

Muslims and the Left: An English case study

In fighting alongside those whom society has oppressed, Socialists have often found themselves shoulder to shoulder with Muslims, but British Left groups have recruited relatively few Muslim members. Then, with the formation of the Respect Coalition, Leftists and Muslims appeared to have tied the knot. This article examines the nature and limitations of this coalition through an exploration of wider ideological relationships between Islam and the Left. It argues that the Coalition was based on a fundamental misconception that it would be possible to combine two different ways of understanding the world, with the result that Respect was ideologically stillborn. It could never have built up a genuine political base, leaving it to rely on opportunism.

Keywords:

Islamism, Marxism, Socialism, Respect Coalition, Tower Hamlets

It may seem strange to be looking at an alliance of Muslims and the Left today, two decades after the fall of the Berlin wall, and at a time when Muslims, far from becoming more secular, are increasingly acknowledging their Muslim identity in their lives and in their politics. However, it is the crisis on the Left that has facilitated the growing political importance of Islam and created conditions that encourage such an alliance. In the same way that - as Marx predicted - the growth of Socialist and Marxist societies was accompanied by a decline in religion, so the perceived failure of the Marxist humanist solution, has encouraged people to look for comfort and answers in old and new religious certainties. Meanwhile, opposition to the dominance of free-market capitalism has brought together a rainbow of different views.

The Rise of the Respect Coalition

Before looking at the implications of this more theoretically, I want to present the case study through which I will be examining broader issues, and look at what happened when British Muslims and secular Leftists became involved together in the experiment of Respect.

From September 2002, the major London protests against Britain's involvement in the war in Afghanistan and then in Iraq were organised by a partnership of the Stop the War Coalition and the Muslim Association of Britain.¹ The Stop the War Coalition is dominated by the Socialist Workers' Party, or SWP, a Marxist group that is currently the biggest organisation on the British far-Left. The SWP had previously ventured into electoral politics under the banner of the Socialist Alliance, a Left alternative to New Labour launched before the 2001 election. However, this had already been allowed to peter out, as the SWP demonstrated its unwillingness to allow the growth of anything that it could not control, stifling initiatives that came from outwith their organisation and excluding other leftists from playing any significant role.²

¹ CND soon became a third partner.

² See the *Weekly Worker*. The journal of the CPGB, a marginalised junior partner in both the Socialist Alliance and the Respect Coalition, this is a relatively open chronicler of events on the Left, and is widely read by Left-watchers of all kinds.

Since well before 9/11, the political activity of Muslims in Britain has increasingly coalesced around a religious identity. The Muslim Association of Britain, or MAB, which took on the role of co-ordinating Muslim participation in the anti-war movement, was one of the many groups under the Muslim Council of Britain umbrella. Members of the MAB came from various schools of thought within the Islamist tradition, including leading figures with backgrounds in the Muslim Brotherhood, which the organisation regarded as an inspiration to all Muslims – though not above criticism.³ Few of the thousands of Muslims who participated in the anti-war movement were themselves members of the MAB. They came from many different Muslim traditions, but many younger, politically active British Muslims have been especially attracted to political versions of Islam - or Islamism.⁴ (Glynn 2002, 2009)

Richard Phillips has recounted how the MAB rejected the Stop the War Coalition's invitations to affiliate, and opted instead for a partnership of equals. (Phillips 2008: 103-4) This astute political move allowed them to avoid assimilation into a Left-led organisation, and gave them a strong voice in key decisions, such as who should speak at the mass public rallies.

The catalyst that turned this tactical combination of Muslims and Leftists into what was tantamount to a new political party, was George Galloway. A long-time Left Labour rebel with a passionate interest in the Middle East and a gift for oratory, Galloway was a leading figure in the Stop the War Coalition, and while the Labour Party prepared for his expulsion he was already discussing plans for a new organisation. (Galloway 2004:154) For Galloway, Respect provided a new political platform. For the SWP, the inclusion of a well-known MP, with no links to themselves, made the organisation appear broader and much more electable. Respect: the Unity Coalition was launched in January 2004. Its “post-modern” name... invented by an eight-year-old’ (Galloway 2004:150) officially stands for respecting equality, socialism, peace, the environment, community and trade unionism.

In its determination to be inclusive – and despite that ‘S’ – Respect was only minimally socialist; and, even so, Galloway explained, ‘we don’t bind a Muslim candidate... to the explicitly socialist parts of our programme’. (*Pink News* 21 February 2006) The dilution of socialist values was resisted by many Respect members, but the SWP consistently used their majority to ensure that this line was adopted, even to the extent of alienating a large section of their own membership. (*Weekly Worker* 14 October and 4 November 2004) The launch conference was told that they could not be ‘more socialist’ because they wanted to ‘reach out’ to the large Muslim communities. After pushing through Respect’s very minimal programme, the National Secretary explained;

We... voted against the things we believed in, because, while the people here are important, they are not as important as the millions out there. We are reaching to the people locked out of politics. We voted for what *they* want. (*Weekly Worker* 31 January 2008)

³ See www.mabonline.net [accessed January 2005] and ‘MAB In Its Own Words’, Islamic Human Rights Commission website, 13 August 2004, <http://www.ihr.org.uk/show.php?id=1216> [accessed July 2009].

