real racism, real discrimination, real injustice and real physical attacks without abjuring or compromising our own identity, without abandoning our own political raison d'etre.

If we can't and if we don't, then the "left" will prove to be of as little use to the young, the secularising, the women and the working class of the Muslim communities as the SWP now is to them and the broader working-class movement in Britain.

* This is not the place to pursue it, but there is an important literature by Lenin and others against those Marxists - the "Austro-Marxists" - who undertook the defence of national culture in the spirit of Ms German with Islamic culture. Lenin called them reactionaries.