Women's liberation, Islam and anti-Muslim racism

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For many, from feminists such as Alice Schwarzer to the Alternative for Germany, it has long been ?proved? that Islam is not like other religions. It is more backward, more oppressive, than Christianity, which supposedly went through a process of ?enlightenment? that made it indisputably part of our ?Western civilization?.

Even though many people recoil from the chauvinist consequences of anti-Muslim prejudice and even more from open racism, the claim that Islam is particularly reactionary and, above all, particularly hostile to women, has had a deep impact on the workers' movement and the radical left.

Were the sexist attacks in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015 not an example of this? Is the lack of democratic rights for women in many Islamic countries not proof of this?

Religion and oppression

In reality, even a brief look at reactionary religious movements, or even governments, around the world, shows that other faiths are no better than Islam in this regard. The Christian churches played an important role in the colonisation and enslavement of whole peoples. Today, they continue to be a cornerstone for dictatorships and are leaders in the fight against the rights of women, gays and lesbians, against contraception and sexual education. In Hindu India, and Christian Brazil, thousands of women are killed each year as a result of sexual or sexist attacks. The sexist Trump considers assaults on women to be a right of (rich) men.

The history of class society shows that neither religion per se, nor any particular religion, produced the oppression of women, but rather that class society itself needed an ideology that justified, and continues to justify, both the exploitation and the oppression of women. With regard to world history on this issue, religions, especially the big ?world religions? are of enormous importance. Differences in religious thought are ultimately a reflection of past, or emerging, changes in their respective societies.

Christianity became a state religion in the ancient Roman Empire and later became the central ideology of feudalism. Protestantism arose with the decline of this mode of production and became the ideology of the emerging bourgeoisie, as evidenced, among other things, by the Reformation and the development of Protestant ethics.

Islam developed in the 7th century with the establishment of a class society which, although with some specific characteristics, was based on the "Asiatic mode of production" and it provided the ideological framework that corresponded to the needs of the official apparatus and a powerful merchant class in tributary urban centres. This brought about a relative improvement in the position of the woman, compared to the prevailing conditions among the patriarchal Arab tribes.

Islam

The rise of Islam meant that ethnic or family background was insignificant for joining the community of believers (Umma). The barbaric treatment of women among the Arab tribes was ended. Women were given rights, the old Arabian law of inheritance was changed, and the number of women that could be married was limited. Mohammed and his successors did not introduce the veiling or seclusion of women, which was already known in Arabia. The same applies to female genital mutilation.
Of course, one cannot say, as some Islamic feminists do, that Islam liberated women. What happened was the establishment and consolidation of a class society. Patriarchy was strengthened by the rules of the Koran but at a higher level of civilisation than that of the tribes. Women were banned from having relationships with more than one man.

On balance, then, Islam is just as hostile to women as all other religions in societies based on exploitation. The objective measure of progress for Marxists is, for example, the degree of involvement of women in the labour market or political and social equality, not religious practices or teachings. The fact that the situation for women in many so-called Islamic countries is often still far worse than in the imperialist centres is not due to their specific religion, as is shown, for example, by looking at Christian countries in the "Third World".

The reason is rather the combination of integration into the capitalist world market and the survival and indeed reproduction of pre-capitalist forms of exploitation and oppression. The ?backwardness? of many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America is an expression of their subordinated and exploited integration into the imperialist world system, which determines their inner development. The use of the term ?Islamic countries? or ?Islamic world? in this context, and in view of the enormous differences between these states, tends to obscure rather than to clarify the understanding of the relationship between imperialism, class struggle and religion.

Increasing importance of religion

If we want to understand the role of Islam, we first need an understanding of the class relations, their inner dynamism, the embedding of these countries in the imperialist world order and the division of labour. No one could overlook the fact that in these countries religion, meaning Islam and not just Islamism, has gained greater importance. The reason for this, however, can obviously not lie in the ?nature? of the people. On the contrary, a decisive factor is disillusionment with the ?West? and the unfulfilled promises of progress from the imperialist powers, especially the USA, which proclaimed the material improvement of all classes and women as a goal after the Second World War and after the Cold War. The Soviet Union attempted to achieve similar geo-strategic interests by promoting left-wing nationalist regimes.

