

WE SHOULD NOT ABANDON SECULARISM

Interview with Pragna Patel and Gita Sahgal



campaigns

*Fight
Gender
Apartheid*

news

*News of recent
crimes against
women around
the world*

editorial

*Secularism as
a Universal
Right*

arts

*Voices of
women
against
Islamism*

interviews

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Maryam Namazie: *The term post-secular is being used a lot recently to say that western secularism may have come to an end and that it's irrelevant for other societies, particularly given the "religious revival." Is there a religious revival or is it political? Is secularism western and irrelevant for other societies or the west for that matter? Your comments?*

Pragna Patel: Ever since the Salman Rushdie Affair burst on to our scenes in 1989, we have witnessed a steady rise of religious fundamentalist movements in all religions. So the question is not so much about religious revivalism but about the rise of religious political power. The revival of religion and the rise of political religious power which defines religious fundamentalist movements go hand in hand.

In the UK, we have been witness to the revival of religion as the main marker of identity; a framework

by which the needs of minority communities have been articulated and addressed. This has led to a greater accommodation of religion within state institutions and in the wider public culture, reflecting a number of global and national economic, political and social trends. But the groups that have tended to dominate as mediators in the development of the new social contract between state and minority communities are authoritarian and conservative if not fundamentalist. Their demands for a seat at the public table are particularly disturbing because what they seek to do is to redefine religious values and identities so that they are compatible with their own reactionary, patriarchal and anti-democratic world views. These fundamentalists often masquerade as 'moderates' but there is nothing moderate about their views on women and female sexuality. What they seek to do is to impose strict religious identities that encourage gender apartheid and force women to retreat into the private sphere of the home. It is no accident that in the last decade or so, internal dissent against religious fundamentalist and orthodox values have largely focused on the need to discipline women and to control female sexuality. If we look at the key flash points in the UK, from the Behzti play (involving Sikh fundamentalists who successfully opposed the staging of a play on rape in a Sikh temple) to the imposition of veiling and sharia law on women and girls, they have all been articulated in the name of the right to manifest religion but are really about the control of female sexuality.

This political use of religion has often involved the appropriation of progressive and secular language and spaces created through struggles for democracy and equality by many, including black and minority women. For instance, religious fundamentalists and 'moderates' alike are engaged in substituting the demand for equality with the demand for 'religious literacy.' That is, the demand for the State to recognise the supposedly 'authentic' theological values and

Continued on next page 2



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traditions of minorities, but not the recognition of the diverse, syncretic, liberal, cultural, political, religious and secular traditions, including feminist traditions, within a community.

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These other traditions are in danger of being obliterated by the shift from ‘multiculturalism’ to ‘multi-faithism’ which has of course benefited from and accelerated under successive British government agendas on ‘Cohesion’, ‘Integration’ and the ‘Big Society.’ The struggle for secularism is therefore directly linked to the struggle for gender justice and racial equality which under the shadow of neoliberal economics and politics is being severely undermined.

Secularism as a concept is not alien to minorities or to those from the ex colonies. Indeed in many parts of the world, the struggle against colonialism was also a struggle for democratic and secular societies. And in the course of such struggles, the meaning of secular values was transformed so even if the concept had its roots in western enlightenment, it has evolved through struggles against colonialism. It is vital that we do not forget this history by seeking to distance ourselves from the struggle for secularism. Why? Because what we are witness to is this process of re-definition from above (the state) and below (religious fundamentalist leaders) which is resulting in a diminishing welfare state on the one hand and on the other hand the communalisation (community groups and civil society organising solely around religious identities) of minority communities. The de-secularisation process is extremely damaging to struggles for democracy and

human rights (especially women’s human rights) in our community and family institutions. It encourages the State to relate to us not as citizens but as subjects defined only by reference to religious identity which is increasingly defined by religious fundamentalists. It prevents us from uniting with others on the basis of need and weakens our struggles against racism, equality and gender justice based on universal values of human rights.

Maryam Namazie: *Some will say defending secularism, and opposing religion in the state feeds into racism and imperialism; it’s colonialist and doesn’t acknowledge the positive role religion can and has played.*

Pragna Patel: This is the same old diatribe that is always trotted out when dealing with issues of racism and imperialism. As black and minority women we have faced these accusations many times; whenever we have struggled against issues like domestic and sexual violence within our communities, we are told that we are being divisive and that we are playing into the hands of the forces of imperialism. At best, we are told that ‘now is not the time to deal with these issues’ or at worst we are ‘traitors to the anti-racist or anti-imperialist cause.’ There are many, including on the so called progressive left who say that in the post 9/11 climate defined by the rise in anti-Muslim racism, defending secularism is tantamount to supporting racism and imperialism. We respond to this in a number of ways:

Firstly, conceptualising secularism as anti religion is a false premise. Secularism is not about the absence of religion in people’s individual lives. Secularism is essentially about de-linking religion from political power in the family, community and in state institutions. Religion cannot be allowed to define our roles and our values because it is based on hierarchies of power and inequality. It will always limit the freedom of those who are seen as threatening such as women, sexual minorities and indeed other religious minorities. Religion can play and does play a positive role in the lives of many of the abused women that we see, for example, at Southall Black Sisters (SBS) but that does not translate into a desire on their part to have their needs met through religion. In fact, many see religion as a personal matter but not as the basis for receiving legal and welfare services which they wish to remain secular and free from religious power exercised by corrupt patriarchs.

In 2009/2010, SBS conducted a small study to shed

light on whether or not the revival of religion constitutes the counter-voice of the many black and minority women who need help to secure their rights in contexts where they are vulnerable and marginalised. In-depth interviews were conducted with 21 women from different religious backgrounds. The results can be found in 'Cohesion, Faith and Gender' and shows that vast majority are acutely critical and even fearful of aspects of their tradition, culture and religion that perpetuate gender inequality, discrimination and violence. Although most are believers and often turn to religion for spiritual sustenance, none express any sense of belonging to a faith-based community. Women in the SBS study reveal how they negotiate and contest their identities on a daily basis. This is precisely why they all cherish the secular space provided by SBS which they experience as an empowering space that enables them to gain access to other ideas, traditions and cultures. More importantly, they value SBS as a secular space because it unlocks their access to secular State services, including the legal and welfare system, which many regard as the final safety net in their struggle to assert their fundamental human rights and freedoms. What the women's voices tell us is that religion can have a positive role to play but if and only if it is willing to align itself to the demand for a democratic and secular state in which the rights of all are guaranteed.

Secularism is important for women's freedom but it is also important for others who are marginalised including religious minorities because it has the potential to guarantee freedom of worship for all. However, we also recognise that the demand for secularism - essentially the demand for the separation of church and state - is not in itself a sufficient precondition although it is a necessary one. The demand for secularism must out of necessity, also be tied to the demand for democracy and equality to prevent the rise of authoritarianism or totalitarianism.

Secondly, if we don't defend secular values and instead embrace religious ones then we will be guilty of developing counter resistance strategies against racism and imperialism that hides other forms of oppression. Religion cannot be embraced as a framework for articulating disaffection and alienation or to address questions of equality and rights since its very foundation is based on recognising some rights but not others. We see this most clearly played out in the clash between the right to manifest religion and

the right to be free from religion. Women who want to be free from religious impositions that deny them their autonomy and sexual freedom are constantly excluded. But we need to alert to the ways in which this exclusion is actually articulated. Often demands for the right to manifest religion may seem on the surface to be progressive but in fact hide a highly reactionary agenda. A good example of this is the recent capitulation by Universities UK (UUK), a representative body of universities in the UK, to demands for gender segregation in universities. UUK has without any hesitation, accepted the right of external visiting speakers to insist on segregating their audience according to gender on the grounds of their religious beliefs. This response is a victory for Islamist groups who have been the most vociferous in making such demands. UUK has justified its position on the grounds that universities need to accommodate the genuinely held wishes or beliefs of those who are religious and states that this arrangement will not be discriminatory as long as 'both men and women are being treated equally, as long as they are both being segregated in the same way.' It would appear that UUK is ignorant of the history and struggles against racial discrimination based on the flawed logic of 'separate but equal.' Such logic legitimised racial apartheid in



South Africa and now legitimises gender apartheid. There is a disturbing failure to recognise that this stance will allow the right to manifest religion (a qualified right) to trump the right to be free from gender discrimination and subjugation (an absolute right).

