

# Religion, the Veil and the Workers Movement

The following pamphlet was produced in 1992 by the now defunct Workers Revolution Group, which was a fraternal organization of the LRP based in Australia at that time. We are posting the material now because of its vital importance in the light of the virulent anti-Muslim campaigns of recent years, which in Europe have often taken the form of anti-veil legislation. We look forward to feedback from our readers about the analysis presented in this pamphlet. (For more information about the WRG, see *Proletarian Revolution* No. 46, Spring 1994.)

*People who are super-oppressed frequently turn to religion for solace. This booklet examines a particular instance of this, in present-day France. Not so long ago, controversy erupted in France over whether Islamic students should be allowed to wear Islamic veils at government high schools. In late September 1989 at a school in Creil, in the northern suburbs of Paris, the headmaster suspended three North African Muslim girls who refused to remove their veils. Angered by this, Muslim girls in Avignon and Marseilles began wearing veils to school and were themselves excluded.*

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*Lutte Ouvrière, one of the larger French organisations claiming to be 'Trotskyist', came out forcefully on the side of the headmaster of Creil. Whatever their intentions in taking this stand, the result of their error was ghastly - in the name of revolutionary communism a boost was given to the sinister - and growing - forces of French racism.*

*This incident highlights the importance of rediscovering the Marxist attitude to religion. Based upon the lessons of the Marxist workers' movement, this booklet argues for a sensitive, dialectical and materialist approach, instead of either bourgeois secularism or genuflection in the direction of religion.*

*Tightly argued, this booklet includes an exposition of the positions of Marx, Engels and Lenin on religion and an Appendix examining the attitudes of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International and the Spartacists.*

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# Religion, the Veil and the Workers' Movement

by Paul White

A  
*Workers Revolution*  
Pamphlet

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## Introduction

From Brunswick to Brooklyn, Muslim women have become the target of racist outrages since the beginning of the 1990/91 Gulf crisis. Their Islamic appearance has made them a particularly vulnerable target of racists.

The issues raised in this pamphlet are just as alive in Paris as they are in New York or Melbourne: capitalism in its death agony offers the horror of racist persecution everywhere. While the scale of the attacks is different, the imperialists are now enacting at home the same policies they have for centuries carried out against the inhabitants of the imperialised countries themselves. And the victims are frequently members of the very same nationalities persecuted abroad.

And everywhere the established labour movement leaders (and the centrist pretenders who seek to replace them) are just as unable to offer a fighting strategy to end the misery of capitalism in crisis. Typically, those who mislead (or aspire to mislead) our class can at best only patronise the oppressed. The persecution of immigrants from Muslim countries in the West shows this well.

People who are super-oppressed frequently turn to religion for solace. This pamphlet examines a particular instance of this, in present-day France. Not so long ago, controversy erupted in France over whether Islamic students should be allowed to wear Islamic veils at government high schools. In late September 1989 at a school in Creil, in the northern suburbs of Paris, the headmaster suspended three North African Muslim girls who refused to remove their veils. Angered by this, Muslim girls in Avignon and Marseilles began wearing veils to school and were themselves excluded.

The Education Minister, Lionel Jospin of the Socialist Party (SP), tried to have it both ways — arguing that veiled students be not allowed to attend class, but also asserting that veiling was not grounds for exclusion from school. (Presumably this means that veiled students can enter school grounds but not actually sit in class!) The French high court has since decided that so-called “discreet” veiling was permissible in schools. Veiled students can still be excluded, therefore.

In defending the rights of oppressed Muslims, revolutionaries do not endorse the the degrading practice of veiling women. However, the struggle for the liberation of Muslim women is only set back by chavinist attacks.

There is nothing new about racist persecution in the imperialist metropolitan countries. As long as there is capitalism, the more powerful countries will seek to continue the subjugation of non-Europeans, so as to further the cause of their own super-profits — the fruits of the exploitation of the third world. A hundred years ago, thus, France was notorious for its racism against Jews. In 1886, for example, the book *La France Juive* appeared, in which the author, Drumont, denounced the Jew “in his totality”. This was typical of the scores of racist tracts produced in this period. Racism towards Jews was officially encouraged at all levels of French

society. The Catholic church paid an especially active role in encouraging such racism at the time, also.

It was in this period that a talented army captain, Dreyfus, was witch-hunted all the way to imprisonment at Devil's Island. As one prominent Frenchman stated at the time: "That Dreyfus is capable of treason I conclude from his race".

As the horrific desecration of Jewish graves at the town of Carpentras in southern France on 10 May 1990 showed, anti-Jewish racism is once again alive and well in France, one hundred years after Dreyfus. At Carpentras, the body of a recently-buried Jewish man was dug up, stripped and impaled. Headstones were smashed, and painted with swastikas. A wave of similar attacks in other French towns followed, in the wake of the atrocities at Carpentras.

Much of this is well known outside France. Less well known is the vicious racism of contemporary capitalist France towards its millions of Arab residents. Like other imperialist states, France after World War 2 desperately needed cheap labour, to enable the restarting and expansion of its manufacturing industry. The ultra-cheap labour of so-called 'illegal' immigrants is today crucial to some sectors of France's economy — most notably in the building industry. In large part, France's cheap labour came from the Maghreb — the former French colonies of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. About 1.4 million "beurs" — Arabs from the Maghreb — now live in France.

The racism of the Nazis and their allies like the leaders of the French Vichy is well known. Less well known outside France is that racist atrocities continued after the war in France. Maurice Papon, an official in Vichy France, is accused of rounding-up Jews and sending them to the gas chambers. He escaped any retribution for this after the fall of Vichy France and went on to become Prefect of Police in Paris after the war.

In 1961, during Algeria's war of liberation from France, Papon ordered Algerians living in Paris to observe an 8.30 p.m. curfew. About 100 Algerians who defied this order were found floating in the Seine river, their hands tied behind their backs.