These promises failed because of the harsh reality of capitalist competition. In particular, with the onset of neoliberalism and capitalist globalisation, these countries became more and more a place for speculative investment, the ?opening? of their markets to the multinationals, privatisation of industries and services, which not only exacerbated the exploitation of their working class but also ruined, or threatened with ruin, large parts of the petty bourgeoisie and the ?middle classes?.

At the same time, however, the bourgeois-nationalist, petit-bourgeois nationalist, and Stalinist forces that dominated the left and liberation movements proved politically incapable of developing an effective perspective for resistance. The policy of the great majority of the Iranian left, for example, led to an adaptation to the ?national bourgeoisie? under ?Islamic? leadership and to a historic defeat of the workers' movement. The fall of the Shah did not lead to a social revolution, but ended in the Islamic counter-revolution.

After the end of the Cold War, the crisis of leadership intensified, with the supposedly secular forces of nationalism or Arab socialism cruelly exposed, as can be seen, for example, in the political capitulation of the PLO in Oslo. All this strengthened the political Islamist forces and also the influence of a ?fundamentalist? Islam, Salafism, which demagogically presented itself as the only realistic alternative to the West.

At the same time, bourgeois forces or military dictatorships also increasingly relied on religion as the ideological justification for their rule. Material improvements for the masses became increasingly difficult in the period of neoliberalism and especially since the great crisis of 2007/8, which produced increased impoverishment and mass unemployment as well as the destruction of entire states such as Iraq as a result of imperialist invasions and occupations. Religion served as a consolation in an ever more desolate world. This, of course, strengthened the conservative religious authorities at both local and national levels.

It also showed, however, that the basic function of the dominant religion in the ?Islamic states? was to stabilise the
system of governance. It did this, firstly, by explaining to the great mass of workers and, above all, the rural population, that, no matter how wretched their life might be, it had to be accepted. At most, they could hope to find a benefactor, a just capitalist or landlord. The brutal class struggle against their rule, however, would be illegitimate.

Secondly, it has to be understood that this function does not flow simply from religious convictions. In Islamic societies, the preachers and Imams are naturally closely tied in with the ruling class who provide them with benefits and privileges and whose ideological advocates they are. In this respect, their position does not differ greatly from that of priests, pastors, popes and evangelical preachers in the Christian countries.

Thirdly, religion also serves to legitimise not only capitalist exploitation but also the oppressive relationships that go with it. That is particularly true with regard to the position of women. This varies a great deal in the different countries and for different classes. It can stretch from the complete denial of rights, as in countries like Saudi Arabia, or under the rule of the Taliban, to a formal equality in Islamic countries with a relatively secular constitution. That is not the same as the real, living relationships, however, not least because the differing forms of women's oppression are not simply created by Islam but are, rather, legitimised by it or, in some places, contradict it, as is the case in Pakistan with its caste system.

Classes and religious consciousness
The above analysis reveals the social and political roots of the strengthening of Islamist forces. However, the attempt to pursue a stricter "Islamisation" is by no means merely a sign of the strength of reaction. It is also a response to internal disintegration, to a deepening of the class divisions within these societies, which, as with the Arab Spring, can surprisingly also lead to revolutionary shocks and insurrections.

The servile morality of the rulers, whether in the form of a religious or a secular ethic, is often invoked precisely when real living conditions more and more blatantly contradict the aspirations of morality. Justice, equality, honesty and so on are preached to the poor, when they are increasingly openly trampled upon in daily life and above all in the world of work. It is therefore no wonder that, in the Islamic countries, the attitude of the different classes to religion varies a great deal.

The ruling class often has a particularly cynical relationship with religion. Its members have long adopted Western lifestyles. They often live separated from the normal population and in enormous luxury. The women of the ruling class do not have to work, their daughters often behave like their counterparts from good homes in the West. Their religiosity is, above all, a facade for the people. While they may mock and reject religious zealotry and rules for themselves, they recognise their value for the immature and backward population, who do not need to know any more than is necessary to fulfil their function as hardworking peasants or wage slaves.

It is no accident that religiosity finds its most fertile breeding ground among the middle classes and in the countryside. Here, too, hypocrisy is of course widespread. As we know from Catholic boarding schools, the guardians, educators and priests teach obedience not only to God, but also to his representatives on earth. This hypocrisy is, of course, also to be found among the religious dignitaries of Islam.