What we mustn't do is capitulate to the form of lazy and expedient thinking and activism that argues that supporting demands for a secular state is fuelling western imperialism. Instead, we have to find the courage and vision to fight racism/imperialism and

religious fundamentalism at the same time, which means being alert to those who seek to undermine the relevance of secularism for minorities and to those who use it to mask a language of majoritarianism and ethnocentrism. Taking this position does not make us complicit in anti-Muslim racism or in other forms of racism. Quite frankly, we can no longer afford to put up with the argument that 'now is not the time to raise religious fundamentalism' any longer because in the silence that ensues, we hide our own forms of fascism which we then are not willing to recognise. This is a very dangerous path to tread.



Thirdly, ironically, it is the accusation that secularism is a western concept and imposition that actually panders to colonial and racist constructions of minorities because it assumes that minorities can only be defined by reference to their religious identities. This stance denies the very real and urgent human rights struggles that are taking place around the world by ordinary people everywhere, many in the ex colonies. If anyone is in any doubt just take a look at the recent book by Karima Bennoune 'Your fatwa does not apply here anymore.' She documents hundreds of everyday struggles waged by individual men and women including politicians, writers, artists and activists against religious fundamentalists across the Muslim world. She argues that their struggles stand for and seek to create secular, human rights and democratic values but they have largely been ignored if not silenced including by those who see themselves as anti-imperialists, to devastating effect. She pleads for the need to bear witness to the countless forms of resistance that is taking place every day against fundamentalist violence. Nor are these struggles inherent to Muslims but can be found wherever religion seeks political power.

Maryam Namazie: *There are those who say defending the strict separation of religion from the state is just another form of fundamentalism, namely secular fundamentalism. Can the two be compared?*

Gita Sahgal: The people who condemn 'secular fundamentalism' are very often the same people who do not like to use the term correctly to refer to religious fundamentalism. They say that they don't like to use religious fundamentalism because it is only applied to Muslims, or that it covers too broad a category. So it's really odd that they are willing to refer to secular fundamentalism, which I think is not a sensible comparison; nor do I think it is a legitimate term.

Like Islamophobia, it is almost invariably used to silence criticism. The person using it is saying, "I am reasonable and nuanced and accommodate religious belief. The 'secular fundamentalist' does not accommodate religion." Actually secularism is a view of the world which guarantees freedom to hold religious belief while limiting manifestations of religion which are harmful in some way. I have often been labelled a secular fundamentalist for arguing that religion should be excluded from special protection or promotion by the state, and that the law is made by human beings and does not come from god. Most religious minorities in South Asia are passionately secular in that they oppose a state religion. In Bangladesh, the Awami League government promised to remove Islam as the state religion and return to the original Constitution of Bangladesh. However, they did not do so but left a hotch-potch with secular principles in the preamble to the Constitution, whilst maintaining the amendments that made Islam the state religion. Muslims in India feel very threatened by Hindu fundamentalists and would oppose India becoming a Hindu state. These views are compatible with human rights; in fact they are the underpinning of human rights – since human rights are the inalienable right of all human beings and won through centuries of human struggle. They were not given by revelation or by Holy Writ.

Religious fundamentalists on the other hand represent the destruction of the most fundamental of all human rights principles – liberty and equality. In fact they threaten every part of the legal human rights framework – there is no civil and political right – such as the right to life, freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the principles of equality and non-discrimination that religious fundamentalists do not

seek to destroy. They also threaten other rights such as the right to the benefits of scientific progress, to health and to education. This is true of numerous movements which work within the law and not only the terrorist groups. I don't see how you can reasonably compare someone who firmly upholds basic, recognised principles of human rights with someone who seeks to overthrow them. Certainly there are people who use the idea of secularism to promote a racist discourse about minorities. This is particularly true in Europe. In Britain, the same people tend to emphasize British values and the Christian character of the State in order to exclude and demonise. The idea of secularism can be misused but the term secular fundamentalism doesn't capture this. In any case, the term is seldom applied to European racists who sometimes use the idea of secularism to promote dominant religious values. In India, we also see right wing Hindu organisations attack the Congress for being 'pseudo-secular,' and try and own the idea of secularism themselves.

In 'Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain,' which I edited with Nira Yuval Davis, we argued that:

"Fundamentalist movements, all over the world, are basically political movements which have a religious imperative and seek in various ways, in widely differing circumstances, to harness modern state and media powers to the service of their gospel. This gospel is presented as the only valid form of religion. It can rely heavily on sacred religious texts, but it can also be more experiential and linked to specific charismatic leadership. Fundamentalism can align itself with different political trends in different countries and manifest itself in many forms. It can appear as a form of orthodoxy - a maintenance of 'traditional values' - or as a revivalist radical phenomenon, dismissing impure and corrupt forms of religion to 'return to original sources'."

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We should not abandon the idea of secular space in our own movements, nor should we abandon the idea of secularism. Many people are leaving fundamentalist organisations and embracing secular space.

The point is to oppose all those who are using a critique of secularism to promote a rule by majority instead of a rule of law. But people using the term 'secular fundamentalist' are often not mounting any substantial critique. Instead they seek to demonise those of us who are clear and firm about separating religion from state and from public policy.

I have also been accused, generally by Christians in Britain, not only of being a 'secular fundamentalist' but of having blood on my hands when arguing the case for the disestablishment of the Church or for other secular policies. I think it is really odd that someone who takes their inspiration from Gandhi and Nehru should be treated like a descendent of Hitler or Stalin.

Maryam Namazie: What would you say to those who assert that we should work with everyone we can in the fight against sharia or religious laws and Islamism, including the likes of the English Defence League and Tommy Robinson. They would say the differences between us and them are manufactured, divisive and intolerant and hold back our movement. They would claim our differences are a facade held up by the left in its aim to de-legitimise anyone who speaks out.

Gita Sahgal: I understand why some campaigners against religious fundamentalism, particularly against Islamism are very frustrated. We know that those who should be our allies have allied instead with the fundamentalists of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Jamaat e Islami, the Islamic Human Rights Commission and Cageprisoners. That list pretty much represents a broad range of Islamists around the world: the Saudi backed groups, the pro Khomeini groups, a pro al Qaida public relations network and two of the largest Muslim fundamentalist organisations in the world. I

have done extensive work on the Jamaat e Islami and Cageprisoners, who extol the virtues of people with much blood on their hands. It is beyond belief that leftists, Quakers, liberal Jews all of whom are their targets, should choose to sit with these people at inter-faith meetings, donate money to their causes and justify their political agendas. Amnesty International supported the idea of 'defensive jihad' and they have never explained why. Human Rights Watch welcomed the Muslim Brotherhood to power and called us racists for pointing out that they were a threat to human rights. The Stop the War Coalition has been exposed by you, Maryam in your work as well as in our book 'Double Bind: the Muslim Right, the Anglo-American Left and Universal Human Rights.'

But as your book, *Enemies Not Allies*, pointed out, it is no use allying with one set of extremists to oppose another. The English Defence League are a nasty rabble who want to spread terror on the streets. We don't know if they are responsible for the attacks on mosques and Muslim schools and community centres. But they were certainly the inspiration for Andre Brevik in his murderous attack on a plural society. It is true that the European far-right have in recent times not killed nearly as many people as the Muslim far-right movements. But we should not be choosing to side with murderers or those promoting murder. You cannot build a principled movement on foundations where basic principles have become blurred.

