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Anarchism: Secularism, Religion and Diversity

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Libertaire and the trial of Fatima -

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Presentation

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This issue of Anarchist Studies concentrates on a paper by Sharif Gemie entitled 'The Trial of Fatima: Anarchists, Muslims and the Monde Libertaire, 2003-05'. Sharif's paper was written in October 2005, before the riots in the banlieus, and it takes issue with the position adopted by the French anarchist weekly on the recent law banning the display of 'ostentatious' religious symbols in French state schools. Monde Libertaire (ML) he argues, have wrongly considered that the law is well-directed, misled by their reliance on a crude and outmoded anarchist theory and a set of inherently sexist and racist assumptions, the latter having their roots in France's colonial past. Sharif's paper is of obvious interest to specialists in French affairs. But as I will suggest at the end of this piece, the issues that he raises have a broader significance, extending beyond French politics.

The discussion papers are with one exception supportive of Sharif's position. Neil McMaster develops the argument about French colonialism. Harold Barclay considers Sharif's treatment of Islam before turning to analyse the social exclusion of French Muslims and the recent riots. Georges Ubbiali lends some support to the idea of secularism in schools, but suggests that the cost of ML's defence of laïcité is an unacceptable neglect of the real issue in French politics: immigration. Beltràn Roca analyses ML's position as misguided commitment to outdated Enlightenment values. Whilst Paul Chambers broadens the discussion by attempting to tackle the relationship between anarchism, the state and religion more generally, Tom Cahill presents a personal reflection on the operation of the French law and its inconsistencies. The last paper in the collection is Ronald Creagh's. This presents a robust defence of ML and the principle of laïcité. In her concluding piece, L. Susan Brown reflects on these debates and presents a powerful plea for diversity, drawing on the experience of multiculturalism in Canada.

With the exception of Ronald Creagh, all the contributors express general - though not unqualified - support for Sharif. And with the exception of L. Susan Brown, all are men. The consensus and the gender balance of the contributors reflect problems of communication and a lack of academic time rather than genuine agreement or lack of interest in the issue. Significantly more writers (from wide-range of backgrounds and disciplines) were invited to comment on the paper than had opportunity to respond. A copy was also sent to ML. Unfortunately, ML were unable or unwilling to reply (Ronald Creagh suggests some reasons why, but it is disappointing that the explanatory statement comes from him rather than ML's editor or editorial committee).

What are the main lines of the debate? There seems to be general agreement that France - not alone in Western Europe - is riven by racism, xenophobia and sexism; that minority immigrant populations are subject to discrimination, exclusion and oppression; that political elites have manipulated the 'headscarves affair' to suit their own agendas; that international politics has played an important role in the debate; and that the issue has forced strange new alliances between liberals, libertarians and their enemies, on both sides of the argument. There is an equally strong consensus that in non-Western societies Islam has adapted itself to openly patriarchal and deeply illiberal traditions and political regimes. Finally, all contributors agree that the decision whether or not to wear a headscarf should be considered a matter of individual choice and, assuming the choice is exercised freely, that its display is determined by any number of different motivations. What is at issue in this debate is the symbolic significance of the headscarf in the public realm. Interpretations of its significance seem to map on to three inter-related arguments about the ('traditional') anarchist critique of religion, the treatment of the secular republican state's claims to neutrality and the legacy of French colonialism.

One view of religion is that anarchists are anti-clerical rather than anti-religious. From this point of view, the problem of religion lies in the institutional relationship of the church (or any other religious body) and the state. Religion itself does not present a problem for anarchists. As Harold Barclay argues, religious teachings can support a range of interesting and alternative institutional arrangements. Equally, as Paul Chambers and Beltràn Roca point out, religious movements can and have served as a vehicle for liberation. The alternative view is that anarchists reject the principle of religion. Rather than being opposed merely to its institutionalisation, they see in it a demand to submit to a superior will. This submission is said to lie at the root of all political authority, and it suggests that whilst churches and other religious institutions are parasitic on the state, religious faith importantly underpins it. This is a view usually associated with Bakunin but it has recently been revived by writers like Fredy Perlman who see in religion - Christianity in particular - a impulse to dominate nature (Mother Earth). A similar position informs Creagh's analysis.