⁴ The definition of this term is debated, but I am using it here to refer to all those different forms of Islam in which people believe that it is not possible to separate a private religion from public action because religion bears on every aspect of life, and that to be a Muslim is a matter of politics as well as of faith.

The SWP was trying to appeal to a Muslim constituency, but what was the role of the their anti-war partners, the MAB? Were they even part of the new coalition? George Galloway told me when I interviewed him in January 2005,

They are fully part. They have two members on our national council - specially delegated by them, to sit as full members... And two other of their prominent activists are on our national council in their own right...as individuals elected at the meeting...[S]ince our annual meeting, which took place a month or two ago, they have concretised their relations with us...

However, Azam Tamimi, then official spokesperson for the MAB, had made clear to me two days earlier that council membership did not in fact equate with full support. The MAB position, as he explained it, is that shown by the majority of Islamists who engage with secular politics:

Our choice in the Muslim Association of Britain is not to give our 100% support for a single party. It's going to be constituency per constituency, person per person. And therefore, it's not a question of agreeing fully, or disagreeing fully, it's a question of where we see eye to eye on about three or four major issues... But, we're not going to talk about all the other things that we would love to see in the world as Muslims, because that is unrealistic.⁵ (Interviewed 17 January 2005)

While the MAB were fully behind Galloway in the 2005 general election, they supported Labour's Ken Livingston in the 2004 London Mayoral election; and Anis Al-Takriti resigned the presidency of the MAB in order to stand as an individual under the Respect banner for the 2004 European Parliamentary elections, held the same day. The semi-detached nature of the main Muslim organisational group did not, however, prevent Respect from putting a Muslim in first or second place on all their Euro-election slates. (Galloway, interviewed 19 January 2005)

Winning Elections

Respect did not win any seats in those elections, but in the Borough of Tower Hamlets, in London's East End, they took more votes than any other party; and it was here, 7 weeks later, that they had their first election victory when Oliur Rahman, a 23-year-old Bengali, was elected councillor in a local by-election. It was on the basis of a series of promising electoral results that Respect decided to concentrate a high proportion of its efforts for the 2005 general election on East London, and especially on Galloway's battle with Oona King for the formerly safe Labour seat of Bethnal Green and Bow.

Respect estimated that the electorate in this constituency was 55% Bengali Muslim - and there were also other reasons for them to be optimistic of electoral success. This was a place where the Labour Party was in particular crisis. Oona King had had no previous links with the area and her selection had been resented by many Bengalis who had hoped that a Bengali would be chosen. She was seen as a New Labour loyalist, and most importantly that loyalty extended to supporting the war. Tower Hamlets' Labour council, despite declaring themselves officially anti-

⁵ Tamimi's defining issues were: opposition to the war in Iraq and the subsequent occupation, support for Palestinian rights, opposition to antiterrorism measures that victimise Muslims, and absence of racist and Islamophobic tendencies.

war, had not taken an active part in the anti-war movement; and beyond this, some local party members had been implicated in major corruption scandals involving the misappropriation of large amounts of regeneration money.

Leaflets distributed outside the mosques for Galloway's earlier European election campaign, had described Respect as 'the Party for Muslims'. And now, although Respect was promoting some traditional Left issues – especially concerning housing - debate focused on the 'Muslim vote'. When I interviewed Galloway three and a half months before the general election, (19 January 2005) he was anxious to make clear that Respect also had wide non-Muslim support, but he told me that he expected a 'very good percentage' of his vote to come from the Muslim community. He explained, 'We are not only not embarrassed about being seen by Muslims in Britain as a champion of their interests, we are exceedingly proud of that.' Galloway is a Scot of Irish Catholic descent, but he claimed (correctly) that voting for him was the best way to get Oona King out and prepare the ground for a Bengali next time.

When campaigning in the predominantly white end of the constituency, Galloway was careful to stress his old-Labour values, but his most active local helpers were young Bengali men, and his main support was always going to come from the Bengalis. The Iraq war was Respect's main campaigning issue, and it was portrayed as an anti-Islamic war. Galloway told a packed public hustings, 'If you make war against Muslims abroad, you are going to end up making war against Muslims at home.' (TELCO hustings, 20 April 2005) In portraying the war as a crusade, Galloway ignored most serious Left analysis, which saw it in terms of wider economic and political strategies.

Oona King insisted that she was 'working for the whole community' in contrast to Galloway's 'single-issue campaigning'; (*East London Advertiser* 4 March 2005) but Labour responded to the challenge from Respect by also going out of their way to attract self-consciously 'Muslim votes'. (Glynn 2010a)

After a high drama campaign, Galloway was elected as Respect's only MP; and the Muslim anti-war activist, Salma Yaqoob, came a close second in Birmingham Sparkbrook and Small Heath, where the 2001 census had recorded that the population was over 50% of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin.

