Secularism, Islamophobia and the politics of religion

John Molyneux

There are moments when a single flash of lightning lights up the night sky and illuminates the whole landscape below which was previously shrouded in darkness. Such was the moment when Michael Brown was shot by a US cop in Ferguson, Missouri on 9 August 2014. And such was the moment when photographs appeared of armed police forcing a Muslim woman to disrobe on a French beach. It both illuminated and encapsulated in concentrated form the whole offensive against Muslims that has been waged by French politicians and the French state, not just for the last year or so but for the last twenty years.

Of course this offensive is by no means confined to France and has a thoroughly international character - essentially it originated in the United States and is raging in Britain, and many other places including Ireland. Nevertheless it does seem particularly intense in France at this point in time and has the peculiarity of being waged in the name of 'secularism' and 'the French Republic' and this ideological device has given it a significant radical cover and legitimacy and secured for it a degree of 'left' support and acquiescence higher than is generally the case elsewhere. This is because secularism has long been seen as a 'value' or 'principle' that the left, including revolutionary socialists, should defend and advocate. This article is an examination of the relations between secularism, Islamophobia, racism and the politics of religion.

As it happens Ireland and Irish history constitutes an interesting and useful vantage point from which to start this examination.

The View from Ireland

Because of the pretty much unique position of dominance held by the Catholic Church in Irish society during much of the 20th century the issue of secularism is alive and well in Ireland today. It is there in the Repeal the 8th campaign and in the slogans of the pro-choice movement: 'Not the church and not the state! Women should decide their fate!'

and 'Get your rosaries off our ovaries!'. It is there in way in which the horrible legacy of the Magdalene Laundries, the Industrial Schools and the brutal Christian Brothers still haunt the memories of so many of our people. And it is still there in the inflated power that the Church hierarchy still exercises over our schools.

On all these issues any socialist will stand full square for the principles of secularism. There should be a complete separation of church and state. We are for complete freedom of religious belief and religious worship but as a private matter. No religion should hold a position of power or privilege in the state or be state funded. It is also probably the case that many, though certainly not all, socialists are non-believers and while not wanting in any way to prohibit religion nevertheless look forward, like Karl Marx, to a world in which people no longer require the services of the opium of the masses.

But shift the focus back in time to 1916 and the Irish Revolution. How would we respond to an argument that ran as follows?

'The 1916 Rising was led by Catholics, in particular that well known Catholic fanatic Padraig Pearse. By far the majority of the Volunteers were Catholics and even the socialist leader of the Irish Citizen Army, James Connolly, was a Catholic of sorts. Moreover, the Proclamation which constituted the programme of the Rising explicitly states that it is written 'In the name of God' and that 'We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessings we invoke upon our arms'. Therefore it is clear that this was a sectarian Catholic uprising intent on establishing a traditionalist authoritarian Catholic state and that no socialist should have given or should give retrospectively any support whatsoever to such a backward obscurantist movement dominated by a religion from the middle ages. Indeed objectively it was forces of the British Army, rough as they may been at times, who represented progress and had to be backed

by all those who value freedom, the enlightenment, and especially the rights of women'.

The answer that I trust every socialist, beginning with those ardent atheists Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, would give to this is argument would be unequivocal. It would be that it is manifestly a manipulation and abuse of the principles of secularism to provide a justification for imperialism. The 1916 Rising, regardless of the religious affiliations of its leaders or the wording of its Proclamation was not fundamentally about religion at all but about national liberation. It was not about Catholicism versus Protestantism but about whether or not Britain should rule Ireland. And that therefore all socialists (and all democrats and progressives), as opponents of imperialism and defenders of the rights of oppressed nations to self determination, should stand unconditionally on the side of Irish freedom and with the Rising.

From this point of view whether or not the majority of the Irish, or the British for that matter, were Catholics, Protestants, Hindus or Jews was an entirely secondary matter and in no way the determining factor in the conflict. As to whether the ensuing independent Ireland would be reactionary, oppressive to women and so on that would be determined primarily not by the religious ideas in the heads of Padraig Pearse or the other signatories but by which social class emerged from the struggle for independence as the class in the saddle. If the working class and its leaders such as Connolly, Markievicz, and Lynn had come out on top then Ireland would have take its place alongside revolutionary Russia in the vanguard of the struggle for sexual equality and women's liberation.