Often, women and girls in rural areas are particularly brutally oppressed because of the enormous power of traditional elites. The poorest, especially women and girls, are largely denied access to education and public life. Infrastructure and medical care are generally much worse than in the cities. Finally, often enough there are forms of servitude that are exploitative. The position of peasants and workers, men and women, is similar to that of slaves or bonded labourers, and this is extended into the enslavement of women within the family. This is combined with the reproduction of pre-capitalist social structures, where tribal leaders, the head of the family and traditional elites are still firmly in the saddle. Their power is legitimised religiously and traditionally, not in order to revive a past class society, but to establish particularly ruthless forms of exploitation in production for the capitalist market.

The urban and rural higher bourgeoisie, as well as parts of the middle classes, are often a second, central social carrier of Islamic ideology. For these classes, unlike the peasantry and working class, it is at least possible to live an
"Islamic way of life", including gender segregation and restriction of women from gainful employment.

At the same time, the crises of capitalism threaten the position of these strata; they fear their decline. One the one hand, they blame big capital and the urban and global elites for this but, on the other, also the democratic movements and national and religious minorities, especially other Islamic currents. For them, the workers' movement and the women's movement are ultimately hostile, even though there are numerous attempts to build Muslim trade unions or women's organisations, a certain analogy with Christian unions and the Christian ?women's movement?.

It is no accident that the working class is often less influenced by religious thought. In the first place, over-exploitation of the class as a whole, forces women to work for wages. This applies in particular to those countries which cannot base their wealth on the sale of mineral resources and are therefore not in a position to feed large numbers of citizens and, above all, to employ migrant workers to do all the necessary work, as with the Petro Monarchies of the Gulf.

In countries such as Egypt, Pakistan and Indonesia, there are huge working classes, numbering millions. In Pakistan, about 20 percent of the 65 million waged workers are women, while in Egypt about one third of the working population is employed in the industrial sector and in Indonesia almost half. Very many women work in the industrial centres of these countries and women played a very active role in the Egyptian independent trade union movement and also in the fall of Mubarak.

The fact that women are forced to sell their labour power as a commodity means that, for the working class, religious prescriptions become an enormous moral and material burden, and stand in open contradiction to their actual lives. In addition, their exploiters turn religion as a moral weapon against women, and the class as a whole. Finally, the beginnings of organisation give women a way to lift themselves out of their virtually enslaved position, which, by the way, also applies to self-defence forces like the Kurdish militia.

It would be naive to think that women, or working class men, cease to be Muslims when they take the path of the struggle. Nonetheless, they do alter their relationship to the state and religious authorities, and this is exacerbated by the fact that these generally take a stand against women who oppose exploitation and oppression.

Of course, there are also battles against oppression, imperialism or occupation, in which religious or even Islamic currents can play a leading role. These, however, constitute the exception, just as the Christian ?liberation theology? stood in sharp contrast to the official Catholic Church and always remained a minority current. Secondly, the fact that organisations such as Hamas have become a leading force in the struggle of the Palestinians against Zionism and imperialism does not alter the fact that their social goals remain reactionary and pro-capitalist, which also leads them to restrict women to their ?traditional? or ?natural? gender roles in the liberation struggle itself.

Fight against women's oppression and imperialism
In the so-called "Islamic countries", that is the states that are dominated by imperialism and in which Islam is the majority faith, the fight for women's liberation is closely linked to that against deprivation and oppression, which are legitimised by religion. In essence, however, this is not a ?religious? struggle, but a struggle for democratic and social rights.

These include a number of democratic demands, such as the formal, legal equality of women as citizens, in court, in divorces and so on, the right to freedom of movement, equal guaranteed and free access to education and training, the abolition of gender segregation, the creation of gender equality and provision of women's shelters to protect them from domestic violence. Revolutionaries advocate the separation of state and religion, the abolition of every theocratic form of government and all privileges of religious communities.

At the same time, there is the social question in the countryside. The liberation of women is unthinkable in many countries without a programme of agrarian revolution, the expropriation of landed property and the abolition of bonded labour. Such a struggle must be based mainly on the agricultural workers, day labourers and small peasants.

After all, the fight for the rights of women workers is decisive for the common struggle of the whole working class.
Women must first of all have access to all areas of professional activity, and unregulated, temporary, “unofficial?” working conditions must be abolished. In most countries, a minimum wage that covers the cost of living would be a unifying demand for men and women. Added to this is the demand for paid leave, sick pay and pensions.