As an MP, Galloway has failed to persuade a significant proportion of his new constituents that he represents more than Bengali Muslim interests; and his strong links with the Bengalis, together with his concentration on international and media activities, have been the focus of critical letters in the local paper. (Glynn 2010a) Respect had high hopes for the local council elections in May 2006, but despite a hugely unpopular Labour council, and chaos among the Liberal Democrats, the only Respect candidates elected were twelve Bengalis, and there was a strong correlation between the percentage of votes cast for Respect in each ward and the percentage of Bengalis in the population.⁶

⁶ R squared = 63% and P<0.001 – i.e. 63% of the variation can be explained by the percentage of Bengalis

The Fall of Respect

Labour was still in control of the council, but Respect's new prominence as the main opposition group had made it a focus for the same sort of pragmatic, community-based politics that had previously concentrated on the Labour Party. (Glynn 2008) Muslim organisations had proved too politically astute and too pragmatic to align themselves with a small and volatile opposition movement;⁷ however, Respect attracted large numbers of individuals and families who identified themselves politically as Muslims, and those who came to the fore were often people who through their business and family connections were regarded locally as 'community leaders'. Among Bengali activists and small businessmen, Respect was perceived as a possible new route for community uplift and personal ambition. There were defections both from and to Labour, and traditional community networks that had previously been used by Labour were activated in support of Respect candidates. The organisation also attracted the familiar problem of mass-membership applications, as wealthy and ambitious members enrolled and paid for their own supporters – though there were protests when personal vote banks meant that the SWP's preferred nominees lost out in selections of candidates or officers. (*Weekly Worker* 6 July 2006 and 8 February 2007; http://www.swp.org.uk/respect_appeal.php [accessed 4 May 09]) After one of the new Respect councillors had resigned his position and poured venom on the organisation in the local press, I asked one of the Respect activists campaigning in the consequent by-election how the councillor had been selected in the first place. I was told, without a hint of concern, that he was well connected and could deliver a lot of votes. (Informal discussion, 24 July 2007)

While the fate of the Socialist Alliance should make us wary of laying all blame for the eventual collapse of Respect on its reliance on a broad coalition, such a collection of different interests was inherently unstable. The coalition came together because its various elements needed each other. When their leaders began to doubt that need, it soon and messily fell apart. Galloway felt that the SWP was holding back the development of Respect through a less than full commitment to the project; and, Peter Manson claimed in the *Weekly Worker* (24 April 2008) that the SWP had provoked the split because the coalition was 'costing it members', and instead of winning support on the back of Muslim "community leaders" and businessmen... the opposite was the case'.

Galloway expressed his concerns over Respect's organisational failures in a long letter to National Committee members at the end of August 2007, setting off weeks of increasingly acrimonious exchanges. That October, after some particularly stormy local meetings, the four Tower Hamlets councillors who had always been most closely associated with the SWP resigned the Respect whip. The following week Galloway retaliated by changing the locks on Respect's national office, and by mid November, remaining supporters could choose between two rival Respect conferences cum rallies. 2008 saw Galloway's group reduced to just 6 councillors. Of the four breakaway councillors, who faced certain defeat at the next election, Ahmed Hussain moved straight to the Tories in February, despite having signed up to the SWP; Lutfa Begum - who had also become an SWP member - her daughter Rania Kahn, and Oliur Rahman all joined Labour in July, with the first two putting their names to statements that the local paper dismissed as 'Labour spin'. (*East London Advertiser* 7 July 2008)

⁷ A new, more traditional leadership, wary of the oppositional public profile, eventually ended the MAB's partnership with the Stop the War Coalition itself, leaving active members to continue their involvement under the banner of the British Muslim Initiative. (Phillips 2008:107 – 9)

The two principal players among the Tower Hamlets Respect (and former Respect) councillors were seen as belonging to opposing factions, but an examination of what they have in common can help throw light on the organisation. Oliur Rahman and group leader Abjol Miah are both young, and both had little political experience before joining the anti-war movement. Both had community-based employment, Rahman in a job centre and Miah as a youth worker, and both stress their connections outwith the Bengali community. Rahman is careful to emphasise his trade-union credentials (he was branch chair of his union), while Miah's previous organisational involvement had been with the Young Muslim Organisation (which he first joined for the football) and with the mosque; but both go to the East London Mosque, which preaches an Islamist line, and both stress that they are on the political Left. Miah seems less familiar with the language of class politics, and relies on the moral strength afforded by his faith, believing that actions here will be rewarded in the world to come. (Interviewed 24 and 25 July 2007) At the ward meeting after Rahman's election to the council (6 August 2004) Galloway introduced him as 'a Bengali, Muslim, Trade Unionist', and when I had asked Rahman before the meeting if he would describe himself as a socialist he had said yes. This multiple identity remained how he saw himself, (*Weekly Worker* 1 November 2007) and alongside support for working-class issues, he promoted the campaign for a local schoolgirl's right to wear the all-covering *jilbab*,⁸ and told me that faith schools were 'obviously' good, and that it was 'vital' to have a Bengali MP. (Interviewed 19 January 2005) Both men attempted to engage with the very different traditions that came together in Respect, but to what extent is this possible?