As for Tommy Robinson: it is clever of the Quilliam Foundation run by former Islamists, to persuade him to leave the English Defence League because it creates confusion in their ranks. But he doesn't yet really appear to have fundamentally changed his views. In fact, the presence of the EDL on the streets has mobilised the SWP and its allies and the Muslim fundamentalists as well as some genuine anti-racist who don't have an anti-fascist movement to turn to. And that is what we need – a real anti-fascist, anti-extremist movement.

I would really urge anyone thinking of entering into any sort of alliance with the EDL to refrain from doing so. They have very little actual presence and what little short term gains they made in getting a new audience of a few angry young men, would soon be lost. Valuable work showing the damage done by Islamism – gender apartheid, sharia courts, etc. would be twisted into a fundamentally racist discourse.

It is true that many pro-fundamentalist leftists and post-modernists do seek to silence people who speak

for One Law for All or the Centre for Secular Space (Southall Black Sisters are the good cops to our bad cops and I don't know of attempts to silence them), but whereas we stand today on firm and principled ground, we would not be able to do so with far-right allies.

But I don't want to sound too disheartened. There is an entire generation of political activists and post-modernist and post-colonial academics who I think of as a 'lost generation.' I think there is little use trying to wean them away from their thinking as post-feminist, post-secular and post-colonial types. They have invested too heavily in talking mumbo-jumbo and they really can't stop. But there are older people who remember a universalist left and there are younger people who have come into politics through their challenge to religion on the one hand or fundamentalist organisations on the other. We should not only notice the rise of political religion, but also a very public rise in mass movements challenging religion and fundamentalism. The Atheist, Humanist and Secular Society – a British student movement, attracts students from all over the world. There are young people struggling against the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat e Islami in many countries.

The movement of ex-Muslims is quite phenomenal. These are the people we are working with at the Centre for Secular Space. It would be a betrayal of their struggles against racism in this country and the promotion of fundamentalism by the British state to ally with racists who want to kill them.

Maryam Namazie: *Some will say that people have a right to a western perspective, a right to their country, and a right to object to the changes and dangers brought to it by mass influxes of people from cultures they don't understand or recognise. Is that really the main problem here?*

Gita Sahgal: Pragna and I are first generation immigrants. We are among that mass influx and we certainly wear strange clothes, eat odd food and refer to values and beliefs that are little recognised in Britain. I remember when we issued our statement in support of Rushdie, we referred to our secular



traditions, because of course we knew that Britain was a Christian state – and though it was a liberal state, it was precisely the unfairness of having an established religion that allowed fundamentalists to demand equality by having a blasphemy law that protected Islam. So we had to argue a third position – against the established Church and for abolishing the blasphemy law. We are also republicans. Does that mean we are against British values?

Pragna and I and many other progressives have had a critique of multiculturalism which is over twenty years old. It is quite different from the critiques mounted by a range of right wing commentators, who tend to blame immigrants and immigration for the problem; and whose analysis of multiculturalism really removes the state from its responsibility. They do not apply this analysis to the conduct of foreign policy either. If it were not for immigrants such as Pragna, Kenan Malik or me, there wouldn't be the critique of multiculturalism that we have today.

A low wage economy, the destruction of the welfare state and the lack of infrastructure to absorb migration are many of the reasons that some people may become afraid. It is very wrong to blame the people who helped to build the state and create an intellectual critique of fundamentalism and racism, for the problem.

There are many people with a pride in their country and their religious traditions who are not extremists or racist in any way. Certainly the cosmopolitan left, of which I'm a part has often failed to recognise that. I've seen critiques of the historian and peace activist EP Thompson for being too 'English.' The people who said that didn't know what they were talking about. He was the most internationalist of men and unusually defended young Indians who were fighting the Emergency (a period of dictatorship in India). Indira Gandhi had allies in the Labour party and people like Michael Foot supported the Emergency. He also worked hard to develop relationships with dissidents in Eastern Europe and not simply make alliances with the official state-sponsored peace movements which were really just Soviet fronts. That is a very good model for us to look at.

I think back to my ancestors who were jailed for years for opposing British imperialism. They were also visceral anti-fascists and utterly opposed to Nazi Germany and Japan's brutal attacks on other Asian countries. They argued that India would join the war effort as an independent country but not as subject nation. However, they did not ally with Germany or Japan (though some Indian nationalists did on the 'enemy's enemy' principle). If they could keep their faith in a progressive and plural nationalism and in universal values in that most difficult of times, so can we.

Maryam Namazie: *Why is secularism so important in this day and age and particularly as a pre-condition for women's rights? Islamic feminists would say that women's rights can be respected under Islam too and there is no need to separate religion from the state if it is properly interpreted.*

Pragna Patel: Perhaps the most urgent struggle taking place today in a variety of contexts is the struggle for women's right in the face of religious fundamentalism. The rise of religious identity as a counter hegemonic identity has very specific consequences for all progressive struggles but especially for those waged by minority women, whose bodies have become the battleground for the control of community representation.

Some feminists from minority backgrounds talk of the need to develop a feminism that is sensitive to the growth of religious values especially in the light of anti-Muslim racism. But these 'religious feminists' seek to work within religious frameworks that make the demand for the recognition of religious identity paramount rather than the need for substantive gender equality. We argue that this trend towards developing a religious based feminism makes no sense in contexts like the British situation where secular spaces still exist and where there is a long, rich and vibrant tradition of secular feminism as in the UK.

Without a shadow of a doubt, over the last three decades, secular black and minority women's projects across the UK have been the driving force behind successful campaigns and services for women who

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experience gender-based violence including specific cultural and religious forms of harm within black and minority communities. By establishing advice centres, counselling services and refuges, black and minority women have challenged community norms that reproduce a culture of denial and silence. In the process they have developed the analysis and the experience needed to challenge State and community practices that justify and excuse violence against women. Despite often operating in contexts of great hostility, these efforts have led to new laws, improved legal interventions and helped to create statutory guidelines on a range of issues such as domestic violence, honour related crimes, forced marriage and child abuse. It is this work and not the work of religious and community leaders or institutions that has led to increased awareness and to progress in respect of black and minority women's human rights.

Despite this track record, 'religious' forms of feminism have emerged as a counter voice to so called 'western secular feminism.' Often our critique of such feminism and their demands for greater religious recognition in state institutions, for example the demand to wear the veil or seek a divorce through sharia courts, is met with the accusation that we are denying Muslim female agency. Yet questions of which social and political forces are at play in demands for greater accommodation of religious identity and who defines religious values and for what purpose, are rarely considered. Instead, notions of 'community' and 'autonomy' - the cornerstone of feminist analysis, embodied in campaigns for freedom, especially in the private sphere, are being used to shore up a regressive multi-faith framework.

We should for example, be extremely wary of demands for separate religious laws to govern family matters in minority communities because what they appear to do is to create the conditions for the establishment of parallel legal systems based on divine law which is profoundly anti-democratic, misogynist and homophobic. Such arbitration systems seek to uphold rather than interrogate patriarchal power. There is an assumption that women who access such religious arbitration forums are doing so voluntarily and are

therefore exercising their autonomy but this is misleading, since few women, irrespective of their backgrounds, have the legal knowledge or the resources to withstand pressure to conform to custom or invoke a broader set of citizenship and human rights. It is precisely because of the lack of any internal democratic means of accountability and other difficulties in securing their safety from within their communities that many minority women, as the SBS study shows, prefer to seek protection through a range of secular state agencies.

