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Marxism and Religion

Alliances and Coalitions in Britain: ~Stop the War” and “Respect”

- Debate - Marxism and Religion -

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Gilber Achcar's article on Marxism and Religion makes an important contribution to this debate for there is no doubt that religion, especially but not exclusively in its fundamentalist forms, is increasingly playing a powerful ideological role in society today including in the metropolitan centres, particularly as a result of 9/11. However, the last part of the text is flawed because he is misinformed about some important facts of the situation in Britain.

We have no differences with the main body of Achcar's argument; it expresses well the important distinction between the need for Marxists to fight for a militant secularism while at the same time defending the right of individuals to have and to express their own religious beliefs. Thus we support the right of Muslim women to wear or not wear the hijab as, when and where they choose, as we defend the right of Sikh men to wear their turban.

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We oppose the right of any authority, whether secular or religious, to determine how an individual may dress or behave, as long as it does not hurt anyone else. Our immediate response to the French debate on the hijab and our critique of the Sikh Temple's response to the play Behzti in Birmingham, along with other articles published in Socialist Outlook and Socialist Resistance show that we defend the democratic rights of Muslim women and also that we are not afraid to condemn censorship imposed by religious dogma.

It is the last section of Achcar's article that is controversial. This involves the links that have been built with Muslim communities, first through the Stop the War Coalition (StWC) and then with Respect. In both cases these were unique developments in British politics and major political gains and achievements for the British left. The SWP were central to these developments both within the anti-war movement and then Respect. As Socialist Resistance, we also played an active part in developing and defending this orientation in the StWC and in Respect. Had the radical left refused to work with the Muslim groups, including the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), the anti-war movement would never have had the breadth or diversity to mobilise such huge numbers. Achcar acknowledges this important development and compares it with the lack of such a development in France.

We agree with Achcar that a united front on a single issue, in this case opposition to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, can be made 'with the devil'. In fact the Liberal Democrats spoke from Stop the War platforms. It was certainly right to welcome MAB into the StWC around the demands of 'Stop the War' and 'Defend Palestine'. MAB were not only loyal to these slogans but were a part of the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of Muslims on the massive February 2003 demonstration. The Birmingham Mosques alone brought over a hundred coaches on that day.

But Achcar conflates the role of an organisation like MAB in the StWC and Respect - they are very different things. Its participation is legitimate in the case of the StWC but not in Respect. At present Respect is somewhere between a coalition and a political party, with Marxists within it, but MAB is not a part of Respect: it took a policy decision that it could not join given the political basis of Respect. Achcar elides over this crucial fact. It is true that there have been Muslim candidates standing for Respect, including Anas Al-tikriti, who stood as a Respect candidate in the European elections, 2004. But he stood as an individual, resigning as MAB's President in order to do so. Surely that is his contradiction not Respect's, for in standing he accepted Respect's manifesto and its programme. There are also of course individual members of Respect who are in MAB, as well as individual Muslims who are not, but MAB as an organisation calls for a vote for different candidates in different parts of the country - including Liberal Democrats and Greens as well as Respect.

We do not think all this amounts, as Achcar argues, to Respect "choosing to ally electorally with an Islamic fundamentalist organisation like the MAB". Nor would we oppose someone from a Christian background standing as a candidate. The central anti-war candidate in the up-coming general election in Britain, George Galloway, is himself a Catholic and is personally opposed to a woman's right to choose. This latter is a problem, but since Respect has a woman's right to choose in its programme and its manifesto, it is a different kind of problem to one which would exist if a Catholic organisation was allowed to affiliate.

As Achcar says, "The British far-left has the merit of having displayed a greater openness to the Muslim populations than the French far-left. It has organised impressive mobilisations with the massive participation of people originating from Muslim immigration against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which the government of its country participated." How Marxists should relate to individuals and their religious organisations only becomes a real issue when, as in Britain, it ceases to be abstract and the left starts to engage with them. Of course socialist and religious organisations are competitors in trying to win people to their ideas. And the SWP, in their desire to keep the coalition (including the Respect Coalition) together, plays down the differences socialists have with religion. At the last Respect Conference Chris Bambery, a leading member of the SWP, correctly argued against a sectarian resolution attempting to commit Respect to secularism. But then, he wrongly went on to insist that religion was not an important issue in his practical experience, nor politically in a general sense. Clearly the situation is changing today and Marxists have to be wary that we do not hide our secular traditions and that we engage in the ideological and political debates generated by this new and challenging situation.

We cannot prejudge how an individual's political beliefs may develop in the process of struggle. As people radicalise over specific issues (in this case responding to the new situation after 9/11 and then the war against Iraq) their consciousness is uneven - but in this process a positive engagement by socialists can allow a debate around other issues, such as democratic rights, or economic imperialism and globalisation, which is capable of deepening their radicalisation over many issues, including other types of oppression. It is not materialist to suggest that Muslim workers will blindly follow the mosques: their growing militancy and preparedness to work with the left means that their ideas will start to change too, if we are able to respond to their everyday experience. Will an offensive against religion be the main way to change their ideas? No, although discussion of the contradictory role of religion is necessary - and here the SWP is probably at fault as they do not do this systematically.

One of the reasons for the growth of religion in general and Muslim organisations in particular is precisely the failure of the left, the labour movement and the trade unions in Britain to defend and support oppressed communities. But while ethnic minorities have traditionally voted Labour, this was in the past based on clientelism: with a new generation of Muslims, many of them born in Britain, this type of relationship is being rejected and things are starting to change. Nor is this solely a radicalisation due to the war. Despite the failure of the trade union movement to respond adequately to the privatisations and attacks over the past period, there has been a process of younger, working class Muslims joining trade unions. In some of the more radical sections of the trades union movement Muslims are having a big input into organisation and activity. A deeper radicalisation leading to the development of second-generation Muslim leaders has been taking place, which has been politically consolidated by opposition to the War and a preparedness to make alliances with the left. For example Oliur Rahman, a Respect local councillor and parliamentary candidate in East London, is both a trade unionist and a Muslim.

The Muslim communities are heterogeneous, divided like any other by generational, gender and nationality differences. The same point can be made about the base of MAB. While the Association itself may be "Islamic fundamentalist", as Achcar characterises it, those who identify with it, or carry their placards on demonstrations are not politically homogenous. There is a delicate balance to be struck between engaging with and capitulating to forces organised by religious groups. The left does not always get it right - but the achievements so far have been quite new in Britain.

In areas such as East London and Birmingham, with large black and minority communities, Respect is now seen not

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only as the anti-war party but also a left party, and is winning support. Part of this support comes from the mosque, some of it from individual Muslims and other ethnic minorities, but either way the majority of the support is working class.

At a recent 700 strong Respect rally five out of the nine speakers were from ethnic minorities (three of them Respect candidates). The left in Britain has never achieved such collaboration before and while there is always danger in making new alliances, the issue is how to break the hold of religious bigotry. Some of the leaders of the MAB will never agree with the radical left, but that doesn't necessarily mean all Muslims organised by them now will agree with them in the future.

Written on behalf of the ISG Political Committee

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