To answer this question it is necessary to look more closely at both socialism and Islam. This theoretical debate may seem far away from the often opportunistic and petty politics of Tower Hamlets, but it impacts directly on the understanding of growing numbers of British Muslims. As Miah pointed out to me, (Interviewed 25 July 2007) few in the Muslim world would admit to not having read Qutb or Mawdudi, there are any number of Muslim study circles, conferences and internet discussion groups, and people do 'talk about Islam'.

Can a Muslim be a Socialist?

As Galloway was preparing to stand for election in Bethnal Green and Bow, I asked Azzam Tamimi whether a Muslim could be a socialist. I wanted to hear his view both as a scholar of Islamic politics, and as official spokesperson of the MAB. He told me, '[T]here are within capitalism and within socialism values that are compatible with some of the values of Islam', but 'those Muslims who became socialists departed from Islam. Those Muslims who became capitalist departed from Islam. Because we are talking about different visions, different world views.' (Interviewed 17 January 2005) The Quran, he explained, revealed 'a set of values' rather than a model of governance; and how these were interpreted depended on 'the experience and perception of people at a given time and at a given geography.' He, and his generation of Islamic political thinkers, are influenced by social democracy, and Tamimi constructs as an ideal paradigm an 'Islamic democracy' where the 'divinely revealed' *Sharia*⁹ - remains an immutable

⁸ A Muslim version of the school uniform had already been agreed with parents, and there was concern that in defending the rights of this one girl, campaigners were supporting a situation where girls would be under peer pressure to conform to more and more strict religious dress codes. (Pola Uddin *Guardian* 19 June 2004)

⁹ *Sharia* is made up of the *Quran* and the *Sunna* – the way or practice of the Prophet as recorded in the authorised collections of traditions (*Hadiths*) attributed to him.

frame of reference, and the elected government, legitimised by the people, has ‘no room for anti-Islamic parties’ because ‘the people will not want it’.¹⁰ This is, of course, just one view among many, and Tamimi’s comments are part of a continuing dialectic between Islam and the West.

Islam, like many religions, contains both powerful conservative forces and a strong radical thread, and has a long history of reformist movements that have attempted to rediscover an original purity in the face of moral decadence and social oppression. For reformers, the creation of a just society through political action is supported by the example of the Prophet himself, with the first years of Islam providing a paradigm of the ideal Muslim social system. Despite the temporal power of Sunni legal establishments and Shia clerics, central concepts of Islam can be interpreted as arguments for a universal classless society. The unity of God can be extended to man; divine justice applies to all; the *ummah*, or community of believers, transcends tribe and nation; the hoarding of wealth is regarded as sinful, and Islam bans monopoly and usury, and prescribes a welfare system based on taxing both income and capital.

Interpretation of the Islamic ideal depends not only on time, place and socio-political context, but also on their interaction with different schools of thought over the nature of Islam’s sacred texts. Islamic evolution has centred on debates over whether their meaning is literal or allegorical, over which texts are authentic, and over the acceptability of going back and reinterpreting original texts, as distinct from relying on the superstructures of jurisprudence built up over the centuries. *Ijtihad* – critical interpretation of the law (Ramadan 2004:43-48) – has been crucial to the development of most of the Islamic responses to western modernism outlined below.

There are also significant traditionalist groups - including organisations that emerged as a conservative reaction to modernising developments within Islam - but these tend to discourage political, as well as cultural, interaction with western society.

Islam and the West

Malise Ruthven has divided Islamic responses to the west into four broad (not always distinct) categories. (Ruthven 1984:294 – 5) The first of these is the re-enactment of the struggles of early Islam, which he associated with peripheral regions. However, groups such as Al – Muhajiroun and its successors demonstrate that similar ideas can take root in the heart of the metropole, though those espousing them may be socially (and numerically) marginal. Such groups maintain a separateness from western culture. They are intensely politicised, but believe that taking part in secular political systems is *haram* (forbidden).

The second type of response attempts to rationalise Islam in accordance with modern cultural values. This opens the door to a more secular understanding where Islam is no longer the ultimate source of all thought and action and social and political ideas can develop independently of it. Many secular Muslims would have no problem in accepting and promoting socialist ideas alongside a private religion.

¹⁰ Tamimi illustrated this point with the example of the US, where ‘a Communist party is outlawed’. In fact, the US has never actually outlawed the Communist Party.

Third and fourth are attempts to meet new challenges either by re-examining primal texts, or by building on the existing body of Islamic jurisprudence. Most modern Islamist groups fall under one or other of these last two categories, depending on their attitudes to post-Quranic Islamic discourse. They all regard Islam as a complete world-view and ultimate source of understanding and guidance.

Engagement with the modern world has required Islamists to respond to socialism. The rest of this section examines this response in three influential schools of Islamist thought, the first two from the Sunni tradition (followed by an overwhelming majority of British Muslims) and the third from the Shia.