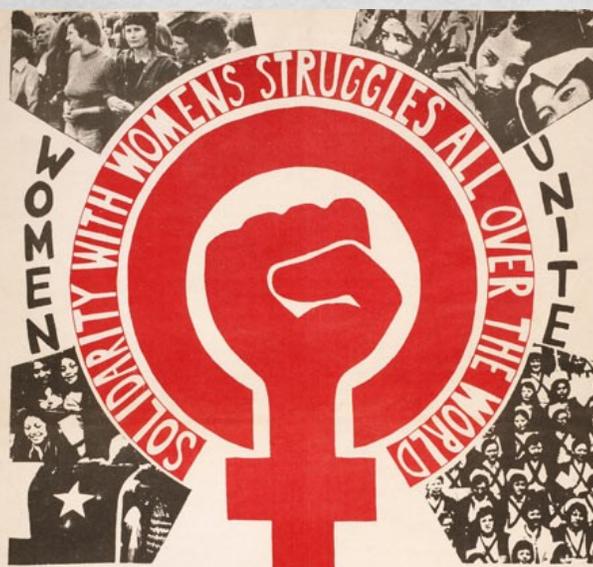
Discussions of Muslim female agency are in any case removed from the increasingly transnational religious political and social movements that give rise to the kind of demands that are being made. The critical point

that is ignored is that female agency is constrained and framed through religious forces and that what we are witness to is the unfolding of a bigger power struggle for the control of female sexuality and women's freedoms and rights more generally - a central goal of all religious-right projects. This is the danger that religious feminists do not recognise but ordinary women engaged in struggles for greater freedom in the private sphere so readily recognise.

Ultimately, such 'religious' forms of so-called feminism seeks to align themselves with rather than challenge religious right movements which in the UK have increasingly dominated the 'anti-racist' or 'anti-imperialist' counter voice. Their goal is clear - to bring secularism into disrepute as a 'western' concept and to restrict minority women's exit options from oppressive patriarchal family practices.

Religious fundamentalism poses a serious threat to the universality of human rights and to the secular fabric of the legal and other public institutions that are so central in gaining access to justice and protection for women and other marginalised people. This is why the struggle for secularism is so directly related to the struggle for women's rights.

*Pragna Patel is the Director of Southall Black Sisters.
Gita Sahgal is the Director of Centre for Secular Space.*



newsflash

AFGHANISTAN

Twelve years after the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan's government is considering bringing back [stoning](#) as a punishment for sex outside marriage. The sentence for married adulterers, along with flogging for unmarried offenders, appears in a draft revision of the country's penal code being drawn up by the ministry of justice. It is the latest in a string of encroachments on hard-won rights for women, after parliament quietly cut the number of seats set aside for women on provincial councils, and drew up a criminal code whose provisions will make it almost impossible to convict anyone for domestic violence.

Locals shot [dead](#) a girl and her boyfriend in northern Baghlan province after they eloped. Javed Basharat, the provincial police spokesman, said police tried to mediate and rescue the pair, but tribal elders promised to surrender both victims yet failed to do so.



EGYPT

A survey of 22 Arab states by the Thomson Reuters Foundation [found](#) Egypt lowest in the women's rights listing and with the highest rates of violence against women – including sexual harassment and female genital mutilation (FGM). Egypt was followed by Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen.

INDIA

Aboobacker Musaliya, one of Kerala's most influential Sunni leaders and general secretary of the All India Sunni Jam-Iyyathul Ulema [said](#) "...Islam has not changed its decrees regarding the life of women. Muslim women should not work in a place where only a woman and a man are present. They should work only in a place where there are enough number of women and trustworthy men. Ninety per cent of jobs do not

require men and women to mingle. These rules cannot be changed." The cleric also said that women should travel only if it was unavoidable. Even then, these journeys must be for purposes ratified by Islam.

IRAN

A document [adopted](#) by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council with president Rouhani's signature has been forwarded to the education and health ministries to "reduce the unnecessary mixing of males and females." The section on gender segregation included the expansion of the culture of chastity and the veil.

Majlis (parliamentary) social affairs committee head Abdulreza Azizi said: "Almost 20% of marriages in Iran end in divorce, as a result of promiscuity, sexual license, perversion, and a tendency to favour Western values." Azizi quoted from the Koran, claiming that the holy book stipulates that [women have no right to seek divorce](#). If they did, it would mean they could ask for a separation on any pretext, whenever they chose to. Azizi also blamed drug addiction, unemployment, economic hardship and foreign satellite television for the high divorce rate.

Following mounting criticism of the Iranian police's harassment of women who refuse to abide by compulsory veiling rules, the ['modesty project'](#) has been transferred to the Interior Ministry. Police commander Brigadier Ismail Ahmadi-Moghadam said: "The government has decided to hand the project over to a social council, which is in the process of organising staff and procedures. We will still be available to play a role if required. We are optimistic about this move, and hope the modesty project will be conducted more efficiently in future." Over 26 government agencies have been involved in imposing hijab, spending millions of dollars over several decades in the process. However both sociologists and politicians now admit that harsh campaigns have failed to force Iranian women to submit to the guidelines. In the past, Iranian officials have accused



Iran's women football fans— photo © Getty Images—via BBC News

Ghulam Ali Hadad, a close advisor and confidante to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his son's father-in-law who was a candidate in last June's presidential election has [said](#) Iranians and many other people around the world tend to adopt the cultural values of the West. Addressing students at Payam Noor University in Mashad, he said: "Women who observe Islamic hijab are currently under considerable pressure to change their appearance. This is a consequence of the harmful influence of Western culture on our society. Western values have even influenced architecture and interior decoration. Some people's dreams and aspirations are inspired by the West."

Over 15% of [homeless](#) in Tehran are women addicted to drugs or alcohol. Most fled their families in the smaller Iranian towns and villages and went to the Iranian capital in search of better social and economic conditions.

Iranian women are [banned](#) from attending football matches. Some disguise themselves as men to attend facing arrest and imprisonment if found out. On social media, women football lovers asked FIFA's head to raise the issue on his visit with Iranian authorities, which he did.

IRAQ

The Iraqi Justice Ministry [announced](#) that it had sent a copy of a draft law on Shiite jurisprudence and personal status to the cabinet for approval. The draft law stipulates that Iraqi Shiites would refer to Islamic Sharia, and specifically principles of Jaafari jurisprudence, for personal status issues — which include marriage and divorce, as well as issues of inheritance and adoption. The pending legislation threatens to further divide Iraqi society on the basis of sectarianism and ethnicity and violate women's and children's rights, including potentially making the latter susceptible to sexual abuse through child marriage.

ISRAEL

Seventy-two percent of Jewish Israelis do not trust the police in protecting women victims of domestic violence and their children, according to a [survey](#). According to the data, half of Israelis know at least one woman who experiences violence of some kind from her husband. Among them, about a third indicated that the woman they know suffers from physical violence, while the rest said the violence was verbal and emotional.



Libya Herald: Women gathered in Algeria Square protesting militias

LIBYA

Hundreds of women turned out in Algeria Square in Libya to [protest](#) against the presence of armed militias in Tripoli streets and across the country. They called for a complete end to the country's militias.

MOROCCO

Moroccans Forced to marry the man who had raped her, a 16-year-old Moroccan girl [committed suicide](#) last month. As Abdel Ali El-Allawi, director of the local chapter of an international NGO, the Moroccan Association of Human Rights, said, the rapist was first put into prison but that his family "entered negotiations with the family of the victim" and proposed that their son marry the teenager; her family assented.



Moroccan teen, forced to marry her rapist, commits suicide



PAKISTAN

A human rights activist [stated](#) that fifty-six women have been killed in Pakistan this year for giving birth to a girl rather than a boy.

