Andrew Flood
The trouble with Islam
2003

The trouble with Islam

Andrew Flood

2003

The September 11 attacks, the Afghan war that followed from it and the ongoing war in Israel/Palestine have once again raised the issue of Islam in the minds of many anarchists in Ireland and Britain. Not just because of the role Islam has in shaping those conflicts but also because militant Islam has become a far more noticeable presence on solidarity demonstrations.

In Ireland we have seen the Hezbollah flag flown on demonstrations in Dublin and chants of 'God is Great' raised. On some London demonstrations it has been reported that chants of "Slay the Jews" and "Death to the socialists" have been raised. Another report on the same demonstration revealed that "ultra-reactionaries of such organisations as Al Muhajiroun, … held placards reading, 'Palestine is Muslim'. They chanted, "Skud, Skud Israel" and "Gas, gas Tel Aviv" .. In Trafalgar Square they hurled abuse (and a few missiles) at Tirza Waisel of the Israeli group, Just Peace."[1]

The left in general has not responded to this. Some groups like the British SWP have gone so far as to describe left criti-

---

[1] Peter Manson, weekly worker 433, May 2002.

cism of the Islamic religion as 'Islamophobia' echoing the official line of their government which insists "The real Islam is a religion of peace, tolerance and understanding." While there is a real need for the left to defend people who are Muslims from state and non-state victimisation in the aftermath of 9–11 this should not at any time imply a defence of the Islamic religion. Freedom of religion must also allow freedom from religion! At a SWP organised anti-war meeting in Birmingham, England it was reported that Islamic fundamentalists there "segregated the meeting, guiding/intimidating Muslim women into a women's only section, apprehended a Muslim looking woman because she had allegedly been drinking, prevented the critics of Muslim fundamentalists from entering the meeting and used violence against them."[2]

The left in Ireland has been unsure how to rise to this challenge, although on the Palestine solidarity march in Dublin on April 27th 2002 anarchists did march with placards reading 'End the occupation: Support Israeli refuseniks' in English, Hebrew and Arabic and chanted 'No Gods, no Masters, no States, no Wars". But otherwise fundamentalist chants have remained unchallenged.

Over 130 years ago the anarchist Micheal Bakunin wrote "I reverse the phrase of Voltaire, and say that, if God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him." Writing of the Christian churches in Europe, he said "In talking to us of God they propose, they desire, to elevate us, emancipate us, ennoble us, and, on the contrary, they crush and degrade us. With the name of God they imagine that they can establish fraternity among men, and, on the contrary, they create pride, contempt; they sow discord, hatred, war; they establish slavery." These words today are applicable to Islam.

This hostility to organised religion and the promotion of a material rather than spiritual understanding of the world is

---

[2] Salman, ISF journal, November 2001, www.isf.org.uk

common to most of the anarchist movement, although there are exceptions. It was developed in the face of Christian state-church systems that often bore similarities to the Islamic State rule found today. Anarchist hostility to religion tended to be strongest in those countries where the church and state were almost inseparable, in particular in Spain.

Islam in general believes that no "division between matters social, political and religious should exist." The idea of Islamic government and Islamic law is not something confined to what is called 'Islamic fundamentalism' but is an expected belief of all Muslims. Under Shari'a (Islamic) law the penalty for Apostasy (Muslims who reject Islam, for instance they "might state that the universe has always existed from eternity"), is execution for men and life imprisonment for women. So, if anything, Islam today attempts to maintain a much tighter control of the thoughts in people's heads than Christianity has done since the time of Galileo.

Islam insists that the Quran is almost entirely a document dictated by God to Muhammad. Like most 'holy books' it is full of absurdities and cruelties which are well documented on the web by Muslim apostates. For instance in Quran 5:33 God commands "The only reward of those who make war upon Allah and His messenger and strive after corruption in the land will be that they will be killed or crucified, or have their hands and feet on alternate sides cut off, or will be expelled out of the land." God also dictates that women are second class citizens, in Quran 4:34 he dictates "Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion andmonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High, Exalted, Great."