Mawdudi

As Miah confirmed, pioneering Islamist thinkers continue to be widely read, though, like others, he stresses that their ideas should be understood in historical context. (Interviewed 25 July 2007) Many British Islamist organisations – including the Council of the East London Mosque and the Young Muslim Organisation – can trace an intellectual and institutional inheritance to Abul A'la Mawdudi (1903-79), who first developed his ideas in pre-Independence India. He built on traditional Islamic jurisprudence, but used *ijtihad* both to purify Islam from ‘perverted dogmas’ absorbed from other cultures, (Mawdudi 1981:96-7) and to address the problems of modern life; and his insistence that the gates of *ijtihad* are always open has allowed those who follow his teachings to reinterpret them in keeping with later changes in society.

Mawdudi rejected both capitalism and socialism in favour of what he understood as an Islamic economic solution. In his attack on socialism, he was responding to Soviet Communism, and he condemned it for its tyranny and violence and its lack of moral order. However, although he enumerated the evils of even reformed capitalism, Mawdudi admitted that its underpinnings ‘are the true principles of human economy, provided they are shorn of exaggerations incorporated with them by the bourgeoisie of the West because of their selfishness and extremist nature.’ (Mawdudi 1995:74) Mawdudi’s economic prescription reads as capitalism with an Islamic face: a sort of Islamic welfare state.

The Muslim Brotherhood

While the spread of Mawdudi’s ideas has been facilitated through links with the Indian Subcontinent, Islamism is internationalist. The Muslim Brotherhood, founded by Hasan al-Banna in Egypt in 1928, has achieved world-wide influence. Banna’s dream was for Egypt to become an Islamic state, but the Brotherhood was forged in a period of revolutionary upheaval, and in spreading the Islamic message they responded to contemporary political concerns. They had mass working-class membership, were active in the formation of trade unions and played a significant role in the widespread labour unrest. However, while Banna wanted to resist foreign companies, he did not welcome class conflict. The Brotherhood argued that the employment relationship should be based on mutual ‘respect and sympathy’, including respect for the rights of management. Banna was reported as lecturing to union groups on their duties towards ‘God, himself, and the owner of the plant.’ The Communist Party and other Left groups, active in the same pool of discontent, regarded the Brotherhood as playing a dangerously divisive role in labour politics; and the Brotherhood’s hatred of communism extended to informing on communists during government round-ups in the 1940s. (Mitchell 1993: 278, 253, 254 and 39)

Sayyid Qutb, who joined the organisation in the early fifties, regarded the man-made systems of both capitalism and communism as ‘rebellion against God’s authority and the denial of the dignity of man given to him by God’. Marxism, he argued, had initially attracted large numbers of people because it was ‘a way of life based on a creed’, but it was a ‘system which is against human nature’, (Qutb 1964:Introduction) based on ‘exciting animalistic characteristics’. (Ibid Chapter 3) He warned Muslims not to be tricked by their enemies into believing that their struggle was economic, political or racial; their struggle was between ‘unbelief’ and ‘faith’. (Ibid Chapter 12)¹¹

Greater equality played an important part in Qutb’s vision, but he claimed that, ‘Only in the Islamic way of life do all men become free from the servitude of some men to others’, and he explained that the purpose of this freedom was to devote themselves to the worship of God. (Ibid Introduction) Despite his emphasis on creating actual political structures, he argued that the important rewards are not in this world, but in the praise of angels and the Hereafter. (Ibid Chapter 12)

Yusuf al-Qaradawi spent long formative years with the Muslim Brotherhood and has twice turned down offers to take on its leadership. (*Al-Jazeera* 12 January 2004) He is also – thanks to a combination of modern media and personal charisma - one of the most influential Islamist thinkers active today. At the centre of his message he stresses the importance of *wasatiyya*, the balance or middle way between extremes – including between capitalism and socialism, between individualism and collectivism and between tradition and reform. (Soage 2008:58) While his religious rulings have upset both religious orthodoxy and Western secularists,¹² politically, his Islamic judicial approach is not so much a middle way between capitalism and socialism, as a system of living that can function within an essentially capitalist economy. There are echoes of Mawdudi here, and indeed Mawdudi was a great admirer of Qaradawi’s jurisprudence. (Soage (2008) p 51)

Qaradawi’s social philosophy centres on *zakah* - the Islamic tax on wealth and savings to support the poor and religious causes - and the IslamOnline website that he supervises praises the tax for the way ‘It frees society from the ill feelings arising out of class hatred. It opposes an individualism that is blind to the travails of one’s neighbors and stands against a socialism that shackles individual freedom.’ This article also points out that *zakah* is a ‘profitable investment... because it will establish economic balance and social justice, and at the same time earn an immense reward in the Hereafter.’¹³

The legalistic approach exemplified by Qaradawi and Mawdudi appeals to a conservative desire for moral certainty rather than a wish for progressive radical reform.