Fast forward to the Troubles and the imagined dialogue above reappears with a vengeance in the British media. The conflict between predominantly Protestant Unionism and predominantly Catholic Nationalism is depicted as primarily a religious conflict with the idea that the conflict is about religion being seen as evidence of Irish stupidity and backwardness. After all hadn't people in 'civilised' Britain stopped fighting about religion in the 18th century? More-over the role of the British state in this conflict was to stand outside and above the two irrational warring tribes and mediate between them, while isolating and defeating the evil terrorists (the IRA).

The term 'secularism' is not much used but popular hostility to religion and especially religious fanaticism (in Britain) is skilfully harnessed to mask the obvious fact that this conflict is not at all about the doctrine of transubstantiation or the infallibility of the Pope but about whether Northern Ireland should be ruled by Britain or be part of the Irish Republic and that in turn is fuelled by systematic social, economic and political discrimination against the Nationalist community. And while this is obscuring the real nature of the conflict it is simultaneously legitimating the role of the British army which is actually acting to sustain the sectarian state and British rule.

Today, however, although the issues of oppression and British rule have not gone away the fact that the war has ended and that Sinn Féin is in government with the DUP means that questions related to secularism like marriage equality, LGBT+ rights and a woman's right to choose come more to the fore.

What these examples show is that although secularism is a goal which socialists support the banner of secularism can be used to serve a number of purposes, reactionary as well as progressive. Therefore it is necessary always to make a concrete assessment of the concrete situation to determine the role being played by this slogan. How does it relate in the given historical circumstances to the interests of the working class and the struggle against oppression?

French secularism in perspective

Secularism has a long and complex history. Its origins in Europe stretch back to the beginnings of the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Copernicus and Galileo took on the Church and 'the spiritual dictator-

ship of the Church was shattered'[1] Elements of it can be seen in the Dutch Revolt of 1565 - 1600 when religious tolerance was established in the Dutch Republic in order to unite the Dutch people against Habsburg Empire based in Counter Reformation Spain. It develops further among the philosophers of the eighteenth century enlightenment (Diderot, Voltaire etc) and comes into its own with the French Revolution of 1789-94.

In August 1789, shortly after the Storming of the Bastille, the Revolution abolished the privileges of the First (the clergy) and Second (Nobility) Estates and abolished the tithes gathered by the Church. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 proclaimed freedom of religion throughout France. On October 10 the National Constituent Assembly seized the properties and land held by the Catholic Church and sold them off at public auctions. In 1790 the Assembly formally subordinated the Roman Catholic Church in France to the French government and in September 1792 divorce was legalised and the State took control of the birth, death, and marriage registers away from the Church. In 1791, Jews were emancipated—receiving full civic rights as individuals but, significantly, none as a group. At the height of the Revolution during the Jacobin period (1792-94) there was an active campaign of dechristianisation in which religious statues and icons were destroyed and an attempt was made to launch a kind of substitute religion in the form of a 'Cult of Reason'. There were also riots in which priests were massacred.

It is should be noted that secularism also featured in the American Revolution with Thomas Jefferson writing into the American constitution the amendment that 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof' as a result of which the US has no established or state religion to this day.

In contrast to the US the reaction that followed the French Revolution and rise to power of Napoleon with his restoration of the Empire also brought with it the restoration of the Church. However secularism lived on as a republican ideal throughout the nineteenth century and was also adopted by the working class and socialist movement. In the Paris Commune of 1871 one of its first decrees separated the church from the state, appropriated all church property to public property, and excluded the practice of religion from schools. In theory, the churches were allowed to continue their religious activity only if they kept their doors open for public political meetings during the evenings but this seems not to have been implemented.

The Commune, of course, was crushed after only 74 days but in 1881-2 France established a mandatory, free and secular education system that relied on state-paid professional teachers rather than on Catholic clerics. And in 1905 a new law was passed on the separation of church and state which remains the legal foundation of French secularity (laicité).

