

Islam and Socialism



The first commie? Mohammed. Being moved in mysterious ways: Galloway



"Socialism and Islam are very close, other than on the existence of God" (George Galloway, Sunday Times, 14 August).

We've heard of Jesus the Socialist. Now it's Mohammed the Socialist. What next? As the MP for Bethnal Green, elected by Muslim votes and with the help of the SWP, Galloway would say this. Even so, it is a curious statement for him, as a Catholic who claims to be a socialist, to have made, acknowledging as it does that socialists don't accept "the existence of God".

Since, like all religions, islam lays down precepts for organising life on Earth as well as on what to do to get to heaven (and avoid hell), is there any basis for Galloway's claim that islam is very close to socialism if its religious side is overlooked?

The French historian and orientalist, Maxime Rodinson, who died last year and who adopted a generally Marxist-materialist approach (even though, like Galloway, entertaining some illusions about Russia), certainly didn't think so. In his *Islam and Capitalism* (1966) (written to

refute the view that islam was an impediment to the economic development of Muslim countries), he wrote:

"Economic activity, the search for profit, trade, and, consequently, production for the market, are looked upon with no less favour by Muslim tradition than by the Koran itself" (p. 16).

"[T]he justice advocated by the ideology of the Koran is not that which socialist thought has established as the ideal of a large section of modern society. Muhammad was not a socialist" (p. 23).

"The alleged fundamental opposition of Islam to capitalism is a myth, whether this view be put forward with good intentions or bad" (p. 155).

"[T]he notion that it is possible to use the traditional concept of property found in the Sunnah, and the relative restrictions it imposes, in order to advocate and promote a move by Muslim societies towards socialist structures . . . is utterly fantastic" (p. 175).

In a previous book (1961), *Mohammed*, Rodinson had provided a materialist explanation of the origins of islam. In Mohammed's time (he was born about 571 of the present era and died in 632), the Arabian peninsula was, we can see now, in a process of transition from tribal society, which was breaking down, to a state, for which Mohammed was to be instrumental in laying the foundations.

As Rodinson described it:

"A mercantile economy was growing up in the chinks of the nomadic world. As well as barter, money transactions using dinars (gold deniers) and dirhams (silver drachmae) were becoming commonplace. The Bedouin borrowed from the rich merchants of the towns, got into debt and were sold into slavery or at any rate reduced to dependent status. The disintegration of tribal society had begun. Large and prosperous markets grew up, like the one at Ukaz, attracting foreigners as well as Arabs from every tribe. The tribal limits had been overstepped".

Mohammed himself, although from a modest background, had become one of the wealthy merchants that had emerged, but he realised that something needed to be done to keep Arab society from completely disintegrating under the impact of the unbridled spread of money-commodity relations. His solution was to create a new Arab community welded together by a new religion that would regulate the emerging money/trading economy by imposing some obligations on the rich and some relief for the poor.

Of course as a mystic, Mohammed was not as rationally calculating as this but expressed himself in religious terms. Thus, in the koran (which he believed was dictated to him by the archangel Gabriel, but which in fact, whether he realised it or not, expressed his own thoughts), the greedy and selfish rich are denounced (it is Allah, the Zeus of the pre-islam Arabian pantheon who Mohammed makes dismiss his fellow gods as fakes, who is purportedly speaking):

"Whoso is mean and bumptious on

account of his wealth,
Who denies the most excellent reward,
We shall smooth his way to ultimate misery.

His fortune shall not profit him when he falls into the abyss"
(Koran xcii, 8-11)

Rodinson describes some of the regulations that Mohammed brought in when in 627, after slaughtering the previous rulers, he became the ruler of Medina:

"There are a number of articles laying down fairly strict rules about inheritances. This was apparently necessary in the unsettled situation which resulted from the disintegration of the tribal structure. The stronger must have found it easier to lay hands on the family or tribal possessions of the weaker. The rule of the Koran guaranteed everyone his share, which was worked out in a somewhat complicated fashion. Women were allowed a share in the property. (This seems to have been the custom in Mecca, although not in Medina.). Admittedly their share was only half that of the men . . . Slavery, naturally, persisted. People were urged to treat slaves well and encourage them to gain their freedom. . . . Loans at interest or, more probably, some form of them, were forbidden. This prescription seems in practice to have been aimed chiefly at those who, in the early days of the move to Medina, refused to make loans to the needy without interest . . . But there seems to have been no intention of prohibiting the normal practices of Meccan trade."

So what does Mohammed's "socialism" amount to? Only certain rules to prevent the excesses of the rich from leading to the decomposition of society in 7th century Arabia, but which still accepted the basis of the money/trading economy that had emerged and was spreading. The economic precepts of the koran laid down a framework for the less disruptive functioning of such an economy, placing some obligations on the rich to help the poor while still accepting the division of society into rich and poor.

No doubt it is these limits on the unbridled and selfish accumulation and use of wealth by private individuals that is behind Galloway's claim that "socialism and islam are very close". But this reveals more about his conception of "socialism" than it does about islam. As a former Labour MP, he still thinks in terms of socialism being the control or regulation of capitalism in the interest of the non-rich. But that's not socialism, but reformism. Islam is no more incompatible with this than it is with capitalism. In fact, it is very close to it, except when the religious element which gives its clerics an undue say is brought back. Socialism, properly understood as a non-monetary, non-market society based on the common ownership and democratic control of the means of production, and islam have nothing in common. ■

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