This was sheer naked terror. Papon was a monster, and he is nothing but a product of French official racism, (although his crimes were not emulated by all French officials). But state racism directed against the beurs was initiated by the majority right-wing coalition in the late seventies, when Lionel Stoleru, then the Secretary of State for Immigrant Workers, opened a xenophobic campaign to begin reducing immigration. Stoleru and his government blamed immigrants for rising unemployment. The previous year, Prime Minister Jacques Chirac had stated: "A country with 900,000 unemployed and 2,000,000 immigrants should be able to solve its unemployment problem".

But if the right-wing government made the bullets, it was the parliamentary 'Left' in power which fired them. For the worst examples of consistent official racism on a truly mass scale in postwar France, we must jump a few years to the 1981-86 popular front coalition government of the Socialist

Mitterrand along with the Communist Party (PCF) and the bourgeois Left Radical Party. It was this "Union of the Left" which instigated the construction of concentration camps for so-called 'illegal immigrants' — whom it began deporting without allowing them the recourse to appeal. Several hundred immigrants were deported. It was this government which began limiting the right of immigrants to family reunions and which began to curtail family allowance payments to immigrants. And it was Mitterrand and Co. who obstructed the process then in place to regularise the status of 'illegals'.

The government of Chirac and Pasqua (1986-88) was more openly racist. But it was only able to get away with so much because of the vile foundations first laid by the previous government. During this period, municipalities controlled by the SP and the PCF eagerly enforced racist housing quotas. The legacy of these disgusting practices is still felt today, through the racist policies of the HLM — a bureau supposedly required by law to provide low-cost housing for those in need. The HLM, however, is quite fussy about whom it helps: you must have lived in a given municipality for 5 years if you are a citizen of metropolitan France, 10 years if you come from a French territory like New Caledonia or 15 years if you fit neither of these categories. It is, of course, completely accidental that the biggest group seeking low-rent accommodation are poverty-stricken North African immigrants, with much less than 15 years residence!

The first 'Round Table' of France's parliamentary parties (excluding only the fascistic Front National — FN), was held on 3 April 1990. The purpose of the Socialist Party (SP) government in convening the meeting was to try to secure the Gaullist opposition parties' agreement with its new immigration policies. A major parliamentary debate on immigration policies was held in the French parliament on 22 May. This was followed by a second Round Table at Matignon, on 29 May 1990.

Before agreeing to attend the second Round Table, the Gaullists sought assurances from the Socialist Prime Minister Rocard, that his party's proposal to extend immigrants' voting rights would be shelved. Rocard accepted.

At the second Round Table, President Mitterrand put forward a list of 20 or so propositions — his "Minimum Charter". These proposals included very strict controls on visas and further immigration of Asians and other third world people such as North African Arabs. The government also proposed the abolition of the right to work of refugees seeking asylum and to cut drastically the number of immigrants granted asylum in the future.

At the 22 May parliamentary debate, the government revealed that 250 new government jobs would be created, to enforce tougher immigration laws. The new positions would mostly be extra police and border guards. PM Rocard said during this debate that "France is not a country of immigration". After painting a lurid picture of teeming masses of third world refugees just waiting to descend upon a poor overcrowded France, he continued that the country was "no longer able" to receive large numbers of immigrants.

Just before the second Round Table, Jean-Jack Queranne, a leading member of the SP, commented that, despite their policy differences, the Socialist Party "did not seek a rift" with the Opposition over immigration policy. Mitterrand declared that "the threshold of tolerance has been reached". And, speaking on television in early December 1989, Mitterrand declared that immigrants were "too numerous"; one could "tolerate" the foreign workers, but only on the condition that they weren't too numerous. But he wants to deport 'illegal' immigrants, whom he has accused of being a threat to French institutions. Yet Mitterrand has also admitted that the level of immigration was proportionally unchanged since 1931.

The Socialist Party tried very hard to lure the right-wing Opposition into sharing responsibility for the new immigration policies, but the rightists were too clever for this. After succeeding marvellously in pulling the Socialists ever further to the right over immigration, the Opposition parties simply refused to abide by any form of bipartisanship.

At the end of March 1991, PM Rocard released the 400 page report of the National Commission of the Rights of Man, "on the struggle against racism and xenophobia". The report admitted that racism occurs to some extent "in all levels of social life", and in all parts of the country. It stated that racist threats had increased sharply since 1982. According to the Commission's very conservative statistics, racist threats in the form of graffiti or pamphlets alone had risen from 77 to 237 incidents each year. During 1989, it stated, 1 person was killed and 30 others injured in racist attacks. The attacks were overwhelmingly directed against North African Arabs.

The Commission placed the blame for the dramatic rise in racism on the so-called "vectors of racism": the Front National (FN), skinheads and other elements of the far right. But it's clear that the government is just trying to shift responsibility for its own crimes.

The Front National is growing steadily: it now gets as much as 15% of the vote nationally. Founded in 1972, it was winning only 1% of the national vote by 1982. Its support jumped to 10.95% (2.2 million votes) in elections for the European Parliament in 1984. In the 1986 parliamentary elections, the Front won 9.65% (2.7 million votes), gaining 35 seats in the electoral system then operating. Then, in the first round of the 1988 Presidential elections, it picked up 14.5% (close to 4.3 million votes). Public opinion polls give the FN's leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, between 15.5% and 17% of the vote. For some time it has been able to win as much as 25% to 30% of the vote in by-elections and local elections.

In the wake of the 'affair of the veil', the Front scored two sensational victories in elections, by trading on racist hysteria generated by the government's own racist attack. The Front regularly comes in second when the votes are counted in elections for the most trendy upper middle class Parisian electorates, in the seventh, eighth and sixteenth *arrondissements*. FN members sit on regional and municipal councils, as well as in the national parliament. The Front has a women's organisation (the Cercle National des Femmes d'Europe) and a growing youth organisation (the Front National de la Jeunesse) of leather-jacketed toughs. It is the biggest ultra-right racist

organisation in Europe.