What is evident from this brief overview is that the struggle for secularism - in the scientific revolution, the Dutch Republic, the enlightenment and the French and American Revolutions - was an integral part of the rise of the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois democratic revolutions against feudalism. It was directed, first and foremost, against the Catholic Church which economically, politically and ideologically was the principle ally of the feudal aristocracy, absolute monarchy and feudal reaction as a whole. The consistently reactionary and counter revolutionary role of the Catholic Church from the days of the Medicis, through to 1789 and 1848 and the Spanish Civil War, also turned the European workers' movement against it. In this respect secularism, like the bourgeois democratic revolutions of which it was a part was thoroughly progressive.

But this is not the end of the story. If the bourgeois revolutions against feudalism were progressive it also the case that, from the moment of its conquest of political power, the bourgeoisie embarked on a policy of colonial conquest and enslavement

---

[1] F.Engels, 'Introduction to the Dialectics of Nature', Marx/Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol.II, Moscow 1962, p.63.

of the rest of the world. Thus the Dutch Republic, within a decade of winning its independence from the Habsburg empire in what was perhaps the first war of national liberation, and becoming the most progressive society in Europe at the time, had established a colonial empire which stretched from Batavia (today's Indonesia) in the far east to New Amsterdam (New York) and Pernambuco (Brasil) in the Americas, which they naturally ran with great brutality. Similarly the bourgeois revolutionary Oliver Cromwell, had no sooner cut off the head of Charles I in January 1649 than he embarked in August of the same year on the conquest of Ireland with consequences that remain legendary. Bourgeois Britain then went on to establish the global empire on which the sun never set and the blood never dried.

France's war of revolutionary defence in 1793, turned with Napoleon into a war of conquest, whose oppressive ferocity was shockingly recorded by Goya in his Disasters of War, while at the same time he invaded Egypt and Syria and attempted to restore slavery in Haiti. In 1830 France decided to 'share its culture'[2] with Algeria by invading it in a war of conquest that by 1870 had reduced the Algerian population by one third. This was the beginning of the extensive French empire in Africa, second only to Britain's, that stretched across the Maghreb to Morocco and down to Senegal, Mali, Congo, Madagascar and elsewhere along with colonies in Indo-China (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia), New Caledonia in the Pacific, and in the Caribbean. This was an empire which lasted until after Second World War and came to an end only with being driven out of Vietnam by the Viet Minh in 1954 and the horrendously ferocious Algerian War of 1954-62.

As the British Empire was depicted as 'the White Man's Burden' so the French colonial project was presented as a 'civilising mission' (*mission civilisatrice*) bringing civilisation to backward and benighted peoples, and in this context the meaning of secularism changed profoundly. From being a progressive value directed against oppression it became seen as a marker of national pride and superiority which could be used to justify colonialism and all the oppression it entailed.

During the post Second World War economic boom, 'les trente glorieuses' as it was known in France, there was large scale immigration from North Africa as workers were sucked in to meet labour shortages in the expanding economy. It was a process very similar to what occurred in Britain during the same period, with the migrant workers in both cases being drawn from the former colonies[3]. In France this inevitably meant that a high proportion of these immigrants were Muslim[4]. And in this situation 'secularism' became a slogan behind which racists and racist organisations could mobilise anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment.

In itself there was nothing uniquely French to this. The British far right have tried repeatedly to make things like halal meat and the building of mosques a pretext for racist campaigns and the notion that immigrants should 'conform to our values' whatever they might be, is doubtless a seam mined by racists everywhere. Nevertheless the specificities of French history made the notion of 'secularism' well suited for this purpose. What made it particularly effective was that it invoked what had been a progressive tradition and this gave it a purchase among French liberals and sections of the French left, including sadly some of the far left, that 'British values' never had with the British left.

Thus, when in the late eighties the wearing the hijab or headscarf by school students

---

[2]September 8 2016, the former French Prime Minister and future presidential candidate, François Fillon, said that France is not guilty because it only wanted to share its culture with its former colonies.

[3]Ireland, of course, does not have former colonies and did not experience anything comparable to the western European boom of the fifties and sixties. The parallel here would be what happened in the Celtic Tiger.

[4]The French census does not record people by religion and estimates for the number of Muslims currently in France vary considerably. A recent report from the Interior Ministry puts the figure at 4.15 million (around 6.2%) compared to 2.7 million in Britain (around 4.5%).

became an issue, left wing teachers[5] were among those making the running in the call for a ban and in the nineties there were actually some teachers' strikes over this question- not something which, to my knowledge, has occurred in other countries.