On the second point, the state's claims to neutrality, the issue is how far the notion of a secular state - such as that modelled in France - is really a cover for the imposition of a set of bourgeois, Western and Euro-centric values. Critics of ML suggest that this is precisely the case. Indeed they are convinced that the republican model is less able than the liberal to uphold the liberties it claims to respect because it effectively excludes minority groups from public consideration. Ronald Creagh's response is that Anglo-Saxon writers - Tom Cahill happily includes himself in this category - are unable to grasp the concept of neutrality being defended. The secular state of course favours a particular set of class and non-class relations. But unlike the liberal state, which has dominated British and American political traditions, its aim is to maximize the liberty of citizens by confining questions of faith to a private realm. The secular republican state has no interest in accommodating the claims of competing social groups either by providing equal access to the state's resources or by recognising identities and claims to group memberships. Against writers like Beltràn Roca who suggests that the state should take group claims and issues of identity seriously, Creagh argues that the liberal model provides no limit to toleration, that it encourages factionalism and, as a consequence, supports a permanent condition of social strife that benefits only the state.

The important corollary is that critics of ML argue that the secular state necessarily oppresses minorities and conclude that anarchists should seek to align themselves with all protest movements. From this perspective the campaign against the ban represents a challenge to the state's authority. Creagh contends that the ban on headscarves is simply not oppressive and that, whilst there are other good reasons why anarchists should make common cause with minorities (to fight racism, xenophobia, sexism and so forth) the freedom to display religious symbols in the public sphere is not one of them. From this point of view, it is wrongheaded to generalise the British experience of radical dissent and misguided to court alliances with groups who seek to reintroduce religion into the public realm.

Some of the arguments raised in this debate can be resolved. For example, it is possible to justify claims to identity using traditional rights theory (the argument would run something like: 'all individuals have a right to the membership of a particular cultural group'). Pace Roca, then, there is no reason to throw out 'Enlightenment' thinking in order to recognise diversity. And there may be good reasons to hang on to something like 'reason' or 'rationality' when it comes to arguments about creationism and intelligent design. Yet in general terms the positions represented by Sharif, on the one hand, and ML on the other, cannot easily be reconciled, certainly not in the combinations in which they are played out. After all, if religion is considered to be just another belief, which has the same status as a political interest, it is near impossible to treat the French government's (and ML's) fears seriously. By the same token, if one sincerely holds that religious faith falls into a different category of belief from, say, other political commitment, and that it necessarily implies submission and mystification, the suggestion that religious symbols (ignoring all the problems associated with 'ostentation') can be treated as marks of political protest is untenable.

The final issue, the legacy of French colonialism, is equally contentious. One of the main thrusts of Sharif's paper is that ML have been misled by a set of stereotypes inherited from the past to misjudge the significance of the headscarf protest in France - a point developed in the paper by Neil McMaster. Rather than trying to discover why young French women have chosen to adopt the headscarf, they have simply dismissed the wearers as victims of

manipulation and patriarchal oppression. Mistakenly assuming that the headscarf indicates a commitment to (that fuzzy term) fundamentalism, they have also wrongly introduced into the debate a set of concerns about the toleration of other oppressive non-European practices. Georges Ubbiali contests this view, maintaining that the scarf is a symbol of female submission and that it should be resisted whatever the motives of the women who wear it. Creagh's response is rather different. He admits a tendency to sloppiness on behalf of some writers in the debate. It is important, he argues, not to presume that wearers of the headscarf are victims in any sense. Yet it is equally important that the demands of the groups who support these individuals are understood. It may be that in the current context the wearing of a headscarf is a sign of alienation, as much as deep religious commitment. Nonetheless, the protest has raised the profile of some rather dubious groups - some who want to take power in the state in order then to oppress the women they pretend to support. Moreover, if one is to avoid assumptions, Creagh argues that non-French must equally avoid reading too much into the legacy of colonialism and/or condemn those who endorse the ban as racists or Islamaphobes. The French cultural tradition of *laïcité* should also be respected.

Creagh's point about French culture is perhaps disingenuous, since it attempts to re-deploy multi-culturalist critiques against those who would level them against him. Nevertheless it usefully reveals the central tenet of the secular-republican case. Critics of ML suggest that anarchists should defend ideas of difference, diversity and pluralism. Whilst, as Beltrán Roca notes, anarchists want to stop short of relativism, these values are supported because they are important to libertarians and anarchists - not just because they help states to integrate minority populations (a somewhat contentious point and perhaps a red herring in the debate given the track record of institutional racism and civil rights abuses in liberal states). On Creagh's side it is of course possible to defend secularism as a cultural value. But it is not easy to do so without adopting a highly politicised notion of culture - one tied to a set of constitutional precepts that have their roots in France's revolutionary past. Creagh's argument - which is supported by a significant section of the French left - points to a homogeneous and static idea of Frenchness that sits uneasily with the principle of diversity traditionally associated with libertarian and anarchist politics. The issue posed by the headscarves debate, then, is not just one of religion, but the possibility of negotiating differences between diverse groups. The relevance of this issue extends far beyond ML's treatment of the scarf.

The contributions by K.K. Vega and Uri Gordon in this issue are not part of the discussion on Anarchism: Secularism, Religion and Diversity.