The Front picks up the support of not just traditional mainstream right-wing parties, both large and small, but even of a section of the working class which formerly voted solidly for the PCF. With the decay of that party, (due both to its capitulation to the bourgeoisie's austerity drive and the collapse of Stalinism internationally), some of these workers have swung behind the Front. Even as early as 1983, the Front won 11.3% of the vote in the working class twentieth *arrondissement* of Paris. A number of private sector workers who traditionally voted PCF have now swung behind the FN electorally, due to alarm at their lack of job security. At Marseille, the FN has even succeeded in creating a group among dock workers. This tragic development is the direct result of decades of preaching to these workers by the bureaucrats of the merits of the French military apparatus, and of strike-breaking by these same bureaucrats.

This is alarming in the extreme, but should hardly surprise us; after all, the Socialist Party and the PCF opened the doors to racism in the workers' movement. (The racist hell-hole of Sartrouville — a Parisian suburb — is a case in point; the current arch-racist Mayor there was preceded by a PCF Mayor!) In fact, there is less and less difference on paper between the immigration policies of not only the SP, the PCF and the Gaullist parties, but even the Front National itself. For, whatever it might aim for privately, the Front merely states what the others really want to say. Thus, a 1985 FN election manifesto defined its immigration policy as follows: to give employment priorities to French nationals, to expel immigrants who were convicted of crimes or who lost their jobs, to refuse welfare benefits to immigrants and to deny automatic French nationality to those from France's former colonies.

And, while capitulating to racism, the mainstream labour movement organisations also resolutely oppose class struggle to combat and remove the causes of the economic crisis — capitalism itself. Some 10% of workers are unemployed, many industrial regions are ruined, many farmers have gone to the wall, and a large-scale rural exodus has begun. The social effects of this economic dislocation are already terrible: youth delinquency rates have risen sharply and observers of French politics are talking about the appearance of a "new poor".

France is clearly in a deepening crisis, and none of the mainstream labour movement organisations can provide a solution.

Obviously, a solution must be found. For that to occur, however, a new leadership must be assembled, both in France and internationally. An indispensable part of the forging of such a leadership is the regeneration of authentic communist praxis. This pamphlet is a contribution towards this burning task.

## Religion, the Veil and the Workers' Movement

The 'affair of the veil' which began at Creil split the Cabinet of the ruling Socialist Party, as the issue blossomed from a local dispute into a national issue. All sectors of French political life took sides. Both camps claimed that fundamental rights and principles were at stake. Those opposing the headmaster of Creil said that girl students have the right to make their own choice — and that to impose restrictions is to attack religious freedom. Those supporting the headmaster pointed out that Islamic veiling is itself a restriction on women's liberty. They agreed with the Creil headmaster that veiling is an attack upon the secularist principles established in the French Revolution, separating church and state. Banning the veil was thus a blow against religious intolerance and for women's emancipation.

Lutte Ouvrière (LO), one of the larger French organisations claiming to be 'Trotskyist', came out forcefully on the side of the headmaster of Creil. (LO's position was spelled out in the 27 October and 4 November 1989 editions of its newspaper *Lutte Ouvrière*. Excerpts from these articles cited here utilise translations which appeared in the 4 December 1989 issue of *The Spark*, a fortnightly paper published by LO's U.S. sympathising group.)

The veil, LO argues, "is the mark of the slavery of women". LO pours scorn on the very idea of young women having any "right" to wear the veil to public schools, writing: "It begins with the wearing of the veil at 12 years of age, and finishes with a woman having her whole life wasted. It is an offence to the dignity of women, and to their liberty." The fight to prohibit the veil is the struggle "against religious prejudice in all its denominations, whose aim is to put women back into servitude and slavery".

LO adds warns ominously that the entry of the veil into government schools is just the thin edge of the wedge. It means the advance of opposition to "human progress and enlightenment. It can end up with atheist and materialist ideas no longer having a place in public schools". And a victory for the veil in France adds further to the burden of women in all Islamic countries.

Lutte Ouvrière therefore argues that girl students at French public schools must be prohibited by the French state from wearing the veil to school.

We have a very different viewpoint. As proletarian communists — authentic Trotskyists — we are philosophical materialists. That is, we believe that it is not God who determines the fate of humans, but humans themselves, through our own efforts. We agree with Marx that religion is simultaneously a dangerous, diversionary mystification of reality (the 'opium of the people') and also the 'sigh of the oppressed' — that is, a stifled cry against oppression.

We also accept Lenin's advice to tread carefully with anti-religious

propaganda — while not for one moment hiding our atheistic materialism. Lenin's general approach to this delicate question still remains a beacon of communist thinking and a guide to revolutionary practice. This is not because Lenin drew up this framework, basing himself upon Marx and Engels (for *that* would be to degrade Marxist science into a religion!), but because Lenin's framework on the question sensibly and scientifically addresses all the principal problems. An examination of Lenin's thinking on this question is therefore useful at this point in the discussion. We can then return to the present day debate in France and consider what the attitude of Marxists to this should be.

### LENIN

Interestingly, Lenin's first comment upon religion that exists in English translation is a passionate defence of religious freedom. A 1903 Article addressed to Russia's rural poor states that Marxists "demand that everybody shall have full and unrestricted right to profess any religion he wants." Lenin denounced the laws in Russia and Turkey ("the disgraceful police persecution of religion") discriminating in favour of particular religions (Orthodox Christianity and Islam respectively) as particularly shameful. All these laws are as unjust, as arbitrary and disgraceful as can be. Everyone must be perfectly free, not only to profess whatever religion they please, *but also to spread or change their religion*.