The 'progressive' credentials of secularism were further augmented by throwing feminism into the mix. In relation to the hijab and other forms of the Islamic veil (niqab, chador, burka etc) the argument was made that this was a marker of women's oppression imposed on Muslim women by their patriarchal families and their backward misogynistic religion. It was therefore a blow for women's liberation to ban the hijab etc from public institutions.

This argument, not confined to France but particularly potent in France, rested on several errors. First it was based on a one-dimensional and stereotyped view of the hijab which refused to listen to what many Muslim women themselves were saying on the issue. Yes, historically the veiling of women was linked to the oppression of women but in the world today it is also linked to Muslim identity (in the way that the 'Afro' hairstyle was linked to Black identity in the sixties) and therefore is often adopted by Muslim women voluntarily and as a statement of defiance and pride in their identity in the face of racism and exclusion. Second, it was based on a patronising top down conception of emancipation in which the liberation of Muslim women was to be handed to them from above rather than taken by those women themselves. Third, it violated the very simple democratic principle that people should be allowed to wear what they want and, indeed, that there should be freedom of religious expression. Fourth, it lined up progressive feminism in common cause with the growing forces of the racist and fascist right, especially the Front National. Fifth, it chimed with a wider deployment of the feminist card by the US state and others (the likes of Hilary Clinton) to justify imperialist interventions and wars. 'We should invade Afghanistan to liberate Afghan women from the Taliban!'.

Unfortunately the extreme cynicism and hypocrisy of this last point - the United States has never invaded anywhere to liberate women, or men for that matter, but only and exclusively in pursuit of its economic and strategic interests - has not prevented it having a certain effect. And this effect has been particularly pernicious because the invocation of the radical values of secularism and feminism has worked to variously co-opt, confuse and demobilise precisely those progressive, left and socialist forces who should have been at the forefront of resisting the rise of racism and fascism in France which, tragically, have been given a relatively easy ride.

However all of this has reached the peak it has because it has coincided with a phenomenon that is by neither peculiar to France nor French in origin - the global rise of Islamophobia.

The Rise of Islamophobia

White western Europeans[6] have viewed non-Europeans and people of colour with a combination of hostility and contempt for approximately five hundred years - that is since Europe began the process of conquering and enslaving most of the rest of the world. This means that in the larger scheme of things, as Alex Callinicos has remarked, 'Racism is a historical novelty'[7] but half a millennium is nonetheless a long time in the development of our social consciousness. By comparison Islamophobia is of really recent origin. I am

---

[5]Unfortunately a particularly shameful role was played in this regard by members of Lutte Ouvriere, one of the main French Trotskyist organisations. See 'The Islamic veil and the subjugation of women', `http://journal.lutte-ouvriere.org/2003/04/24/foulard-islamique-et-soumission-des-femmes_6495.html` and Chris Harman 'Behind the Veil', *Socialist Review* 180, Nov. 1994. `https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1994/11/veil.html`

[6]I am referring here to the attitudes of dominant social groups and the dominant ideology, not to all Europeans.

[7]Alex Callinicos, *Race and Class*, London 1993, p.16

[8]The longer Oxford English Dictionary contains a reference to the use of the word in 1923 but this was clearly a completely isolated example.

looking at a 1980 edition of the Concise Oxford English Dictionary - it does not contain the word 'Islamophobia'[8] A standard sociological textbook from 1990, E.Cashmore and B.Troyna, *Introduction to Race Relations*, does not discuss the phenomenon and has no reference to the word in its index, nor does Alex Callinicos' *Race and Class* from 1993. Of course, the people who are now subject to Islamophobia have long been the objects of racism, but it was on the basis of their skin colour, nationality, ethnicity (so-called 'race') and alleged culture, not their adherence to Islam or their Muslim identity. They were seen and labelled as 'Arabs' or 'Pakis' or 'Asians' or 'wogs' or 'blacks' etc. not as Muslims.

