

# In Defence of Militant Secularism

**Andrew Coates**

A STRANGE alliance has arisen: from conservative members of the Muslim Association of Britain, the SWP, to London's Mayor, all are in an uproar about "Islamophobia". Ken Livingstone has taken it upon himself to criticise the French move to ban wearing ostentatious religious symbols in schools. He has also given lessons on religious freedom by defending a cleric, al-Qaradawi, who supports female genital mutilation.<sup>1</sup> This bloc draws support from the mainstream of the Anglican Church and Prince Charles to, with rare exceptions, the bien-pensant pages of the *Guardian*.

All are reactionary responses to the secular view, which is at the centre of anti-racism. This stand, eloquently supported by Henri Pena-Ruiz in *Qu'est-ce que la laïcité?* (2003), rests on the fundamental principle of the Enlightenment: the freedom of the public sphere from religious dogma. As he states, of the realisation of the problems religion causes: "Il a fallu que les fous de Dieu, auparavant encouragés par l'Amérique causant la mort en plein coeur de Manhattan pour que le monde prenne enfin conscience du danger." (It required those crazed by God and earlier encouraged by America to cause death at the very heart of Manhattan before the world finally realised the danger they posed.)<sup>2</sup> The imperialist reaction is well known. But as Henry Pena-Ruiz has also stated, we need to activate simultaneously "la lutte sociale contre toutes les dérégulations capitalistes et pour la promotion des services publiques, qui produisent de la solidarité et non de la charité; la lutte pour une émancipation intellectuelle". Through a "une laïcité universelle" we aim for "l'émancipation laïque du droit, gage de liberté de tous les êtres humaines". (A struggle against capitalist deregulation, for public services, for solidarity and not charity, a fight for intellectual emancipation. Through universal secularism we aim for secular emancipation, the measure of all human liberty.)<sup>3</sup> Only by defending universal rights, and by denying special privileges to religious groups, can a genuine anti-racist position unite the oppressed.

The immediate cause of this polemic is the

progressive decision of an otherwise right-wing French government to ban the veil (le voile), and other divisive badges of faith from the public educational sphere. This was supported by the immense majority of the French left. Even most of those opposed to a formal interdiction admitted "the veil is an oppression" (that is the position of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire). Nearly all sides have pointed to the simple fact that men, under dominant interpretations of the Qur'an, are not required to cover their hair, and that women are obliged to do so because it is held that the sight of female coiffure will cause sexual feelings. Members of the North-African feminist movement, Ni Putes Ni Soumises, were at the forefront of the battle against the veil. Fadela Amara has declared that, whilst a believer, she sees the veil as "a tool of oppression, of alienation, of discrimination, an instrument of power by men over women".<sup>4</sup> These brave feminist voices have aroused the violent hostility of the French Islamicists, the tellingly named Frères musulmans (Muslim Brotherhood). Only a tiny minority of the French left, inspired by the British Socialist Workers Party, or post-modernist relativism, defended the absolute right to be oppressed.

This has not been the stand in Britain. As we have seen, a majority appears to align with Islamicists against secularism. The Anglo-Saxon "left's" views correspond to an ideology resting on three sources.

The first derives from straightforward British imperialism. That is the practice of separating "communities" on religious ground. Under the Indian Raj different religious groups had the right to distinct "personal law". That is that the profoundly unequal relations between men and women under Hindu and Islamic "law" (with the notable contradiction of Sikh rules) were eternalised in jurisprudence. At present in Canada there are serious attempts to re-establish this state of affairs. "Community leaders" (not elected but given by their status as religious figures) are recognised by the state as those who determine "their" communities' rules.

The "left's" response has been to try to gain

their own constituency by trawling for support amongst sympathetic Muslim notables (and notably not amongst other ethnic or religious groups). The so-called Respect Coalition has explicitly pitched its propaganda at the “Muslim” vote and welcomed the endorsement of mosques. Abandoning any class-related politics it accepts the idea that there are fixed faith “communities” out there to be captured.

Secondly, there is the adoption of the American model of “multi-culturalism”. This, as *Historical Materialism* (Vol.11 No.4, 2003) details, is a model of social conflict in which different ethnic groups assert their “rights”. The very particular conditions of American class formation (in which the heritage of slavery, different waves of immigration, the existence of a colour-based privileged layer in the working class, and an immensely powerful bourgeoisie have combined) are regarded as universal. In place of unified class conflicts, we have religious and cultural organisations from the different class and ethnic fractions as permanent lobbies. Each is held to be separate but equal. Those British groups, such as *Socialist Action*, which derive their politics from America, are quite open about this. Class unity is dropped in favour of the “right to be different”. Lee Jasper, a key adviser of Ken Livingstone, has gone so far as to advocate racially segregated schools in the name of ... anti-racism!

Thirdly, this last response indicates another basis for Islamophilia. The French Nouvelle Droite (New Right) may seem an unlikely home for this. Anglophone readers are not generally familiar with the works of Alain de Benoist but at his core are some familiar themes. That is “neo-paganism”, the right to “difference” or “identity”, and the transposition of genetic racialism to cultural distinctiveness. Hostile to an Islamic presence in Europe, the Nouvelle Droite has enjoyed warm relations with Political Islam in what are considered “Arab” countries.<sup>5</sup> Following an identical relativism anglophones claim that

everyone has the right to his/her cultural practices, and that there are no universal rights. Furthermore it is held that for “Europeans” to criticise Islam is inherently racist. The British defenders of the Qu’ran are not very open about the affinity between their ideas and the heirs of Maurras. But there is an American point at which the extreme right culturalists such as Alain de Benoist and the remnants of the post-modern New Left overtly meet, and that place is called *Telos*.

Such responses are fundamentally wrong. They divert attention away from the central question of racist reactions to “foreigners” (since in the UK racist sentiments are centred on asylum seekers regardless of their religion). They encourage the birth of communalism, promoting one religious community’s interest against others. They ignore the central problem for secularists in the Britain: that is to create a republic with no established religion and to free education from the influence of spiritual doctrines. That sphere should ideally be a place for equality between the citizens. They are steps backward from the centuries-long struggle for working class emancipation, which fused with the Enlightenment and the fight to free people from the yoke of Revelation and the Book. And most importantly, they in their misguided enthusiasm for religion follow imperialism’s central wish: to divide the peoples.

#### Notes

1. Brett Lock, ‘The Odd Couple: Red Ken and the Conservative Cleric’, *Tribune*, 30 July 2004.
2. Henri Pena-Ruiz, *Qu’est-ce que la laïcité?*, Gallimard, 2003, p.262.
3. Henri Pena-Ruiz, ‘Laïcité et égalité, leviers de l’émancipation’, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, February 2004.
4. *Le Monde*, 29 January 2004.
5. Pierre-Andrew Taguieff, ‘Alain de Benoist, philosophe’, *Les Temps Modernes*, No.451, February 1984.

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