Lenin's ideas on many aspects of revolutionary politics changed over time, but his understanding of the theoretical and practical issues at stake for the proletariat and its party was arguably something which underwent the least variation. This becomes apparent if Lenin's first major statement on this question — a 1905 article "Socialism and Religion" — is compared to his later writings on this issue.

"Socialism and Religion" set the essential framework for the Bolsheviks' attitude towards religion. The article summarised in a popular style conclusions already reached by Marx and Engels on religion — that 'religion is the opium of the people' (or "a sort of spiritual booze", as Lenin put it), which "exhorts working people to suffer exploitation"

**in the hope of heavenly reward. But those who live by the labour of others are taught by religion to practise charity while on earth, thus offering them a very cheap way of justifying their entire existence as exploiters and selling them at a moderate price tickets to well-being in heaven.**

The proletariat, Lenin confidently predicted, would fuse its struggle with modern science, break through "the fog of religion" and successfully "fight in the present for a better life on earth".

Lenin argued for religion to be a private affair, as far as the state was concerned. That is, he said that communists demand that the state be absolutely independent of any religious affiliations and should materially contribute to no religious organisation's expenses. At the same time, discrimination must be outlawed against any religion and all citizens "must be free to profess any religion" or, for that matter, "no religion whatever".

As far as the Marxist party was concerned, however, religion was never

a private affair:

Our Party is an association of class conscious, advanced fighters for the emancipation of the working class. Such an association cannot and must not be indifferent to lack of class consciousness, ignorance or obscurantism in the shape of religious beliefs. We demand complete disestablishment of the Church so as to be able to combat the religious fog with purely ideological and solely ideological weapons, by means of our press and by word of mouth. . . . And to us the ideological struggle is not a private affair, but the affair of the whole Party, of the whole proletariat.

Lenin added, however, that religion could not be overcome simply through empty, abstract propaganda.

It would be bourgeois narrow-mindedness to forget that the yoke of religion . . . is merely a product and reflection of the economic yoke within society. No amount of pamphlets and no amount of preaching can enlighten the proletariat, if it is not enlightened by its own struggle against the dark forces of capitalism. Unity in this really revolutionary struggle of the oppressed class for the creation of a paradise on earth is more important to us than unity of proletarian opinion on paradise in heaven.

Communists, wrote Lenin, were adamantly opposed to any "stirring up of secondary differences" over religious questions, which could be utilised by reactionaries to split the proletariat. The true source of "religious humbugging", after all, was economic slavery.

The same themes were restated at greater length during 1909, in an essay entitled "The Attitude of the Workers' Party to Religion".

The philosophical basis of Marxism, as Marx and Engels repeatedly declared, is dialectical materialism . . . a materialism which is absolutely atheistic and positively hostile to all religion. . . . Religion is the opium of the people [Lenin is here citing Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right*] — this dictate by Marx is the cornerstone of the whole Marxist outlook on religion. Marxism has always regarded all modern religions and churches, and each and every religious organisation, as instruments of bourgeois reaction that serve to defend exploitation and to befuddle the working class.

At the same time, Engels frequently condemned the efforts of people who desired to be "more left" or "more revolutionary" than the Social Democrats, to introduce into the program of the workers' party an explicit proclamation of atheism, in the sense of declaring war on religion.

Engels condemned the Blanquists' war on religion, says Lenin, as the best way to revive interest in religion and to prevent it from really dying out. Engels blamed the Blanquists for being unable to understand that only the class struggle of the working masses could, by comprehensively drawing the widest strata of the proletariat into conscious and revolutionary social practice, really free the oppressed masses from the yoke of religion, whereas to proclaim that war on religion was a political task of the workers' party was just anarchistic phrase-mongering.

The same warning was made in Engels's *Anti-Dühring*, and with relation to Bismark's war on religion:

By this struggle Bismark *only stimulated* the militant clericalism of the Catholics and only injured the work of real culture, because he gave prominence to religious divisions rather than political divisions, and diverted the attention of some sections of the working class and of the other democratic elements away from the urgent tasks of the class and revolutionary struggle to the most superficial and false bourgeois anti-clericalism. Accusing the would-be ultra-revolutionary Dühring of wanting to repeat Bismark's folly in another form, Engels insisted that the workers' party should have the ability to work patiently at the task of organising and educating the proletariat, which would lead to the dying out of religion, and not throw itself into the gamble of a political war on religion. . . . Engels . . . deliberately underlined, that Social Democrats [all Marxists called themselves Social Democrats at this time] regard religion as a private matter *in relation to the state*, but not in relation to themselves, not in relation to Marxism, and not in relation to the workers' party.

This flexible but principled attitude towards religion by Marx, Engels and Lenin has been attacked by "anarchist phrasemongers" (Lenin's expression) who failed to grasp that the Marxist attitude on this question is quite consistent. Lenin explains:

It would be a profound mistake to think that the seeming 'moderation' of Marxism in regard to religion is due to supposed 'tactical' considerations, the desire 'not to scare away' anybody, and so forth. On the contrary, in this question too the political line of Marxism is inseparably bound up with its philosophical principles.

Marxism is materialism. . . . We must combat religion — that is the ABC of all materialism, and consequently of Marxism. But Marxism is not a materialism which has stopped at the ABC. Marxism goes further. It says: We must *know how* to combat religion, and in order to do so we must explain the source of faith and religion among the masses *in a materialist way*. The combating of religion cannot be confined to abstract ideological preaching, and it must not be reduced to such preaching. It must be linked up with the concrete practice of the class movement, which aims at eliminating the social roots of religion.

According to "the bourgeois progressist, the radical and the bourgeois atheist", says Lenin, religion maintains its hold due to "the ignorance of the people".