So when, how and why - the questions are interconnected - did Islamophobia develop? A commonplace view is that it emerged as a response to 9/11 and an accompaniment to Bush's 'war on terror'. Obviously these were an important turning point and marked a definite escalation but they were not the origin. Samuel P. Huntington's book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* was the key founding intellectual text of Islamophobia. It was published in 1996 and was the working up of an article written in 1993 and a lecture given in 1992. In the 1993 essay he wrote:

> The most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another. Why will this be the case? First, differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic. Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most important, religion...
>
> These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear. They are far more fundamental than differences among political ideologies and political regimes.[9]

This then gives us an indication as to when and how Islamophobia began to gain momentum. It was in the early to mid-nineties. I do not mean by this that Huntingdon through his essay or his book *started* the phenomenon or is responsible for it. Huntington was, in the words of Tariq Ali, a 'state intellectual'[10]. He was director of Harvard's Centre for International Affairs and the White House Coordinator of Security Planning under Jimmy Carter. This means that his 'theories' were from the outset fashioned to meet the needs of the US ruling class and, in so far as they were taken up and propagated it was because that class and its representatives in the White House, the Pentagon and then the media deemed useful.

This particular theory was then seized upon and disseminated with great vigour and with ever growing intensity after 9/11. Such is the global hegemony of the US bourgeoisie in these matters and also the confluence of material interests of British, French and European imperialism, that the notion of Islam and Muslims as a threat to our way of life was soon appearing not only from the mouths of leading political figures but also, at least by innuendo and implication, in the headlines of innumerable newspapers and TV news broadcasts around the world, until within a matter of years it had become almost 'common sense'.

But if that is when and how, what about why? The two main background factors were the Iranian Revolution of 1979 with its Islamist outcome and the collapse of Communism and end of the cold war in 1989-91. The Iranian Revolution overthrew the Shah of Iran who, together with his regime, was a key US ally in the Middle East and possessed major oil reserves. The Islamist regime of Ayatollah Khomeini which emerged from the Revolution then gave a huge impetus to Islamist movements throughout the region. The appeal of Islamism, or political Islam, across the Middle East was aided by the complete failure of nationalism and communism (Stalinism), which had previously been

---

[9]http://edvardas.home.mruni.eu/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/huntington.pdf

[10]'State intellectuals are those who have worked for and emerged from the bowels of the US state machine: Kissinger, Brzezinski, Fukuyama and Huntington typify this breed'. Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*, London 2002, p.302

the predominant forces, to successfully challenge imperialism in the area. During the Cold War the West had tended to view the Islamists with indulgence as potential or actual allies in the fight against the godless communists, as in US support for forerunners of the Taliban against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. But with the Cold War over and the communist threat eliminated US imperialism increasingly saw Islamism as the main threat to its interests, above all in the oil rich Middle East.

Noting the fact that the Islamophobic drive began before 9/11 is important because it is often presented as emerging as a response to 9/11. In reality the rise of Islamophobia was, along with US imperialism's general record in the Middle East, one of the causes of the attack on the Twin Towers. However it is clear that 9/11 and the subsequent 'war on terror' with its invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq ratcheted up the whole vicious cycle of war, terrorist atrocity, more war, more terror and ever more racism and hatred.

Some observations about how racism works: first, once a group is stigmatised and demonised by official society they become a target for all sorts of bigots and bullies. These range from the bully in playground looking for a child to intimidate to fascist and Nazi parties trying to build on the basis of hatred. For fascists the ultimate enemy is the working class movement and socialism but they will use any scapegoat going to help them attract support to defeat the working class and the left; it can be Jews, asylum seekers, Poles, blacks, Roma - whoever is being singled out by the media and the establishment. Once the media identified 'Muslims' as 'the problem' every fascist, big or small, leapt on the band wagon even to the point, in many cases, of becoming pro-Israel.

Second, when a racist band wagon is rolling it becomes a case of 'any stick to beat a dog' - drag in any argument that lays to hand, especially those you can use to wrong foot or embarrass ideological or political opponents. Thus, for example, inserted into the discourse of Islamophobia, is the claim that a marker of Muslims 'not sharing our values' is Muslim homophobia. This notion is promoted with a straight face as if belief in LGBT+ equality were a 'traditional' Western value by people who a decade or two ago would most likely have been grubby homophobes. And in this toxic context using secularism (with a dash of misogyny parading as feminism) as a weapon to further estrange and isolate Muslims was an obvious move.

Two Coups

The issue of the abuse of secularism as a pitfall which can seriously derail the left and serve reaction is not confined to France or Europe. On the contrary it has played a significant role in two recent major events in the Middle East: the Egyptian military coup of July 2013 and the attempted military coup in Turkey in July 2016.