Of course anyone who is familiar with the Old Testament of the Christian and Jewish religions will know there is nothing in the Quran that is any worse then what is found there. Even the Christian New Testament contains justifications for slavery e.g. Matthew: 24:46 "Blessed is that slave whom the master finds at work when he comes... But if that evil slave ... begins to beat his fellow slaves and to eat and drink with drunkards, then the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not foresee, and will cut him in two, and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." The difference is that the attempt to impose a Christian state has been defeated almost everywhere. The fundamentalist movements that seek to promote the idea may be influential (as shown by their attacks in the US on the teaching of evolution) but in general do not attempt to impose their complete religious program.

With Islam however we see the continued existence of religious states in Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Sudan to name three. We also see a growing movement that seeks to create new Islamic states, even in multi-faith countries like Lebanon, Egypt and Israel/Palestine and which actively seeks to impose Islamic law on Muslim communities everywhere. In Northern Nigeria this has resulted in high profile cases where Islamic courts have sentenced women to death by stoning for 'adultery'. About 1 in 5 of the world's population is Muslim.

The general label applied to this movement is Islamic fundamentalism. It's not a great label for a wide range of reasons, not least because it lumps together some very different trends and ignores the fact that many of the most objectionable elements are part of mainstream Islam. That said I'm going to use it anyway because there are no better alternatives that people will readily understand.

The rise of fundamentalism in the modern period owes much to the struggle against colonialism and the failure of the Arab nationalist projects to deliver a better life for the working class,

sure their attempts to impose themselves on the immigrant communities are opposed.

- national and religious minorities

- political oppositionists, including various monarchist, Islamic and liberal groups

- writers, journalists, artists, intellectuals and students;

- peasants and tribal groups;

- homosexuals and others who follow an 'un-Islamic' lifestyle." 6

For opportunistic reasons sections of the western left are happy to build alliances with Islamic fundamentalist groups that are not only essentially uncritical but that discourage others from raising criticisms. This is sometimes defended by the straightforward observance that such groups oppose 'western imperialism' and in countries with large Muslim populations sometimes succeed in attracting the masses to their organisations.

The problem with this position is that it fails to recognise the hostility of such groups to the left — a hostility that includes physical attacks and murder- in the countries where they are strong. This is not terribly different from the situation with fascist groups in the west. Of course for the western left with no basis in immigrant Muslim communities this is easy to ignore — they are not the targets of such activities themselves.

Anarchists have a long and proud tradition of fighting the power of organised religion, including in countries like Spain fighting fascist gangs formed on a religious basis. While we recognise the freedom of people to hold a religion we also recognise that there has to be a freedom from religion — an idea that runs against the basis of Islam. Anarchists in the Middle East and beyond will need to determine for themselves the most effective ways of counteracting the influence of the fundamentalists there. In the west we can at least make

including the peasantry of the region. Frequently it is based on a revolt against colonial control on the one hand and the westernisation of the country on the other. The failure of successful national liberation struggles to relieve the desperate poverty of the masses on the one hand and the obvious growing enrichment of the westernised elites on the other leads easily to the idea that the answer lies in a return to 'traditional values'.

The first of these movements to be successful was Wahhabism which brought Ibn Saud to power in what was to become Saudi Arabia. In this case, as with the early spread of Islam across North Africa, Wahhabism was to provide essential glue to hold together a society created by conquest in a manner similar to nationalism. Wahhabism was imposed by force with massacres on the taking of Mecca and widespread destruction of religious sites that were considered un-Islamic. Religious police raided homes, beating those they suspected of smoking tobacco. Wahhabism was also pretty much the only genuine 'primitivist' version of Islam as it was anti-industrial. When they rose against Ibn Saud in 1927 one reason for their revolt was Saud's allowing of telephones into the country! Modern fundamentalists may talk of a return to traditional values but the societies they seek to create include aspects of advanced modern technology, in particular if it is of military use!