PALESTINE

The Palestinian Authority [banned](#) the Islamist Hizb ut Tahrir from holding a seminar in Bethlehem under the title: "Women's groups and societies seek to corrupt women." The group recently launched a campaign against women's organisations and societies, accusing them of corrupting Palestinian women. The campaign is being held under the motto "Women's honour must be protected and the infidels and their tools are conspiring against women." The campaign by Hizb ut Tahrir drew strong condemnations from women's rights groups in the West Bank. The groups accused the party of inciting against women and appealed to the Palestinian Authority to take action to stop the fundamentalists from pursuing their campaign.

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi religious police [arrested](#) two young men offering a "free hug" to passers-by in the capital. Free Hugs Campaign is a movement for individuals to offer hugs to strangers in public places, especially in big cities, "to brighten up their lives."



Saudi men arrested for offering 'free hugs' to people on the street in Riyadh. Image from Huffington Post.

SUDAN

Two activists in Sudan are due to stand [trial](#) for 'indecent behaviour.' They are at risk of imprisonment or flogging. Najlaa Mohammed Ali, a lawyer and human rights activist, and Amin Senada, also an activist, were arrested on 21 October in Port Sudan after they were found to be travelling in the same car together. Initially, members of Sudan's police and security forces took the

pair into custody after accusing Senada of placing his hand on Ali's shoulder. The arresting officers later claimed they had found them kissing in the car, charging both with 'indecent behaviour' under Article 152 of Sudan's 1991 Criminal Code. It is believed that the charge is a response to Ali's political activism, including her participation in countrywide demonstrations that took place in September.

Under the guise of protecting morality and preventing the co-mingling of the sexes, which is deemed "prostitution," government officials have [deployed](#) the public order regime against unmarried men and women alike who dare to share office space and taxi rides or attend parties together.

SYRIA

A new [report](#) estimates 6,000 women have been raped since March 2011 however during the Syrian conflict; the actual number is likely to be much higher given most cases go undocumented.

YEMEN

A Yemeni court [ordered](#) the release of an eloping Saudi woman and her boyfriend and gave 22 year old Huda Abdullah three months to rectify her legal status in the country. Huda had fled her family home in Saudi Arabia and headed to Yemen to meet her beloved. She was

arrested in Yemen for illegal entry and placed on trial, amid mounting pressure from her family and Saudi authorities for her to return home. But she stuck her ground, pleading in court to be able to stay and marry her boyfriend, and applied for asylum through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

arts corner

BURKA AVENGER

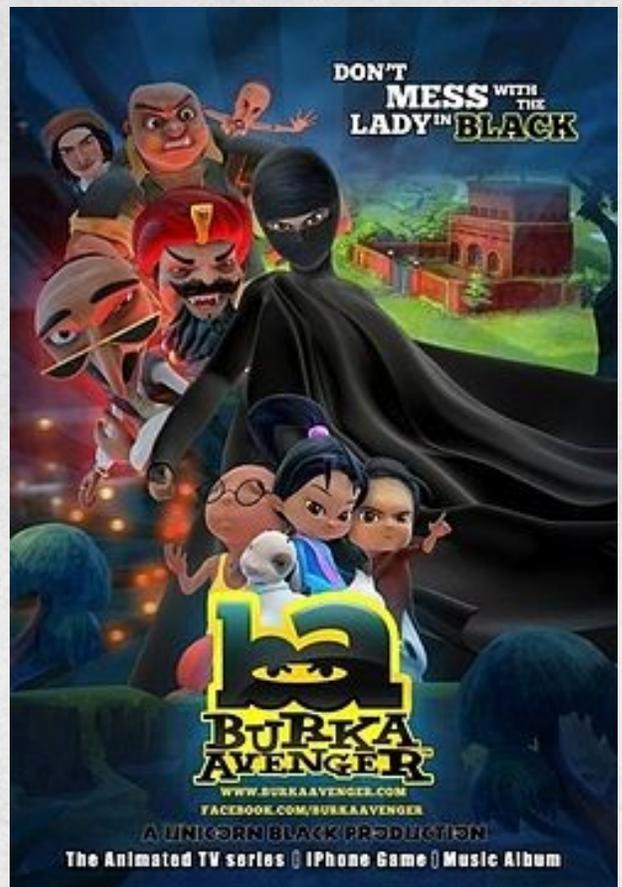
The Burka Avenger is an amazing action-comedy animated TV series shown on Pakistani television that follows the adventures of the Burka Avenger and three young kids in the imaginary city of Halwapur as they fight the evil Baba Bandook and his henchmen.

The superhero is a mild mannered unveiled teacher who becomes the Burka Avenger when her school is threatened with being shut down by Islamists, armed with pens and books.



Burka Avenger is an animated television series airing on Pakistan's GEO TV Network. It features Jiya, a teacher at a girls school whose alter ego is a burka-wearing super hero who uses her martial arts skills, involving throwing pens and books, to fight crime and corruption.

Official site: www.burkaavenger.com



upcoming events



The Religious Right, Secularism & Civil Rights

OCTOBER 11-12, 2014 | TOWER HILL HOTEL, LONDON, UK

Join a **weekend of discussions and debates** on the religious right, its attacks on civil rights and freedoms, and the role of secularism for 21st century humanity.

The Arab uprisings; Sharia and religious laws; the burqa and conspicuous religious symbols; freedom of expression and its limits; apostasy, blasphemy and free thought; "Islamophobia" and racism; honour crimes; faith schools and religious education; reproductive rights and secular values will be amongst the **topics discussed**.

The conference is **endorsed by** Atheist Alliance International; Children First Now; Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain; Equal Rights Now; Fitnah; International Committee against Stoning; International Committee against Execution; International Federation of Iranian Refugees; Iran Solidarity; One Law for All; Secularism is a Women's Issue; The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science UK; and Women Living Under Muslim Laws, amongst others.

**FOR ORGANISATIONS OR VENDORS WISHING TO BOOKS STALLS,
FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO PURCHASE TICKETS, PLEASE CONTACT:**

Post: BM Box 2387, London, WC1N 3XX, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 7719166731

E-mail: onelawforall@gmail.com or fitnah.movement@gmail.com

Web: <http://www.onelawforall.org.uk/> or <http://www.fitnah.org/>

upcoming events



The Religious Right, Secularism & Civil Rights

WEEKEND ADMISSION

2-day conference, including lunches, a cocktail reception and a Saturday evening dinner and entertainment.

UNWAGED £150

WAGED £160

ORGANISATIONS £170

PRICE AFTER 1 MAY 2014: UNWAGED £155, WAGED £170, ORGANISATIONS £180.

SINGLE ADMISSION

Admission to **either** Saturday or Saturday conference (including lunch), **or** Saturday dinner & entertainment.

UNWAGED £50

WAGED £60

ORGANISATIONS £70

PRICE AFTER 1 MAY 2014: UNWAGED £55, WAGED £70, ORGANISATIONS £80.

REGISTRATION FEES ARE NON-REFUNDABLE AFTER MAY 1, 2014.

PHOTO CREDIT: Ezequiel Scagnetti © European Union (Front)

editorial

SECULARISM AS A UNIVERSAL RIGHT

MARYAM NAMAZIE

The concept of 'post-secularism' aids in theorising efforts to diminish secularism's importance just when it's needed most. A theory that insists that secularism lacks relevance, particularly for 'non-Westerners,' is part of the project to dismantle it and knowingly or unwittingly enhances the regressive role of the religious-Right under the guise of defending culturally relative 'rights;' it is also based on a number of false premises.

Contrary to its assertions, the so-called religious revival is about politics rather than religion or increased religiosity. Also, secularism (the separation of religion from the state) is a precondition for safeguarding religious and cultural rights; is not western but universal; and is a fundamental right and necessity for all, and particularly those living outside of the west.

In fact, the articulation and defence of secularism is more urgent than ever given the encroachment on civil rights and freedoms across the world by the religious-Right (particularly Islamism) and the urgent need for solidarity with the palpable fight-back in many countries.