The precondition for this, however, is the opening of the workers’ movement to women and its support for their struggles for democratic rights, against sexism and attacks. At the same time, this would also be the starting point for a working class women’s movement, which could also give the oppressed women from the middle classes and the peasantry a way forward.

The struggle for the right of self-defence is necessary against attacks by Islamic or other anti-women forces whose most reactionary manifestations include forms of clerical fascism. There should be no reliance on the state, the need for self-defence units of the working class and the peasantry must be argued and, wherever possible, put into practice.

Finally, such a movement is inconceivable without women fighting male chauvinism and patriarchal structures in the workers’ movement. These are widespread even among non-religious men. Therefore, women must have the right to hold separate, independent meetings of their own in the trade unions and political organisations of the working class.

The ties that bind women, and men, to the ruling class via the medium of the religious authorities can only really be put in question on the basis of the class struggle. Many women (and men) will enter the battle without having already broken from their faith. To demand this, or make it a precondition for joint action would be doctrinaire and ultimatist and would only play into the hands of the religious authorities and the capitalists and landowners standing behind them, who should be fought.

Also, a revolutionary party will accept people with religious convictions if they are prepared to accept the political programme for the separation of state and religion and to stand up for it. At the same time, such a party and its programme must be based on solid materialist principles, and its goal should be to patiently persuade militant believers of consistent materialism, which is theoretically incompatible with a religious, or any other idealist, explanation of the world.

What is decisive for membership of the party is its programme and that does not require acceptance of atheism, but only of the proletarian revolution, that is, the establishment of workers’ power, which itself will create the conditions in which the need for religion will die out.

Islam and women in the imperialist countries

We have seen that, in many countries dominated by imperialism, Islam, not just the Islamists, is closely connected to the existing order. That is not the case in European countries where it is not Islam that is the predominant religion, but Christianity. Of course, here, too, we call for the separation of state and religion, for example, the abolition of all religious education in schools, and are against all the other ways in which the state gives massive support to the Catholic and Protestant Churches.

In the imperialist countries, the official and bourgeois “critique” of Islam is by no means religious or even enlightening, but instead has a racist character that serves to stigmatise migrants and fugitives, as well as to justify military and political interventions in “backward” countries.

In the exposure of the repressive role of religion as it is undertaken by the Right, by state institutions and bourgeois organisations, the oppression of Muslim women serves only as an excuse. In fact, the proposed “measures” to combat it, whether that is “integration laws” or rules on clothing such as the ban on veils or the burka, only serve to strengthen divisions in the class and the oppression of women.

The causes of real oppression, and its consequences; lack of job opportunities, poor pay, no promotion, dependence on the man’s income, are not fought as reasons and means for the continuation of racist oppression. Instead, the exclusion and bad position of Muslim women and men is blamed on their wrong beliefs. It is as if migrants would suddenly have equal opportunities on the labour market, in the education system or in the search for accommodation if they were to
abandon their faith and become ?fully integrated?.

Finally, in racist thinking, the oppressed, and especially Muslim women, are presented as having no agency. The veiled woman cannot speak for herself, no matter how eloquent she is. She has to be "liberated" by the state through forced measures such as a ban on the veil. If she shows no understanding of this, then that is proof that she is just too backward to recognise her own interest.

This is white, democratic, civilising racism ?at its best?. Its paternalism, however, also reveals its reactionary, imperialist character. The core of this concern for the ?Muslim? woman is that it is not about the fight against women's oppression. The rights of migrant women, refugees, including men, are ultimately of no concern. The assertion that Islam is a particularly reactionary religion, fundamentally more deeply and irreconcilably oppressive, ultimately leads to the idea that Muslim women, and men, unlike people of other religious convictions, first have to abandon their religion before they can be regarded as equal human beings at all.

By attributing this particularity to Islam, racism reverses the cause of the oppression of Muslims; Islam, religion and Muslim people themselves are blamed. They need to assimilate, ?integrate? and ?discard? their own identity, in order to be ?well? integrated and accepted into the western community. The mendacity of this demand is particularly evident among those who have ?arrived? for decades, the young people in the Paris suburbs, young people of the second and third generations who face a future as unemployed, labourers, part-time workers, precarious workers for whom capitalism provides access only to the ?secondary labour market? if at all.

Real integration and a joint struggle against women's oppression are therefore only possible if the struggle for equal rights, open borders, equal access to education, training and work is combined with the fight against anti-Muslim racism in all its varieties.

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