To understand how this worked it is necessary first to dispel a false Islamophobic view of the Middle East as one vast Muslim Islamist mass. Of course it is true that the overwhelming majority of people in the Middle East, including Turkey, and across North Africa are Muslim by faith, much as the overwhelming majority of Irish were (until very recently) Catholic. Nevertheless there were in the 20th century and across the region large secularist and modernising political movements of various kinds. This secularist spectrum ranged from right wing bourgeois movements and regimes that acted as agents of or collaborators with, imperialism, through bourgeois nationalist movements and regimes that were to some degree anti-imperialist to the Communist/Stalinist left. Examples, moving round the Mediterranean, would include the Algerian FLN (National Liberation Front), Nasser and Nasserism in Egypt, the PLO in Palestine, the Ba'ath Party in Syria and Iraq, Mohammed Mosaddegh (Prime Minister of Iran until overthrown by a CIA coup in 1953), the various Kurdish parties such as the PKK in Turkish Kurdistan, Kemal Ataturk and Kemalist parties in Turkey and the Communist Parties of Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey.

The picture is complicated by the fact that these categories were fluid and the la-

bels often misleading. Thus, a movement e.g. Kemalism, could begin as to some extent anti-imperialist and morph into a pro- imperialist force; a bourgeois nationalist movement e.g. the Ba'ath Party of Saddam Hussein (and that of the Assad family), could describe itself as socialist and include socialist in its official name, without harbouring the slightest intention of opposing capitalism or liberating the working class[11] and the Communists were quite often largely middle class in terms of their entire leading layers and pursued a policy of subordinating themselves to bourgeois nationalists such as Nasser.[12] But what all these forces had in common was a desire to 'modernise' their respective nations and a perception of the Muslim masses, both peasants and workers, as a 'backward' obstacle to this process. This elitism towards the mass of ordinary people sank deep roots in large sections of the region's 'left' and 'progressive' forces.[13]

One effect of this approach was to isolate much of the left from the religious masses and consequently make it easier for the Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or Erdogan's AKP (Justice and Development Party) in Turkey, to present themselves as the principle opposition to the pro-imperialist regimes and pro-Western military. However where this particular chicken really came home to roost was with General Al-Sisi's military coup of 3 July 2013.

Because the Muslim Brotherhood were seen by the Egyptian masses as the main opposition to the hated regime of Hosni Mubarak the victory of the anti-Mubarak revolution in early 2011 and the holding of Egypt's first real elections produced a Muslim Brotherhood government and Muslim Brotherhood President, Mohammed Morsi.

But this government, behaving rather like the Irish Labour Party and other right wing reformist parties, collaborated with the military, with the state and with Egyptian capitalism and did nothing at all for the mass of the people who had elected them. Indeed for the majority of Egyptians things got worse as the economy deteriorated and state institutions became increasingly dysfunctional. This in turn produced a mass movement against the government which culminated in vast anti-MB demonstrations on 30 June.

At this point, and it was clearly planned in advance (perhaps with the aid of the CIA), the military were able to take advantage of the mass discontent and stage their coup. When the Muslim Brotherhood protested against the coup in the name of democratic legitimacy and organised sit-ins at al-Nahda Square and Rabaa al-Adawiya Square. The military responded on August 14 with a deadly massacre at Rabaa which claimed, in a few hours, somewhere between 800 and 2000 lives. Human Rights Watch called it, 'one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history'[14] On the basis of this the Al-Sisi regime was able to consolidate its thoroughgoing counterrevolution and re-establish all the features of the Mubarak dictatorship.

The tragedy was that many political forces and individuals who had played leading roles in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 now supported the anti-Muslim Brotherhood coup on the grounds that the military were a lesser evil than the Islamists. Perhaps the worst case of this was Hamdeen Sabahi, the Nasserist leader who was jailed seventeen times under Mubarak and who had stood as a semi-left candidate in the 2012 Presidential election, coming third with 21% of the vote. The April 6 Youth Move-

---

[11]This was particularly the case in the era when adopting the label socialist facilitated receiving aid and or protection from the Soviet Union.