Whilst secularism is often portrayed as anti-religion, in fact it guarantees the absolute right to religion and belief. This is not the case when religion has a role in the state. The death penalty for apostasy or blasphemy, including against believers, is one example of many. In Iran 130 offences are punishable by death, including heresy and enmity against god.

Secularism also defends the right to expression of belief even whilst limiting the role of expression in the public space. For example, the Christian-Right calls for laws forbidding reproductive rights for all citizens yet laws granting such rights do not force Catholics to practice either contraception or abortion.

On the flip side, there are sharia law courts in Britain, which are a parallel legal system where a woman's testimony is worth half that of a man's; women have limited rights to divorce whereas men have unilateral right to divorce and child custody is given to the father at a pre-set age irrespective of the welfare of the child. Where the law is secular, women would have equal



rights and access not available to them under religious laws. Restricting these sharia courts would still allow women to give up their rights to alimony or child custody in a civil court if they felt they deserved nothing whilst protecting the many who don't want to or are coerced into giving up their rights under sharia.

What is often touted as 'religious rights' is in fact an imposition by the religious-Right and Islamists and aims to implicate the state in the implementation of inequalities in the name of rights. There is, however, no right to oppress and discriminate against.

As author and human rights lawyer, Karima Bennoune says:

"...in applying freedom of religion, both those who believe and those who choose not to believe, as well as those who seek to manifest belief and those who do not wish to be coerced to do so, must be taken into consideration. This is only possible in a framework of secularism..."

"...The term secularism here means emphasis on the temporal over the religious in law and an accompanying minimization of the role of religion in the functioning of

Continued on next page

the state and legal system. The significance of the temporal for human rights is not that it is always morally superior to the religious, [though I would argue it is] but rather that it is contestable. The temporal allows space for dissent which the 'you cannot argue with God' paradigm forecloses."

One fallacy of the theory of post-secularism is that secularism has come to an end given the return or revival of religion. In fact, the 'religious revival' is not because of increased religiosity but due to the rise of the religious-Right, spearheaded by Islamism.

Whilst Islamism may use Islam as a tool for the far-Right restructuring of power structures (just as the Christian-Right uses Christianity) the movement is not fundamentally about religion as an ideology and belief but about enhancing the power and influence of the religious-Right in society.

In the past several decades (though there is a palpable change in era), the rapid rise of Islamism in Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Indonesia, Nigeria, Somalia, Pakistan, Sudan, and its increasing influence in Europe, including Britain; the constraints on free expression; increased veiling and so on are not due to people becoming more devout Muslims but because of the rise of Islamism.

In fact, Islamism was brought to centre stage as a result of US foreign policy during the Cold War in an attempt to create a 'green belt' around the then Soviet

Union. In contemporary history, the rise of Islamism can be linked to the establishment of an Islamic regime in Iran on the back of a suppressed left-leaning revolution and its exportation internationally. Saudi Wahabbism has also played a role.

Despite this, and partly because of post-modernism and cultural relativism, Islamism is seen to be one and the same with 'Muslims,' thereby legitimising oppression under the guise of respect for culture and tolerance.

Multiculturalism (not as a positive lived experience but

as a segregationist social policy) and cultural relativism ignore and negate the plurality in any given society or 'community' by giving precedence to the dominant culture and religion and implying that that human beings – depending on how they are pigeon-holed – are fundamentally different, and should be treated as such.

Because it is those in power that determine the dominant culture, Islamist values and sensibilities are seen to be those of 'authentic Muslims.' The conflation between 'Muslim' and Islamist means that for example, even though historically there have been portrayals of Mohammad, Islam's prophet, including by Muslims, it is now considered an 'offence against Muslims' to do so. Opposing veiling or Sharia law is seen in the same way, though both are highly contested in many contexts.

The theory of post-secularism sees Muslims as a homogeneous community that is conservative, Islamic and anti-secular. But there is no homogeneous culture anywhere. Conflating Islamist with Muslim ignores the immense dissent and denies the social and political struggles and class politics. It is a narrative peddled by Islamists and their apologists – many of them on the

Left (and I say this being on the Left myself) - in an attempt to feign representation, restrict dissent, and prescribe the limits of 'acceptable' expression.

Ironically, like the nativist far-Right which opposes multiculturalism and cultural relativism yet benefits from its idea of difference

to scapegoat the 'other' and promote its own form of white identity politics, the post-modernists use multiculturalism to side with the oppressor by demanding respect and tolerance for oppression characterised as 'difference' no matter how intolerable.

And whilst feigning to be inclusive, the theory of post-secularism is really western-centric. It doesn't see the many secularists within the 'Muslim community' in the west and in societies in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.



Martha Moose performance art: The slut, the spinster, the perfect woman

According to the Iranian Marxist Mansoor Hekmat: ‘The religious, cultural, ethnic and national categorisation of people is always the first step in denying their universal rights as human beings. If the genocide in Rwanda is the continuation of an African tradition, if stoning is the Iranian people’s Islamic tradition, if veiling is part of the culture of women in ‘Islamic societies’, if marrying off a nine year old girl is a tradition of the people of those countries themselves, then they can really be forgotten, humiliated, bombed and left to the mercy of their own rules beyond the fortresses of western civilisation and democracy. But if it becomes clear that these people like all others live and produce in a capitalist society and global market, if it becomes apparent that these Islamic traditions and laws have been imposed on them by sheer force of imprisonment, torture chambers, street patrols, knives, executions, and stoning, if it becomes apparent that these people like all others are yearning for freedom, equality and an end to discrimination... then all this hypocritical ideological monument will collapse and the damage will be beyond words.’

As a result of cultural relativism, concepts such as rights, equality, respect and tolerance, which were initially raised vis-à-vis the individual, are instead applicable to culture and religion and often take precedence over individuals.

Though Muslims or those labelled as such are Islamism’s first victims and on the frontlines of resistance, the conflation of Islam and Islamism with Muslim has meant that much needed criticism is often condemned as racism. The distinction between humans and their beliefs and far-right political movements is of crucial significance here. It is the human being who is meant to be equal not his or her beliefs. It is the human being who is worthy of the highest respect and rights not his or her beliefs or those imputed on them.

Moreover, it’s the idea of difference that has always been the fundamental principle of a racist agenda not the other way around.

Contrary to that which is argued by the theory of post-secularism, in plural societies, with diverse beliefs, religion must be kept separate from the state in order to

treat all equally, despite and irrespective of individual beliefs. The state must be secular if it is to be inclusive, accessible, non-discriminatory and if it is to be underpinned by principles of equality, non-discrimination and individual rights.

Of course when speaking of Islam or any religion, I am not referring to religion as a personal belief. Everyone has an absolute right to religion and atheism but religion in the state is no longer a question of personal belief but a matter of political power and control.

As Women Living Under Muslim Laws says:

What is often touted as ‘religious rights’ is in fact an imposition by the religious-Right and Islamists and aims to implicate the state in the implementation of inequalities in the name of rights. There is, however, no right to oppress and discriminate against.

“Fundamentalist terror is by no means a tool of the poor against the rich, of the Third World against the West, of people against capitalism. It is not a legitimate response that can be supported by the progressive forces of the world. Its main target is the internal democratic opposition to their theocratic project and to their project of controlling all aspects of society in the name of religion, including education,

the legal system, youth services, etc. When fundamentalists come to power, they silence the people, they physically eliminate dissidents, writers, journalists, poets, musicians, painters – like fascists do. Like fascists, they physically eliminate the ‘untermensch’ – the subhumans -, among them ‘inferior races’, gays, mentally or physically disabled people. And they lock women ‘in their place’, which as we know from experience ends up being a straight jacket...”

Those who consider a demand for secularism as ‘culturally inappropriate,’ ‘western,’ or ‘colonialist’ are only considering Islamism’s sensibilities and values, not that of the many who resist. Islamism is a form of colonialism though it is seen as ‘authentic.’ Islamists in Niger or Mali are de-Africanising the lived Islam there, for example, and the niqab and burqa were unheard of in many countries just a few decades ago.