The Marxist says that this is not true, that it is a superficial view, the view of narrow bourgeois uplifters. It does not explain the roots of religion profoundly enough; it explains them, not in a materialist but in an idealist way. In modern capitalist countries these roots are mainly social. The deepest root of religion today is the socially downtrodden condition of the working masses and their apparently complete helplessness in face of the blind forces of capitalism, which every day and every hour inflicts upon ordinary working people the most horrible suffering and the most savage torment, a thousand times more severe than those inflicted by extraordinary events, such as wars, earthquakes, etc.

'Fear made the gods'. Fear of the blind force of capital — blind because it cannot be foreseen by the masses of the people — a force which at every step in the life of the proletarian and small proprietor threatens to inflict, and does inflict 'sudden', 'unexpected', 'accidental' ruin, destruction, pauperism, prostitution, death from starvation — such is the *root* of modern religion which the materialist must bear in mind first and foremost, if he does not want to remain an infant-school materialist. No educational book can eradicate religion from the minds of masses who are crushed by capitalist hard labour, and who are at the mercy of the blind destructive forces of capitalism, until those masses themselves learn to fight this *root* of religion, fight the *rule of capital* in all its forms, in a united, organised, planned and conscious way.

Does this mean that educational books against religion are harmful or unnecessary? No, nothing of the kind. It means that Social Democracy's atheist propaganda must be *subordinated* to its basic task — the development of the class struggle of the exploited masses against the exploiters.

Lenin insisted that this can only be understood in practice dialectically. Otherwise atheist propaganda can even be harmful in certain circumstances. (He gives the example of a labour strike led by a Catholic trade union. In this instance, the Marxist must "place the success of the strike above everything", vigorously opposing any division of workers "into atheists and Christians", since it is the "progress of the class struggle" which "will convert Christian workers to Social Democracy and to atheism a hundred times better than bald atheist propaganda"):

A Marxist must be a materialist, i.e., an enemy of religion, but a dialectical materialist, i.e., one who treats the struggle against religion not in an abstract way, not on the basis of remote, purely theoretical, never varying preaching, but in a concrete way, on the basis of the class struggle which is going on *in practice* and is educating the masses more and better than anything else could. A Marxist must be able to view the concrete situation as a whole, he must always be able to find the boundary between anarchism and opportunism (this boundary is relative and changeable, but it exists).

And he must not submit either to the abstract, verbal, but in reality empty 'revolutionism' of the anarchist, or to the philistinism and opportunism of the petty bourgeois or liberal intellectual, who boggles at the struggle against religion, forgets that this is his duty, reconciles himself to belief in God, and is guided not by the interests of the class struggle but by the petty and mean consideration of offending nobody, repelling nobody and scaring nobody — by the sage rule: 'live and let live', etc., etc.

Lenin continually warned against the dangers of petty bourgeois impatience in combating religious prejudices. Thus, in a speech to the First All-Russia Congress of Working Women, in November 1918, he noted the young Soviet republic's astonishing success in pushing back women's oppression in the more urbanised areas, but added a warning:

For the first time in history, our law has removed everything that denied women's rights. But the important thing is not the law. In the cities and

industrial areas this law on complete freedom of marriage is doing all right, but in the countryside, it all too frequently remains a dead letter. There the religious marriage still predominates. This is due to the influence of the priests, an evil that is harder to combat than the old legislation.

We must be extremely careful in fighting religious prejudices; some people cause a lot of harm in this struggle by offending religious feelings. We must use propaganda and education. By lending too sharp an edge to the struggle we may only arouse popular resentment; such methods of struggle tend to perpetuate the division of the people along religious lines, whereas our strength lies in unity. The deepest source of religious prejudice is poverty and ignorance; and that is the evil we have to combat.

In drafting the Russian Communist Party's Program to following year, Lenin repeated the traditional call for the complete separation of Church and State and continued to warn against "hurting the religious sentiments of believers, for this only serves to increase religious fanaticism".

Then, two years later at a meeting of non-Bolshevik delegates to the Ninth All-Russia Congress of Soviets", when Kalinin remarked ironically that Lenin might issue an order to "burn all the prayer books", Lenin hastened to clarify the situation, stressing that he "never suggested such a thing and never could. You know that according to our Constitution, the fundamental law of our Republic, freedom of conscience in respect of religion is fully guaranteed to every person".

Earlier in 1921, Lenin wrote to Molotov criticising slogans such as "*expose the falsehood of religion*" in a circular regarding May Day. "This is not right. It is tactless" wrote Lenin, underlining again the need "*absolutely to avoid the affront to religion*". In fact, Lenin felt so strongly about this issue that he demanded an additional circular, correcting the previous one. If the Secretariat could not agree with this, then he proposed to take up the matter in the Politbureau. (The Central Committee subsequently published a letter in *Pravda* on 21 April 1921, urging that in celebrating Mayday "nothing should be done or said to offend the religious feelings of the mass of the population".)

Lenin's views on socialism and religion are quite clear cut. On the basis of the above outline, (and extrapolating a bit to take into account the philosophical views of Marx and Engels) Lenin's attitude on the religion question can be summarised in the following nine theses:

1. Religion is a form of oppression in class society — a means of bamboozling the masses into accepting their oppression.

2. Religion exists and flourishes in specific material conditions — what Lenin referred to as "economic slavery". In today's world this means "fear of the blind force of capital" — in which capitalism's economic catastrophes thrust the working masses repeatedly and abruptly into "pauperism, prostitution, death from starvation".

3. The forms of religion (e.g., Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) vary enormously. But all religion, while unquestionably a *diversion* from real human liberation, functions as a diversion precisely



because it is a *comfort* in conditions of adversity. It appears to provide hope for a better life (albeit after death). And this hope of liberation ("salvation") in the hereafter even enables the illusion to develop that suffering here and now is not in vain, since suffering will be generously rewarded in Paradise, provided the believer submits to God. In the callous, cold, inhuman capitalist world of today, governed by the imperative for a handful of capitalists to constantly accumulate capital, religion also provides the oppressed with a means of apparent partial release from their bondage; religion affirms that each person is indeed precious in the eyes of his or her divine creator.