¹¹ Al-Qaradawi departs from this view and describes the Palestinians’ war with Israel as ‘a battle of land, rather than one of belief’, <http://www.islamonline.net/English/News/2002-06/04/article12.shtml> [downloaded July 2004]

¹² His suggestion that ‘apostates should not incur the death penalty but “only” social ostracism’ upsets both. (Soage (2008) p 59)

¹³ <http://www.islamonline.net/english/introducingislam/Worship/Zakah/article01.shtml> [accessed 21 November 2008]

Red Shi-ism

In contrast, the Islamist scholar who has made the most serious attempt to engage with Marxist ideas is Ali Shari'ati. Although his views have had little direct impact on the majority of British Islamists, who come from a different tradition, no examination of the interaction between socialism and Islam can ignore his potentially still potent contribution. Shari'ati, who died in 1977, is often referred to as the ideologist of the Iranian revolution, and his slogans were chanted by hundreds of thousands. His legacy has also been claimed by groups who opposed the direction that the revolution eventually took, and who attempted to replace Khomeini's clerical dictatorship with a more democratic and reformist Islamic leadership. (Hiro 2000:147)

Shari'ati's Islamic modernism was influenced by the religious humanism developed by Muhammad Iqbal in pre-Independence India. (Iqbal 1930) Material justice formed a crucial part of his vision, but was only a part, deemed insufficient on its own.

Like Iqbal, Shari'ati stressed the failures of both bourgeois liberalism and communism, and blamed them on their shared materialist roots. (Shari'ati 1980:21) He argued that without God there can be no moral conscience, and that Marx's criticisms of capitalism demonstrate an idealistic view of human values that is contradicted by the dialectical materialist understanding of society. (Shari'ati 1980:29)

For Shari'ati, Marxism was an irreconcilable enemy, not only because he realised that Marxist views were attracting the same youth that he was appealing to with reformist Islam, but also because, unlike capitalism, it provided an alternative world view. Qutb had recognised Marxism's attraction as a creed; Shari'ati emphasised that:

[C]ontrary to the beliefs of those who look for shared modalities in Islam and the communism of Marx, these, as two comprehensive ideologies, are altogether opposed... the only comparable modality of the two schools is that each is a complete, comprehensive ideology. (Shari'ati 1980:64)

At the same time, Shari'ati recognised aspects of socialism within Islam. In 1953, he joined The League for the Freedom of the Iranian People, formerly called the Movement of God-Worshipping Socialists, who saw socialism as an inherent part of Islam (and who developed the argument of Marxist inconsistency given above). (Rahnema 2000:26) He studied at the Sorbonne in the early sixties and his writings engage with contemporary debates. He did not avoid Marxist terminology, and he even adapted Marx's argument that religion is the opium of the people, to condemn, not religion, but the 'narcotizing and benumbing' effect on the masses of reactionary and corrupt forms of religion, which he claimed can only be eliminated by 'true religion'. (Shari'ati 1986:31 and 48, and *Red Shi'ism*) For Shari'ati, the next world was not a distraction from engagement with worldly life, but the ultimate reward or punishment for 'the respective services or disservices done by each person for his society.' (Shari'ati 1980:57)

Shari'ati's 'Red Shi-ism' regarded Islam as a revolutionary force for a fairer world, inviting the common people to rebellion and armed struggle against oppression, ignorance and poverty. (Shari'ati 1986:43, and *Red Shi-ism*) He regarded socialism as a tool in the service of Islam; but Islam as the truth that gives life purpose.

Views from the Left

Marxists¹⁴ would agree with Shari'ati that Marxism and Islam are based on different, and mutually incompatible, understandings of ultimate truth. In the Marxist view, 'Man makes religion, religion does not make man.'(Marx 1844: para 3) Shari'ati's criticisms seem to be directed at an Althusian interpretation of historical materialism as structuralist determinism, but other Marxists have rejected Althusser's views and re-emphasised the role of human agency. And while Shari'ati regards Marx's comments on religion as mere stylistic embellishments on Feuerbach, (Shari'ati 1980:56) in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx makes clear that Feuerbach's argument is incomplete precisely because it does not take account of man's active role in changing society. (Marx 1845: para 3)

The world will be changed by human action, but in order to change the world for the better, it is necessary first to interpret it correctly. That is why Marxists will argue against what they believe to be a wrong interpretation of the world, and why, for Marx, 'the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism'.(Marx 1844: para 1) Explaining his famous comment that religion 'is the opium of the people', Marx wrote:

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. (Marx 1844: paras 4 and 5)

Religion, he argued, is a dangerous illusion. It can be, and often has been, used as a conservative force in support of existing authority (as Shari'ati acknowledged), persuading people to accept their lot meekly in the hope of rewards beyond the grave. Even where there is no manifest exploitation, its controlling mechanisms can be internalised, helping people to accept inequalities rather than to fight against them. And it obscures objective truth and understanding, which are the necessary first steps for real progress. Religious interpretations of the world as governed by an all-powerful deity (or deities) whose acts (while mysterious) respond to our imperfect attempts to keep to a divinely ordained moral code, can lead us to get lost down byways of theological speculation. Marxists argue that this prevents us from seeing the world as the direct product of human society that can only be changed through human understanding and action; and the realisation that this world is all we have should lead people to try and make this life as fulfilling as possible.