Plus even in many western countries the fight for secularism is not over. Britain for example, has an established church. The queen is the head of the Church of England. There are unelected bishops in the House of Lords and daily prayers in Parliament. Even in France, which is renowned for its secularism, judges take sharia law into account in, for example, the annulment of

marriage and have even introduced sharia's civil code for some of its citizens of North African descent via bilateral agreements.

Also, the post-secularism theory ignores the reality that believers can be secularists too. Recent surveys in France show that about 25% of the population in France is atheist, with the same percentage being Christian and also Muslim. 75% of the population, however, are secularists. Research carried out by Southall Black Sisters in the UK shows that many women, including those who are 'deeply observant want to be able to traverse different religious spaces for their social and emotional lives and secular spaces for their activism and advice.'

The theory of post-secularism implies that this is about a clash of civilisations or an antagonism between a 'secular West' and a 'religious East,' but it is not. It is about a global struggle between secularists, including many Muslims and believers on the one hand, and theocrats and the religious-Right on the other.

There are strong secular movements in so-called Muslim-majority countries like Iran, Pakistan, Algeria and Mali, despite the great risks involved. Karima Bennouna has brought to light many such groups and individuals in her recently published book, the title of which is based on a Pakistani play where the devotional singer who is beaten and intimidated for singing deemed 'un-Islamic' retorts: 'Your fatwas do not apply here.' The uprisings and revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa, such as the mass protests against Islamists for the assassination of Socialist leader Chokri Belaid in Tunisia; the vast secular protests in Turkey against Islamisation; the Harlem Shake in front of Muslim Brotherhood headquarter in Egypt and the largest demonstration in contemporary history against the Muslim Brotherhood – 33 million people -

are all evidence of that.

Post-secularism (leaving people at the mercy of 'their own culture') and the systematic and theorised failure to defend secularism and people's, particularly women's, civil rights in many countries and communities, only aids and abets the religious-Right to the detriment of us all – believers and non.

As British philosopher AC Grayling has said: secularism is a fundamental right. Today, given the influence of the religious-Right, it is also a precondition for women's rights and equality and for rights and freedoms in the society at large. It must be actively defended, promoted, and articulated.



letters to the editor

Undecided about legislating women's dress

Miriam K.

I question banning the niqab and burqa if a woman actively and freely chooses to dress in this way. May I just say, firstly, that my own personal opinion on the veil and burqa is that it is ultimately a manifestation of male power which eschews responsibility for male sexual behaviour and places it upon the shoulders of women. It is part of a sexual double standard that 'blames' women for 'tempting' men and even for being sexually assaulted by men - women are somehow seen as 'asking for it' (the sexual double standard is a worldwide phenomenon not just a Middle Eastern one). No comment on men having any responsibility for their own personal, sexual behaviour, of course, (does this mean men are little better than dogs?). Can I also say that, for me, what makes us special as human beings is our capacity to communicate and so much of this is done by the eyes and face of another person - the burqa, in particular, looks abhorrent to me.

However, my quandary is - what of the Muslim women living in Western society who choose to cover up through no pressure beyond their own active choice (yes, you can argue they have somehow been brainwashed by familial/cultural expectations). Have we a right to ban their choice? Have I the 'right' as another human being and (western) woman to say - don't cover up! Does this not sound the same as some imam saying - cover up!

I would like to live in a world (also for my two daughters) where women truly dressed as they pleased without all the crap that goes with what women wear. I am undecided about the issue of legislating women's dress... (but hate the double-standard involved).

Do not fight the flag alone

Marieme Helie Lucas responds

We are all as concerned with liberties. And we are also fully aware of the fact that right and extreme-right traditional parties and organisations are trying to make the best possible use of our defence of secularism in order to further their xenophobic agenda. We need progressive forces to join us in the unveiling of the broad fundamentalist political agenda of the Muslim-right, in order to step out of the dilemma: speak up and be used by the classic far-right, or not speak up and our silence will be used by the Muslim far-right.

This is precisely why we need to link up the question of the Muslim fundamentalists' 'flag' with their broader political agenda. The real question cannot be limited to the veil per se; it has to take into account all the other demands that are made simultaneously (parallel legal systems establishing different laws - not democratically voted but 'divine' - and different rights for different categories of citizens; limitations in the teaching of evolution in science classes; bans on art classes; the imposition of supposedly religious rules on an entire population branded Muslim regardless of their

individual beliefs; attacks on dissenters under the pretext of 'Islamophobia'; etc..)

All of those are part of a theocratic political project of the Muslim extreme-right which goes against secularism, democracy, fundamental rights - the veil/burqa/niqab being only the visible tip of the iceberg, the 'flag' of their political project. Banning the flag alone is obviously not enough to target their political agenda as a whole: there is an urgent need for a political analysis that clearly identifies the ways to counter their global political project, and to do that without fuelling the racist agenda of the traditional European far-right. And it is not by accident that I repeat 'political' in this sentence, as so many people still talk about religion when trying to grapple with the problem.



Women wearing the burqa in Europe today are instrumentalised by the Muslim extreme-right, whether or not they realise it. They display their 'difference' and 'identity,' which is exactly what the traditional far-right needs in order to fulfil its xenophobic agenda. Both the traditional xenophobic extreme-right and the Muslim extreme-right want a violent confrontation and need it in order to recruit fresh troops. This is not a reason for shying away from addressing the proliferation of burqas everywhere, but it should be an incentive to not isolate the 'flag' from the broader issue of the growing far-rights in Europe, including the Muslim far-right.

Progressive people in Europe should link up and support the struggles of progressive secular people in so-called Muslim countries and communities. Struggles against the burqa, or against religious courts, or for secularism are waged everywhere in Muslim-majority contexts. We need to uphold citizenship - together - and do away with divisive 'communities' and communalism.

Marieme Helie Lucas is an Algerian sociologist and founder of Secularism is a Women's Issue.

our campaigns

FIGHT GENDER APARTHEID

Universities UK (UUK) has issued [guidance](#) on external speakers saying that the segregation of the sexes at universities is not discriminatory as long as “both men and women are being treated equally, as they are both being segregated in the same way.” The guidance has been [supported](#) by the National Union of Students.

UUK add that universities should bear in mind that “concerns to accommodate the wishes or beliefs of those opposed to segregation should not result in a religious group being prevented from having a debate in accordance with its belief system” and that if “imposing an unsegregated seating area in addition to the segregated areas contravenes the genuinely-held religious beliefs of the group hosting the event, or those of the speaker, the institution should be mindful to ensure that the freedom of speech of the religious group or speaker is not curtailed unlawfully.”



We, the undersigned, condemn the endorsement of gender apartheid by Universities UK. Any form of segregation, whether by race, sex or otherwise is discriminatory. Separate is never equal and segregation is never applied to those who are considered equal. By justifying segregation, Universities UK sides with Islamist values at the expense of the many Muslims and others who oppose sex apartheid and demand equality between women and men.

The guidance must be immediately rescinded and sex segregation at universities must come to an end.

Join initial list of signatories below by [signing the petition here](#).