4. For anarchists, "narrow bourgeois uplifters" and impatient middle class radicals, the hold of religion on the masses is due to the latter's ignorance. Marxists, in contrast, understand that the material roots of religion are very deep and real in modern capitalism. Religion cannot therefore be overcome merely (or even primarily) by propaganda. Communists *must* make anti-religious propaganda, but this must always be subordinate to practical proletarian unity in the class struggle: the anti-religious preaching "must be linked up with the the concrete practice of the class movement, which aims at eliminating its social roots of religion". This is the only *materialist* strategy of uprooting religion.

5. Attempts to solve the problem by declaring a political 'war upon religion', engaging in tactless affronts to religion, or by supporting measures aimed at restricting religious observance ignore religion's real, material, roots. Such behaviour is folly, from a proletarian viewpoint, since it exacerbates religious divisions within the proletariat and pushes working people into the arms of religious fanatics.

6. Communists support full freedom of religious belief and observance. All laws discriminating either for or against particular religious sects are unjust, anti-democratic and must be repealed. Everyone must be equally free in law to believe — or not believe — any religious views. Communists therefore demand that religion is a private matter as far as the state is concerned. This means that the state must forswear all religious discrimination and any affiliations or material links with religion.

7. Communists remain ideological and political opponents of religion. The communist party is, in Lenin's words, "an association of class conscious, advanced fighters for the emancipation of the working class. Such an association cannot and must not be indifferent to lack of class consciousness, ignorance or obscurantism in the shape of religious beliefs. We demand complete disestablishment of the Church so as to be able to combat the religious fog with purely ideological and solely ideological weapons, by means of our press and by word of mouth. . . . And to us the ideological struggle is not a private affair, but the affair of the whole Party, of the whole proletariat".

8. In their battle against popular religious prejudices, the communists must be not only materialists — believing and acting on the fundamental standpoint that it is *humans* who make their own history and can thus liberate themselves through their own conscious activity — but also *dialectical* materialists. That is, Marxists must proceed on the basis of the *situation as*

*a whole*, being acutely aware of all the crucial interactions between the respective political component parts. This implies linking anti-religious propaganda in a concrete way to the actually existing class struggle, instead of an abstract, purely ideological battle against religion. Only with the victory of the proletarian class movement can the social roots of religious prejudice in capitalist exploitation begin to be severed. Religion cannot be 'abolished' — the working masses must *outgrow* it, on the basis of their own experiences. Communists will therefore avoid any measures (such as reviling religious practices) which inflame religious feelings for no good purpose. A principled communist practice on the question of religion will always seek to begin from the concrete situation as a whole. This will mean flexible tactics, to adjust to changing realities. But, as Lenin explained, the Marxist "must always be able to find the boundary between anarchism and opportunism (this boundary is relative and changeable, but it exists)".

9. The slogan of complete separation between church and state is a bourgeois democratic demand. However only the proletariat and its party can achieve this fully, due to the countless ties between the religious establishment and capitalism. We remain confident that the proletariat will fuse its struggle with modern science, break through 'the fog of religion' and successfully 'fight in the present for a better life on earth'.

#### LUTTE OUVRIERE

Under the pretext of defending the separation of church and state and opposing religion, Lutte Ouvrière departs radically from the Leninist policy on religion. It is not not enough to be 'anti-religion'; if one does not know how to oppose religion, one can do positive harm. This is very much the case in the instance of the recent controversy over Islamic veiling in France.

It is instructive that LO makes little effort to separate its position from that of the openly pro-bourgeois secularists, such as the headmaster of Creil and his supporters in the Socialist Party. In fact, LO seems to take great pains to underline its more or less unqualified support for the stand taken by this man. (LO's only criticism of the man is that some of his arguments — about the supposed neutrality of French public schools — "were not always convincing".) For the headmaster, LO says, "was right".

We believe that this is an outrageous position to be taken by an organisation claiming to stand on the revolutionary heritage of Lenin and Trotsky, for several reasons.

LO's position parallels that of the 'bourgeois uplifters' and middle class radicals chastised by Lenin. It is an elitist, bureaucratic attempt to impose the cessation of religious practices, irrespective of the wishes of the people involved. Such tactics are no substitute for a policy of combining sound, carefully thought out and sensitively formulated propaganda against religion with the concrete class struggle. Or, perhaps we can say that LO *does* combine propaganda of a sort with the concrete class struggle — but on the wrong side of the barricades.

It is easy to sound 'left' when attacking the veil. And it is true that the veil is a source of oppression for Islamic women. But if campaigns against

the veil are waged without due regard for whom one is uniting with and what the dynamic of this movement is, the results can be disastrous. This is exactly what LO's stand on the recent French controversy has resulted in. LO joined hands with the bourgeois secularists in France — only to find itself in a cesspool of racism and chauvinism.

France has a long and ugly record of colonial and imperialist exploitation in Arabic North Africa. This has spawned an equally vile tradition of racism towards African Muslims — especially those compelled to migrate (legally or illegally) to France due to the imperialist pillage of their own countries.

All sections of mainstream politics in France have participated in the dirty game of baiting North African Arabs in France. In the early 1980s, the large and very influential Communist Party (PCF) led racist demonstrations to physically attack districts in which North African Arabs and other African immigrants lived. In the most outrageous of these incidents, in 1983 a Parisian PCF mayor personally drove a bulldozer into a building for immigrant workers from Mali. The PCF supported the French state against Algeria, when the latter was fighting for its independence. Today, the PCF opposes all new immigration, and approves of the government's witchhunt of so-called 'illegal' *sans papiers* immigrants. More recently, the Socialist Party has been enforcing a tough immigration policy. It is not surprising therefore, that the headmaster of Creil sparked a national outpouring of racism and chauvinism. From the mainstream right wing (newspapers like the daily *Le Figaro*) through to the extreme racist Front National, the headmaster's stand gave new opportunities to spew out their filth. *Le Figaro* complained that the schoolgirls were dupes of the Lebanese *Hezbollah*.