[12]This policy derived from the 'stages' theory adopted by Stalin and the Comintern in the mid-1920s and the Popular Front strategy of the 1930s. For an account of the relation between 'Communism' and third world nationalism see John Molyneux, *What is the Real Marxist Tradition?*, London 1985. See https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/molyneux/1983/07/tradition.htm

[13]For a discussion of these attitudes in relation to the Turkish working class see Ron Margulies, 'What are we to do with Islam? The case of Turkey', *International Socialism* 151. http://isj.org.uk/what-are-we-to-do-with-islam/

[14]https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/12/egypt-raba-killings-likely-crimes-against-humanity.

ment, who were a major factor in the street mobilizations in 2011, also gave partial support to the coup.[15] As a result there was very little effective resistance to the counter revolutionary coup.

At the heart of this failure was the widespread tendency to see the fundamental division in society as 'modern' secularism versus 'backward' Islamism, rather than the class struggle and hence to regard the Muslim Brotherhood, not the military, as the main enemy.

Another position taken by many on the Egyptian left is that of the Third Square[16] which rejects the army and the Brotherhood as both equally reactionary, both equal poles of counterrevolution.[17] But this, though clearly preferable to Sabahi's out right support for the coup, is still inadequate. To treat two political forces as equal poles of counterrevolution when one is in power and massacring and imprisoning the other and when one is the main representative of the ruling class and the embodiment of the capitalist state and the other is a predominantly petty bourgeois opposition with a mass base among the poor is, intentionally or not, to give aid to the oppressor. Instead, in order effectively to build resistance to the al-Sisi dictatorship it is necessary for socialists to defend all those suffering repression, regardless of their religion and including the Muslim Brotherhood.[18]

The attempted coup in Turkey on 15 July raised similar issues though the outcome was very different. The similarity lay in the fact that many forces on the left, in Turkey and internationally, were reluctant to wholeheartedly or actively oppose the coup because they thought that the Islamist Erdogan government was as bad as (or perhaps worse than) rule by the secular military . The whole event was over in a matter of hours so there was little time for

parties and movements (still less academics) to take formal positions, nevertheless the phenomenon I refer to was evident in terms of who did not come out onto the streets and in the commentary on social media. Anyone on that night who posted clear anti-coup statements was immediately assailed by objections from many sides including people of 'the left'. And this was despite the fact that the Turkish military had form - that two previous coups in 1960 and 1980 had been brutal and repressive in the extreme.

One argument put forward to justify failure to oppose the coup is that it was a 'fake coup' staged by Erdogan himself to strengthen his position. Given the seriousness of what occurred that night, the bombing of parliament and the presidential place and the more than two hundred people killed this can be dismissed as fanciful but the reason for the 'theory' (and the fact that it was advanced by many people with very scant knowledge of Turkey) was clearly that it got people off the hook of having actually to oppose it.

Another argument was the notion that Erdogan was/is a fascist. This had been popular, including in certain anarchist/autonomist circles, at the time of Gezi Park and it resurfaced in relation to the coup. This characterisation is false for many reasons. It is an instance of the tendency to call all instances of capitalist state repression fascist, as in Thatcher was a fascist, Donald Trump is a fascist and so on. In reality fascism was and is a counterrevolutionary mass movement that destroys bourgeois democracy and the working class movement (the trade unions and all the left) - destroys and eliminates not attacks and weakens. This is the basic distinction between Mussolini, Hitler, Jobbyk, Golden Dawn and the Front National on the one hand and Thatcher, Trump, Bush, UKIP, Cameron, Merkel etc

---

[15]To their credit they later withdrew this but by then the worst damage had been done.

[16]See   http://www.france24.com/en/20130729-egypt-third-square-activists-reject-army-mohammed-morsi

[17]This position has also been theorised internationally by Gilbert Achcar (SOAS Professor and member of the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France) in his book *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising*, London 2016.

[18]For much fuller analyses of the Egyptian Revolution and its fate see John Molyneux, 'Lessons from the Egyptian Revolution' *Irish Marxist Review* 13, and Philip Marfleet, *Egypt:Contested Revolution*, London 2016.

on the other. Erdogan and his government do not meet these criteria at all. In addition calling the AKP fascist has affinities with the Islamophobic term 'Islamo-fascism' used by former leftists like Christopher Hitchens and Nick Cohen to justify their support for George Bush and Tony Blair.