Marxists understand the values by which we live as human - made not by individuals, (Marx 1845: paras 6 and 7), but by the actions of human society. As such these values are not immutable, but neither are they arbitrary nor inevitable. There have been many creative and inspiring movements that have set out to generate a better society, and before the French Revolution their aims were generally interpreted according to a religious understanding of the world, because that was the way people knew how to think. However, Marxists understand all these developments as the products of interacting human minds and actions, and argue that, while religion provided a framework that helped in their evolution, it ultimately proved a constraint on both understanding and action.

¹⁴ While many different schools of thought would describe themselves as 'Marxist', the ideas described in this section would, I believe, be widely accepted.

There is no place for religious belief in the Marxist world-view, and no place for dialectical materialism in a world ruled by God. A religion such as Islam may incorporate ideas that can be interpreted as socialistic, but the very name, Islam, means submission to the rule of God, as revealed to Muhammad; and all followers of religious faith are bound ultimately by divine authority, as mediated through worldly religious powers.

The Bolsheviks recognised the intrinsic incompatibility of Marxism and religious faith, and argued that workers needed to be freed from religion. Despite later developments under Stalin, the first Bolshevik government understood that religion could not be legislated out of existence, (Lenin 1965:134) but they thought that people could be persuaded, through widespread education and propaganda, to give up their reliance on old beliefs as they participated in making society fairer through human action, and religious escapism became unnecessary.

The problems of promoting Marxism in a devoutly religious environment had been addressed a little earlier, in Ireland, by James Connolly. Connolly was concerned that the aggressive atheism of his fellow Marxists was alienating ordinary Catholic workers. He believed it was possible to put forward a materialist argument for Marxism and criticise the actions of the Catholic hierarchy without asking people to renounce their private beliefs. (Connolly 1899 and 1909)

Connolly's own religious belief is disputed, and other Marxists have criticised his prohibition on all discussion of theology, but his position would not challenge the Marxist atheist understanding that, as socialist ideas and society take root, so religion will become redundant and wither.

Combining Religion and Socialism

There are, of course, religious people, from all faiths, who have tried to combine religion and socialism, and have worked alongside non-religious socialists. Thus, Father Groser, who helped to form the Christian Socialist movement, worked with members of the Communist Party in pre-war housing struggles in the same part of London as features in this study. (Groser 1949 and *The Christian Socialist* 32, May 1966) Groser was inspired by Jesus' teachings and saw this active involvement as his Christian duty; like the priests and nuns who turned to liberation theology in Latin America, or Tony Benn, who comes to socialism from a Protestant perspective.

And on the other side of the world, many Bengali Muslims were moved to follow Maulana Bhashani, the religious and political leader with Maoist sympathies who played an important role in the lead-up to the Bangladesh War of Independence of 1971. Bhashani spent a year in political exile with the London Bengalis in the mid fifties, but left no legacy of socialist organisation. He was an inspiring leader, whose untheorised class-consciousness merged with an egalitarian interpretation of Islam; (Maniruzzaman 1973:230-231) however, his appeal to a religiously inspired morality inhibited development of more materialist interpretations.

Religion may inspire an egalitarian commitment, but is unlikely to lead to socialist understanding without a secularist separation of private faith from the public political world.

Arguments, such as Connolly's, about the compatibility of religion and socialism could appeal to 'secular' Muslims - who could separate their religious beliefs from a materialist approach to politics and economics - but would be largely irrelevant to those who argue that faith should underlie every aspect of life and thought.

That there is no place for secularist separations in Islamist ideology, Qaradawi makes very clear:

Since Islam is a comprehensive system of *'Ibadah* (worship) and *Shari'ah* (legislation), the acceptance of secularism means abandonment of *Shari'ah*, a denial of the Divine guidance and a rejection of Allah's injunctions... The acceptance of a legislation formulated by humans means a preference of the humans' limited knowledge to the Divine guidance: "*Say! Do you know better than Allah?*"...

For this reason, the call for secularism among Muslims is atheism and a rejection of Islam. Its acceptance as a basis for rule in place of *Shari'ah* is a downright apostasy.¹⁵

This is a severe charge. At the very least an apostate can be certain of eternal damnation. While Qaradawi does not speak for all Islamists, and interpretations of *Shariah* vary, Islamism has no sympathy for the secularist position.

A Third Way?