A C Grayling, Philosopher
Abhishek N. Phadnis, President, London School of Economics Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society
Anissa Helie, Academic
Charlie Klendjian, Secretary of Lawyers' Secular Society
Chris Moos, Secretary, London School of Economics Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society
Deborah Hyde, Editor of Skeptic magazine
Deeyah Khan, Film Director and Music Producer
Dilip Simeon, Chairperson of the Aman Trust
Elham Manea, Author
Faisal Gazi, Writer and Blogger
Fatou Sow, International Coordinator of Women Living Under Muslim Laws
Gita Sahgal, Director, Centre for Secular Space
Harsh Kapoor, South Asia Citizen's Web
Helen Palmer, Chair of London Humanists
Kate Smurthwaite, Comedian and Activist
Marieme Helie Lucas, Coordinator, Secularism is a Women's Issue
Maryam Namazie, Spokesperson for One Law for All and Fitnah
Mina Ahadi, International Committee against Stoning
Nadia El Fani, Tunisian Filmmaker
Nahla Mahmoud, Spokesperson of Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain
Ophelia Benson, Writer
Pavan Dhaliwal, Head of Public Affairs of the British Humanist Association
Peter Tatchell, Director of Peter Tatchell Foundation
Polly Toynbee, Journalist
Pragna Patel, Director of Southall Black Sisters
Raheem Kassam, Director of Student Rights
Richard Dawkins, Scientist
Rohini Hensman, Social Activist
Rory Fenton, President of The National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies of the UK and ROI
Rumy Hassan, Academic
Rupert Sutton, Lead Researcher of Student Rights
Safia Lebdi, Founder of “Les insoumis-es”
Salil Tripathi, Writer
Soad Baba Aissa, President of Association pour l' Egalité, la Mixité et la Laïcité en Algérie
Terry Sanderson, President of National Secular Society
Yasmin Rehman, Women's Rights Campaigner

Continued on next page

Protest Universities UK's endorsement of Gender Apartheid at British Universities

DATE: Tuesday 10 December 2013

TIME: 5:00-6:30pm

PLACE: Universities UK, Woburn House,
20 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9HQ
(Closest Underground: Euston or Russell
Square Underground Station)

Universities UK (UUK) guidance on external speakers saying that the segregation of the sexes at universities is not discriminatory as long as "both men and women are being treated equally, as they are both being segregated in the same way" is an endorsement of gender apartheid. Any form of segregation, whether by race, sex or otherwise is discriminatory. Separate is never equal and segregation is never applied to those who are considered equal. By justifying segregation, UUK sides with Islamist values at the expense of the many Muslims and others who oppose sex apartheid and demand equality between women and men. The guidance must be immediately rescinded and sex segregation at universities must come to an end.

For more information, contact:

Maryam Namazie, Fitnah

maryamnamazie@gmail.com

077 1916 6731

or Chris Moos

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074 2872 0599

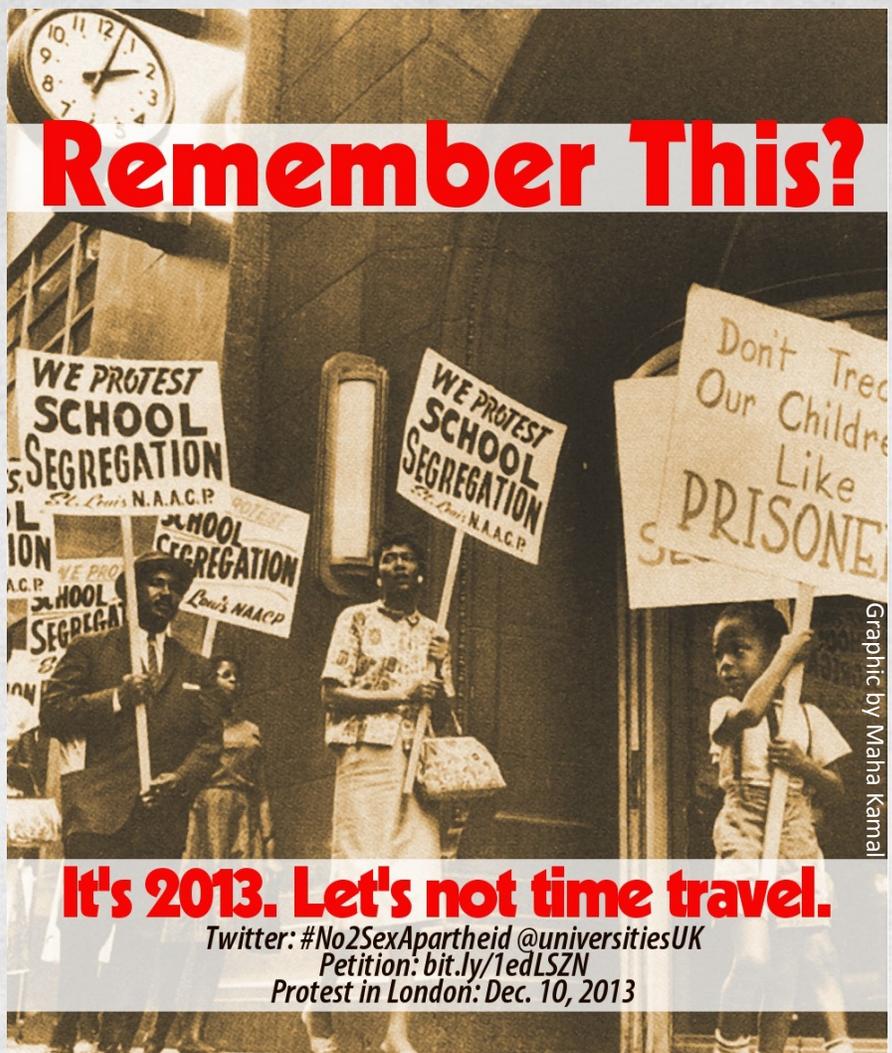
[http://fitnah.org/fitnah_campaign_english/
uk_sex_segregation.html](http://fitnah.org/fitnah_campaign_english/uk_sex_segregation.html)

and

[https://www.facebook.com/
events/180254252180446](https://www.facebook.com/events/180254252180446)

Also join teams of Sex Apartheid Busters being organised to break segregation wherever it is instituted by emailing

maryamnamazie@gmail.com



Iran legalised paedophilia.

Join the fight to protect the children.



Photo: Pavel P./Flickr (unaffiliated)

TWEET: #Iran #No2LegalPaedophilia

SIGN: http://www.avaaz.org/en/petition/An_end_to_legalised_paedophilia_and_child_rape_in_Iran/

CONDEMN LEGALISED PAEDOPHILIA AND CHILD RAPE IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Fitnah – Movement for Women’s Liberation and Children First Now unequivocally condemn legalised paedophilia. This law, like many other laws in the Islamic regime of Iran, violates the dignity and rights of children. And it must be stopped.

If you haven’t already signed our [petition](#), please join the over 9,500 others who have and do it now. Also forward it to 10 friends or acquaintances and Tweet against the law: #Iran #No2LegalPaedophilia. You can also write to Ali Khamenei, Iran’s Leader, info_leader@leader.ir, Twitter: @khamenei_ir or to Hassan Rouhani, President, media@rouhani.ir, Twitter: @hassanrouhani demanding an end to child rape and paedophilia.

Tweet against the law:

#Iran #No2LegalPaedophilia

Sign our petition and forward it to 10 friends or acquaintances.

Write to Ali Khamenei, Iran’s Leader, info_leader@leader.ir, Twitter: @khamenei_ir or to Hassan Rouhani, President, media@rouhani.ir, Twitter: @hassanrouhani demanding an end to child rape and paedophilia.

Publicise the campaign on social media including by changing your Facebook profile change to our campaign poster.

Do an act of solidarity on the internet, in your city square, at work, at your university in support of children’s rights and against the law.

letters to the editor

Send questions and comments to fitnah.movement@gmail.com and we will respond in the next issue of the publication.

contact us

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join us

Fitnah – Movement for Women’s Liberation is a protest movement demanding freedom, equality, and secularism and calling for an end to misogynist cultural, religious and moral laws and customs, compulsory veiling, sex apartheid, sex trafficking, and violence against women. We remind the Islamic regime of Iran and Islamists everywhere that the women’s liberation movement is a source of fitnah for their rule alone. We are Islamism’s worst fitnah!

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