The Front National scored two sensational by-election victories. In both constituencies they used the issue of the veil to curry support for their racist message of repatriating all Arab immigrants. Marie-France Stirbois, one of the successful candidates asserted that "a climate of fear" was reigning in rural France because of illegal immigration. Then, in an unprecedented move, hundreds of works of art, and manuscripts and books on Islamic culture and civilisation were destroyed by government officials at the Cultural Centre Library in Paris.

LO's reply to this, of course, is that its campaign was directed against the Islamic religious leaders, who pressure girls to wear veils. This is ridiculous, however. Firstly, it does not explain how a supposed 'Trotskyist' organisation could choose to ignore the predictable reactionary outcome of such a campaign against the veil. Actually, LO is quite aware of the dangerous ramifications of its policy. Writing in the June 1990 edition of *Lutte de Classe*, its international journal, LO described France today as as having

**a climate strongly tainted with racism, in which virtually every individual of North African [Arab] appearance or black skin is seen as an immigrant, and virtually every immigrant is seen as an illegal immigrant deserving of the rigours of the law, the police and, (why not?) public opinion. Le Pen, with his open racism, had only to reap the benefits of this insidious propaganda, at the same time enjoying the luxury of appearing**

**less devious than the phony anti-racists of the Left in government.**

What a ringing criticism of the failure of 'official' anti-racism! And what a pity that LO does not itself heed it!

Lutte Ouvrière's policy is also nonsense, because it assumes that by attempting to force the unveiling of young Muslim women a blow for progress can be struck. As Lenin warned, however, such an abstract "war against religion", while sounding very 'left' usually only inflames religious passions. If there had been no bans on Islamic veiling in the first place, there would have been no demonstrations in support of veiling. The beurs in France have never before been known for their religious fervour; attacks upon them in the name of 'fighting religion' have been one of the main reasons pushing them towards the fundamentalists.

Irrespective of their individual politics, Muslim people frequently have an acute sense of having being imperialised by the West. This is particularly so when (as in France) they must face daily abuse and vilification, as well as degrading living and working conditions. In the absence of a viable proletarian leadership, these material conditions can easily push many Islamic people back towards religion, especially when material and political oppression intensifies. An attack upon their religious beliefs and practices by the French state therefore must appear to many of them as yet another example of imperialist aggression. As a result, they frequently find themselves being pushed deeper into the arms of the Islamic fundamentalists, whose simplistic and reactionary explanations at least have the apparent virtue to them of seeming to oppose imperialism.

There was an alternative to this monstrous debacle. When the reactionary headmaster of Creil first acted against the Muslim students, LO could have *defended* their right to wear the veil — while explaining that this was a chauvinist attack, part and parcel of all the other attacks upon North African migrants in France. LO has a small but impressive network of cadres and supporters in French industry, offices and schools — it is arguably the ostensible Trotskyist grouping most imbedded in the French proletariat. The group could have used that muscle to mobilise working-class support in the forms of demonstrations and industrial action, in support of the Arab immigrants' democratic rights, and against the racist witch-hunt of immigrants. Instead of turning the Arab workers towards the Islamic fundamentalists, their actions would have then had the *opposite* effect — proving to the North Africans that French-born workers can support their democratic rights.

Lutte Ouvrière's stance is not only criminally opportunist — a capitulation to pressure from racist French imperialism — it is also sectarian, for it cuts off the group from the beurs who want to fight the racists. LO knows that in late 1983 Parisian beurs staged their powerful "march for equality and against racism". They know that the beurs have been at the centre of many militant strike movements in industry. The beurs are obviously an important, super-exploited and potentially very militant part of the French proletariat. Unfortunately, LO's politics only help drive a wedge between French-born and beur workers — over the question of religion — when the same issue could (if tackled sensitively and intelligently) become a means of

unity in action with the beurs.

But wouldn't this have meant lending support to the veil? No! LO would have been intervening on the basis of its own politics. It could have made quite clear what its attitude to religion was. This would have created uneasiness on the part of some of the Arab workers — but many would have been impressed that the group was nevertheless supporting their democratic rights. The upshot would surely have been to create a whole new audience for the group's anti-religious propaganda. And the audience would have been gained without exacerbating the dangerous split on religious grounds in the French proletariat.

This approach would have been an attempt to do what Lenin proposed — to link sensitive and sensible anti-religious propaganda to the class struggle. Of course, that is not what happened. The French bourgeoisie, it seems, need not fear a class struggle campaign from the likes of LO today! In every sense of the word, we can conclude that the campaign against the veil in France recently supported enthusiastically by Lutte Ouvrière has been completely counter-productive; it has had completely the opposite effects to those which were supposed to result. And in every sense it has been a completely reactionary campaign, enabling the fascists and mainstream right alike to build new support for their vile politics.

That a group claiming to be 'Trotskyist' can be implicated in such reactionary politics demonstrates yet again the degree to which the 'Trotskyist movement' has degenerated. It also underlines how urgent is the task of building the nucleus of the authentic revolutionary Trotskyist party in France (in whose ranks more than a few beurs will be found), and of re-creating a viable and genuine Fourth International.

#### USFI: 'OPPORTUNISM IS OUR RELIGION'

Michael Löwy, a leading theoretician of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI), the largest international grouping claiming to be Trotskyist, has suggested a framework for integrating religion into revolutionary strategy. His article, 'Internationalism Today', appears in the Autumn 1988 issue of *International Marxist Review*.