The idea that Islam supports neither capitalism nor socialism but provides an alternative system has become something of a cliché. But what might this actually mean in practice? We have seen how Mawdudi's economic prescription was for a sort of Islamic welfare state. In his book on Western Muslims, Tariq Ramadan (the thinker who most inspired Abjol Miah (interviewed 25 July 2007)) adopts a much more radical approach to Islamic law, but arrives at a very similar construction. He describes this as 'an economy with a human face'. (Ramadan 2004:188) Like Qaradawi, Ramadan is looking for a 'middle way', and the way he finds 'fixes clear and distinct conditions for involvement in the dominant economic system.' (ibid 197) Like New Labour's 'Third Way', this offers little challenge to hegemonic capitalism,¹⁶ (though it is not wedded to free-market neoliberalism). Ramadan's 'liberation by stages' through building up ethical businesses, (Ramadan 2004:198) might allow those involved to sleep better at night, but could make little impression on wider economic structures.

Lessons for the Future

In considering the collapse of Respect, it is important to acknowledge both the previous failure of the Socialist Alliance, and Respect's general opportunism - of which the attempt to unite socialists and Islamists was both a symptom and further cause. The Socialist Alliance had already exposed organisational failings within the SWP; and the opportunism led the organisation to rely on networks of people whose interests were rather closer to home. However, the ideological incompatibility highlighted by this article formed a fundamental fault line at the heart of the Respect project, forcing it to fall back on short-term tactical alliances. Basic

¹⁵ Qaradawi, *How the Imported Solutions Disastrously Affected Our Muslim Nation* quoted in his own *fatwa* of 22 June 2002, www.islameonline.net [accessed March 2005]. See also FN 12 above.

¹⁶ An allusion to the Third Way may be suggested in the name given to the government-funded organisation that arranges speaking tours for 'moderate' Muslims: the confusingly-titled Radical Middle Way.

differences in world-view influence even those who would not describe themselves as Islamists, and who have not consciously applied the ideas discussed here to their own political actions. They may still be affected, at some level, by the belief that they do not have to engage fully with socialist ideas because all that is good in socialism is already contained within Islam; or, as Abjol Miah put it to me, ‘fighting for your rights [and] social justice’ are ‘part of the *Shariah*’. (Interviewed 25 July 2007)

Respect liked to portray itself as part of the East End socialist tradition, and to draw parallels with the powerful Communist Party of the Thirties, with its significant ethnically-Jewish membership. But the Communists would have been appalled at the emphasis given by Respect to Muslim identity and to encouraging political and community action through religious organisations. Their strength and their ability to stem the growth of Fascism were due to an emphasis on class politics that cut across ethnic and religious difference.¹⁷ (Glynn 2005 and 2010b)

The Communist Party was able to build on years of grassroots work to develop, not only electoral success, but also a solid base of political consciousness to support it. Later, the compromises with capitalism that characterised post-war Communist policy disillusioned many supporters long before they had to face revelations about the nature of Stalin’s rule; (Bornstein and Richardson 1982) however, Respect sidelined Left arguments from the start, precluding development of a Left political consciousness. A socialist organisation that campaigned for greater economic equality - and against discrimination on the basis of religious (as of other differences) and against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq - could have appealed to Muslims as well as non-Muslims; or at least to those Muslims who could have helped build an organisation according to the socialist principles Respect’s founders claimed to support. Instead, by jettisoning those principles, Respect has bequeathed a legacy of disunity and distrust amongst what remains of the Left, and encouraged a politics that builds on and reinforces ethnic division. The new emphasis on ethnicity was observed by the political reporter of the *East London Advertiser*, who noted at the time of another council by-election in October 2008,

As soon as the by-election was called..., activists from all parties called me seeking an inside line on whether their opponents were going to select a Bengali or someone white. (23 October 2008)

While Respect’s Leftist leaders showed themselves ready to abandon fundamental principles in pursuit of an elusive short cut to socialism, the Islamists remained detached from Respect and kept their ideological positions uncompromised. Recent years have seen Islamist movements grow in strength, and Tamimi made clear that the MAB’s readiness to work with secular socialists was actually a consequence of the socialists’ relative political weakness. He told me, ‘when we criticise socialism as a world view we don’t depart much from what Mawdudi or Sayyid Qutb had said’. However, ‘the socialists of today, especially in Britain, are not seen by us as the enemies of yesterday... now increasingly capitalism is becoming a more dangerous thing than socialism.’ (17 January 2005)

¹⁷ Although Father Groser was made president of the Stepney Tenants’ Defence League, he was there not there as a community representative. His presence would, however, have helped cut across Catholic anti-communist sentiment.

Despite their respect for their new comrades, many on the Left failed to learn from them the important lesson of not compromising on fundamental principles, and as a result they weakened their own position and that of the Left more broadly. At the root of this failure was a misunderstanding of the nature of religion. Whilst it is possible to imagine ‘secular’ Muslims practising forms of socialism and working alongside non-religious Marxists, Islamists have a fundamentally different political understanding; and it is impossible to combine the two different and complete worldviews of Marxism and Islamism. This does not mean that Marxists and Islamists (or followers of other religions) cannot or should not work together when, as is often the case, they share similar immediate aims. It is often possible for Marxists and Islamists to find a common minimum programme and a reasonably sensitive *modus vivendi*; however, their ultimate aims are very different. Joint action over shared issues is one thing. A formalised relationship that requires the abandoning of fundamental principles is another.

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