Saudi came to play a similar role in relation to the export of fundamentalism that the USSR played in the spread of Leninism. Particularly with the growth of the oil industry in Saudi large sums of money were provided to finance the infrastructure of fundamentalist groups in other countries and a huge network of religious schools in Saudi itself. Saudi, like Moscow, became the place of training, support and refuge for fundamentalist activists. And funds could be exported which provided schools, meeting places and even religious based welfare systems to the increasingly desperate working class of the cities and countryside in the Arab world. In the conditions of des-

perate poverty that exist this cre — ates the infrastructure that fundamentalism grows out of.

One Lebanese Marxist, writing of this and the failure of the somewhat more secular Arab nationalism of Nassar, described the situation. "Then came the October war [against Israel] with its parade of intense Islamic propaganda, and the oil boom which enabled Libya and especially Saudi Arabia to distribute their petrodollars to the integralist (fundamentalist) groups everywhere in order to undermine left-wing extremists, or pro-Soviet groups as in Syria. Even at the time when the modernist statist bourgeois faction was still credible, Saudi Arabia was used as the prototype by repressed or persecuted Islamic archaism; and its emergence following the October war on the ruins of Nassar's Egypt as the leader of the Arab world gave the Brotherhoods of Sunni Islam not only more subsidies, but the model of an Islam true to itself. The propaganda pounded out by western media — depicting Saudi Arabia as the new giant with the power of life and death over western civilisation — stimulated, in old and young alike, the nostalgic old desire for the return of Islam to its former strength."[3]

The role of the west in relation to fundamentalism has been quite complex. Up to the Iranian revolution in 1979 it was simple, promoting fundamentalism was seen as a way of advancing the western agenda by undermining Soviet influence and the various nationalist leaders of the region who wanted to redirect some of the wealth towards development. "M. Copland, the former chief of the CIA in the Middle East, revealed in his book The Game of Nations that from the 1950s the CIA began to encourage the Muslim Brotherhood to counteract the communist influence in Egypt." Even after the Iranian revolution, "French president Giscard d'Estaing, confided to members of his cabinet before taking the plane for the Gulf in March 1980:

"To combat Communism we have to oppose it with another ideology. In the West, we have nothing. This is why we must support Islam."[4]

The facts of western support for the Afghan mujheedeen and the more limited support for the Taliban that followed have been so well documented since S11 that I don't intend to repeat them here. But it is important to realise that this does not mean that the fundamentalists are simply a creation of the west that has gotten out of control. They have their own dynamic and their own wealthy backers in Saudi Arabia. Lack of western support would have hurt their war against the Soviet occupation but the war would still have gone on.

Fundamentalism remains a mass movement. In almost all of North Africa and the Middle East it is the only mass movement that threatens the stability of the regimes there in any way. It is nakedly hostile to the left in all its forms, Hezbollah for instance has carried out attacks on even the tame Lebanese Communist Party, bombing its offices. The Iranian revolution in 1979 saw a movement of workers councils (Shora) emerge that sought to take over the management of production. "The regime introduced a law aimed at undermining worker self-management by banning shora involvement in management affairs — while at the same time trying to force class collaboration by insisting that management must be allowed to participate in the shoras."[5] Since then, according to the Iranian Revolutionary Socialists' League, the "following groups have all been attacked throughout the reign of the mullahs:

- workers, trade unionists, left-wing and socialist activists

- women and women's/feminist groups

_____

[3] Latif Lakhdar, Khamsin: Journal of Revolutionary Socialists of the Middle East. (1981)

_____

[4] ibid

[5] Michael Schmidt, Religous fundamentalist regimes: a lesson from the Iranian revolution 1978–1979. Zabalaza Journal, South Africa, Number 2, March 2002