Löwy asserts that a "new internationalist culture" is in the process of formation, replacing the old authoritarian Stalinism. He explains:

This is particularly the case in Latin America, where an internationalist culture is appearing which is drawing inspiration from both the Marxist tradition and Christian socialism linked to liberation theology. The universal humanist dimension (catholic in the original sense of the word) of Christianity fusing with the proletarian internationalism of Marxists has produced a rather unexpected result, provoking a broad echo in the mass of the people.

The USFI, it seems, is going in the opposite direction from Lutte Ouvrière. But wholesale concessions to religion are just as dangerous as sectarian bourgeois secularism. Commenting upon tactics for confronting religion in 1909, Lenin discussed the advisability of the slogan "socialism is a religion." Löwy is not saying exactly that, but the situation is analogous,

as we shall see. Lenin wasn't very happy with the slogan, but conceded that it might be used by a communist agitator when speaking to religious workers. But he absolutely condemned those who used such a slogan as a cover for genuflections to religion.

"For some", said Lenin, "the statement 'socialism is a religion' is a form of transition from religion to socialism; for others [like Lunacharsky's faction in the Bolshevik Party at the time] it is a form of transition *from* socialism to religion". The point is that among Marxists religion is *never* acceptable. Löwy is so keen to jump into the the liberation theologians' camp feet first that he gives them revolutionary credentials. Perhaps the USFI should proclaim a modified form of Lunacharsky's ideology and adopt the slogan 'opportunism is our religion'

We shouldn't be too surprised; for a long time, the USFI has stood closer to liberalism than to revolutionary Marxism. Trotsky warned of the what happened to petty bourgeois liberal intellectuals who tire of a 'Marxist' pose. Writing in 1904, (*Our Political Tasks*), he condemned the liberal ideologues who,

**having passed fleetingly through the school of Marxism and been 'ruined' by it, found themselves obliged to seek out a spiritual refuge in the clouds of idealist metaphysics, and to take up Feuerbach's expression, 'in the asylum of theology'.**

#### SPARTACISTS: 'WAR AGAINST ISLAM'

The Spartacists have a similar approach to the problem of religion in the dependent capitalist countries. These days, this tendency is notorious for its Eurocentric advocacy of 'Western civilisation' and its particularly pathological dislike of Islamic culture and societies. The most vivid example of this, of course, is in Afghanistan, where the Spartacists welcomed the Russian imperialists' invasion as a civilising mission. This tendency's U.S. paper, *Workers Vanguard* (25 January 1980) explained that "Somebody had to clean up Afghanistan and try to drag it toward the 17th century" and added:

Discounting his liberal hauteur, Alexander Cockburn, writing in the *Village Voice* (21 January), caught the flavour of the place: "We all have to go one day, but pray God let it not be over Afghanistan. An unspeakable country filled with unspeakable people, sheepshaggers and smugglers, who have furnished in their leisure hours some of the worst arts and crafts ever to penetrate the occidental world. I yield to none in my sympathy to those prostrate beneath the Russian jackboot, but if ever a country deserved rape its Afghanistan. Nothing but mountains filled with barbarous ethnics with views as medieval as their muskets, and unspeakably cruel, too.

This is far, far more than mere 'liberal hauteur' (arrogance or haughtiness); it's downright racism! But the Spartacists, although always a rather peculiar fake Trotskyist tendency, were not always as rotten as this. Only two and a half years earlier, in their magazine *Women and Revolution* (Summer 1976), they wrote a sensitive, balanced account of Turkic Muslim women in the Soviet Union during the twenties and thirties: "Early Bolshevik Work

Among Women of the Soviet East". This related the patient and sensitive approach of the Bolsheviks to deal with the problem of religion in this extremely economically backward region.

Women organisers for the Bolsheviks' *Zhendotel* — the Department of Working Women and Peasant Women — even donned the *paranja* (an extreme form of Islamic veiling, completely covering the head and face) "in order to meet with Muslim women and explain the new Soviet laws and programs which were to change their lives".

The article notes that the Stalinist degeneration of the Russian revolution strangled *Zhendotel*. Patience and sensitivity were thrown out the window, as frantic campaigns for divorce and against veiling were initiated. In 1927, according to this article,

mass meetings were held at which thousands of frenzied participants, chanting 'Down with the paranja!' tore off their veils, which were drenched in paraffin and burned. . . . Protected by soldiers, bands of poor women roamed the streets, tearing veils off wealthier women, hunting for hidden food and pointing out those who still clung to traditional practices which had now been declared crimes . . . On the following day the price for these impatient, sectarian actions was paid in blood, as hundreds of unveiled women were massacred by their kinsmen, and this reaction, fanned by Muslim clergy, who interpreted recent earthquakes as Allah's punishment for the unveilings, grew in strength. Remnants of the Basmachi [tribal] rebels reorganised themselves into *Tash Kuran* (secret counter-revolutionary organisations) which flourished as a result of their pledge to preserve *Narkh* (local customs and values).

"In 1934, as if to sanction its physical liquidation at the hands of *Tash Kuran* terror", the article concludes, "the Soviet government liquidated *Zhendotel* organisationally, as well".

Some 55 years later, when the same policies as those pursued in Soviet Central Asia in the late twenties reappeared across the border in Afghanistan, reactionary mujahedin guerillas seized upon this to build support for their insurgency. This time, however, the Spartacists backed the Stalinists.

In the 'affair of the veil', this bizarre reactionary sect managed to combine 'defence' of the persecuted Muslim students of Creil with an allegation of the type one usually finds in the hard Right's press (papers like *Le Figaro*). According to the misnamed Ligue Trotskyste de France (the French Spartacist group): "The appearance of the headscarves . . . bears the smell of a provocation on behalf of the Islamic fundamentalist milieu, particularly in the Creil affair". With 'friends' like this, the beurs hardly need any enemies!