The third and superficially most plausible argument for not opposing the military coup is that Erdogan has been able to use his victory to reinforce his own power and to extend that power in an increasingly authoritarian direction. There is no doubt that this has happened and that the crackdown against those responsible for coup, the so-called Gulenists and putchist elements in the Military, has extended way beyond the ranks of those who could have been involved: Erdogan's Justice Minister Bekir Bozdag has himself stated that the number of arrests has reached 32,000.[19] Nevertheless this argument is false for two reasons: first because in terms of scale and severity this does not compare with the repression meted out by the military. According to *The Economist*, 'Turkey's army has overthrown no fewer than four governments since 1960. The bloodiest coup came in 1980, when 50 people were executed, 500,000 were arrested and many hundreds died in jail'[20] Second because progressive and left wing forces would be in a much stronger position to resist this anti-democratic authoritarianism in so far as they clearly opposed the coup from the word go.

Why then was the Turkish coup unsuccessful, while the Egyptian coup swept all before it? Partly because the Turkish army was not united but mainly because the Turkish masses, primarily the Turkish working class, came out onto the streets in huge numbers immediately, on the night of 15 July, to confront the tanks and stop the coup in its tracks. They did this at the call of Erdogan (though not all who came out were AKP supporters.. But the reason has little

to do with religion and everything to do with economics. In Egypt the capitalist economy was deteriorating and so Egyptian Islamism bitterly disappointed many of its supporters. In Turkey the capitalist economy experienced an unprecedented boom and this enabled Erdogan, by means of limited but judicious reforms, to retain and increase its base in the working class. If we want an Irish parallel we could say Erdogan's AKP resembled Fianna Fail in the Celtic Tiger whereas the Muslim Brotherhood was like Fianna Fail after the crash of 2008.

What both these cases demonstrate is the folly of seeing secularism versus theocracy as the main dividing line in society rather than the politics of class conflict.

Marxism and Religion

This article as a whole should be understood as an application to contemporary events of the basic Marxist analysis of religion which in turn is part of the general historical materialist theory of ideology. This is not the place for an exposition of this underlying theory[21]. However, two points need to be made here by way of conclusion.

The first is simply that people make religions not religions people. Religion as a whole and every religion in particular is a social product, a response to a real set of material circumstances and therefore as society changes, as material conditions change so do religions and people's interpretations of religious texts and doctrines. This applies equally to Christianity, Islam, Judaism and all the rest. As Chris Harman has said:

> The confusion often starts with a confusion about the power of religion itself. Religious people see it as a historical force in its own right, whether for good or for evil. So too do most bourgeois anti-clerical and free

---

[19]See http://www.rte.ie/news/2016/0928/819767-turkey-arrests/

[20]'Erdogan and his generals', *The Economist*, 2/2/2013 http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21571147-once-all-powerful-turkish-armed-forces-are-cowed-if-not-quite-impotent-erdogan-and-his

[21]For my take on these matters see John Molyneux, 'More than opium: Marxism and religion', *International Socialism* 119. (2008) and John Molyneux, *The Point is to Change it: an introduction to Marxist Philosophy*, London 2011.

thinkers. For them, fighting the influence of religious institutions and obscurantist ideas is in itself the way to human liberation.

But although religious institutions and ideas clearly play a role in history, this does not happen in separation from the rest of material reality. Religious institutions, with their layers of priests and teachers, arise in a certain society and interact with that society[22].

The second is that in determining the socialist and Marxist response to political movements with a religious colouration - of which there are a multitude - the starting point is not the theology or doctrine of the movement but the social force or forces it represents and its role in the class struggle. This is the criterion Marxists have generally applied to movements with a Christian ideology from Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement to the right wing Moral Majority to the Easter Rising and the IRA and Chavez in Venezuela. It is the criterion that must be applied to Islamist movements in their equally great variety. Hamas and Hezbollah, Al Qaeda and Isis, the Muslim Brotherhood and the AKP cannot all be lumped together in one Islamist pot. It is necessary to make a concrete analysis of each in its specific circumstances. And exactly the same principle applies to secularism.

---

[22]Chris Harman, 'The Prophet and the Proletariat', *International Socialism* 64 (1994) p,4-5. `https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1994/xx/islam.htm` It should be said that this outstanding and pioneering article paved the way for many of the arguments presented here.