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Feminism and the soul of secularism

- Debate - Marxism and Religion -

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Secularism, as a concept, appears to be in danger from both the left and the right. Among feminists, it tends to be only some minority women scrambling for the soul of secularism. It is time for all feminists to muck in, says Rahila Gupta

Marieme Hélie-Lucas, founder of Women Living Under Muslim laws (WLUML), speaking at a conference on 'Secularism, Racism and the Politics of Belonging' organised by the University of East London and Runnymede Trust in January [1], posed an important question: in the face of so much discrimination, why do women of migrant Muslim-descent still choose to support secularism? She was, of course, speaking about the the North African community in France, particularly Algerians, who had fled the rise of religious fundamentalism at home. However, it is no less valid a question to pose about minority women in the UK despite their very different histories. It is also important because it shifts the focus from those women who use their religio-political identity to challenge racism to those who recognise the dangers of that strategy.

As much of state policy constructs minority communities in terms of their religious identity, it is a question of particular interest to Southall Black Sisters (SBS) who have resisted religious categorisation in their provision of a secular service to women escaping domestic violence. Their new report, Cohesion, Faith and Gender [2] which will be launched on 16 March explores precisely this question through in-depth interviews with women of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian backgrounds who use the centre. For those who associate secular ideals with Western values, it may come as something of a surprise that all but one of the women did not want religious authorities to shape their lives. Whilst the majority of women were believers, they wanted a clear separation of their spiritual needs from their social needs. Most felt a primary loyalty to their gender identity and found that any attempt to assert their rights had met with the disapproval of religious leaders. They welcomed an inclusive and secular space such as the one provided by SBS because they carried memories of the gendered, caste-based and religious discrimination they had faced in their countries of origin.

To some extent public policy is influenced by the public debate. Secularism, as a concept, appears to be in danger from both the left and the right. The growing popularity of the term, secular fundamentalism, an oxymoron if ever there was one, is part of the continuing attempt to discredit it. Although secularism was traditionally the preserve of the left, some on the left have abandoned this territory, in the face of rising anti-Muslim racism and the state's War on Terror, and developed an anti-racist politics that gives succour to religious extremism rather than challenging it. The marches against the war in Iraq, for example, that were organised by the Stop the War coalition in which the major partners were the Socialist Workers' Party and the Muslim Association of Britain, often used slogans like 'We are all Muslims'. Rallies started with prayers from the podium! This is not the way we tackle 'Islamophobia', certainly not by squeezing our public secular spaces.

Similarly, the alliance of anti-EDL (English Defence League) forces in June 2010 in Tower Hamlets, which included Respect, SWP and the East London Mosque, illustrated very neatly the capitulation of the left to the fascists within while organising against the fascists without. When a member of Women Against Fundamentalism challenged one of the organisers, an ex-Respect member, on the make-up of the alliance, he dismissed her reservations as a counsel of perfection. The only threat that he could see was from the white fascists, he was not interested in the complex and complicated way in which Islamic fundamentalist forces were vying for power and for the leadership of the anti-racist/anti fascist movement in Tower Hamlets.

There are also attempts by academics to chip away at the theoretical basis of secularism. Haleh Afshar, an ex-Marxist, Muslim feminist academic and member of the House of Lords, wants to 'problematise' the notion that secularism is 'an avenue towards equality' [3]. She believes that adopting it in order to be inclusive has not worked

because 'people of faith feel excluded by the faithlessness of society'. This is a particularly enervating construct of 'people of faith' and does not reflect the lived reality of the women who come to SBS. In any case, people of faith are likely to be at greater danger from each other i.e. from different faiths rather than the faithless and would therefore benefit from a level playing field. Secularism is not about hostility to religion but about not privileging faith over non-faith.

Further constraints on secularism are placed by those who argue that religion is not a matter of choice but should be considered to be as primordial a part of one's identity as ethnicity; a position that was articulated by AbdoolKarim Vakil of King's College at the UEL conference. If religion is not a belief system, chosen freely, but seen as an embedded part of one's identity, then any critique of it becomes offensive and is collapsed into the same category as racism. As Haleh Afshar puts it, 'If what you say belittles me, if what you say disempowers me...then we can't be equal, we can't have the same rights'. But there's an unacknowledged substitution of 'me' for 'my beliefs'.

Vakil also questions the neutrality of the secular space as a way of undermining it: because 'it is basically the way the state regulates a space in which the differences that are acceptable can manifest itself and differences that are unacceptable are excluded', and because that entails 'the disciplining of certain subjectivities and their acceptability for the public space' he argues that it cannot be neutral. But does it matter? Especially if it means disciplining of certain subjectivities such as misogyny or homophobia. He appears to further condemn 'the secular as a thickened state that's already a sedimentation of our relations, including over the very conceptualisation of what is religious, what is secular, what is political.' But as these concepts are continually contested, it is a dynamic process, a churning and not a setting.

At the far-right end of the spectrum, secularism has been hijacked as a way of asserting national identity. In France, a constitutionally secular country, Bloc Identitaire, to the right of Le Pen's National Front, embraces secularism as a way of 'othering' Muslims. Marieme Hélie - Lucas reported that in parts of Paris where Muslims pray on the streets outside their mosques, the Bloc holds provocative picnics with wine and pork on the same streets. In the UK, the Stop Islamification of Europe (SIOE) group also seems to be supporting secularism when it argues that, 'SIOE wants all religions to be treated in law the same way as political parties, with no special legal protection.' However, their secularism is implicitly and explicitly defined as an Islam-free space, a position shared by the more sophisticated though equally racist EDL. A similar attempt to assert national identity by the BNP and the English Democrats takes them down the opposite route: identifying with Christian values in Britain, constitutionally a Christian country.

With the resurgence of religion, secularism is bound to be contested territory. The women who come to SBS to rebuild their lives testify to the importance of secular spaces. One woman said, 'I would like my views represented by women, not by community and religious leaders...If religious leaders bring their laws where can we run to? There will be more suicides, depression, castaways, conversions. It would be the biggest disaster.' Among feminists, it tends to be only some minority women scrambling for the soul of secularism. It is time for all feminists to muck in.

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[1] <http://www.uel.ac.uk/cmrb/news.htm>

[2] <http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/>

[3] <http://www.uel.ac.uk/cmrb/audiovisu..>