

SECULARISM AND MUSLIMNESS: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT FROM ALGERIA

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I am one of those lucky people who were brought up in mixed contexts (religious, cultural and ethnic) and far from suffering from a loss of identity, had enjoyed the richness of non-antagonistic multiple identities.

In the late fifties and early sixties, most of us — my Algerian friends, fellow students, colleagues and activists — were openly secularist, not religiously inclined, and certainly not practising religion; we were engaged in a liberation struggle in the name of nationalism and socialism, not in the name of religion. In the elder generation, the practising Muslims we knew did activist work which was generous and humane, drawing from their faith the strength to banish racial hatred from their hearts even under colonization and during the liberation war. They were a world apart from today's fundamentalists.

During the liberation struggle, when sharp polarisations took place between Algerians and Europeans, some of us had the privilege of working with "Europeans" — Christians — within Algeria, who were inspired by their religion's principles of humanity and fraternity to help the Algerian freedom fighters. We were also working with internationalists and cosmopolitans in France whose commitment and spirit to defend the right to independence of Algeria was rooted not in any religious faith, but in their philosophy of human rights and social justice.

In other words, my political upbringing was shaped by women and men who — atheists, Muslims, Christians or Jews — stood for principles, drawn from indeed different sources, but leading them all to common positions on rights of people to decide for themselves, on anti-colonialism, on social justice and human rights.

The crucial experience of my generation, the war for independence, left us, young activists, with the deeply rooted knowledge that morality, humanity, generosity and courage were not the ownership of any creed, any ethnic group or nationality. Visitors of the newly independent Algeria were amazed at the absence of racism or feelings of hatred, revenge and retaliation, after a seven year long war which killed two million Algerian people.

It is therefore even more surprising to witness the monopolisation of these values by Islamic fundamentalists, slowly but surely within nearly forty years after independence, and to track similar trends in so many other Muslim countries. Intolerance prevails against Algerians who are non-Muslims and, worse, non-believers, against agnosticists and atheists. Xenophobia against foreigners has led to their recent killing; explosion of violence and murder of intellectuals and of women who have become the main targets of fundamentalism, is justified by their not being 'good Muslims', or not enough.

be it in their day to day and private behaviour or in their political stands. While we fought a seven year war to be able to call ourselves 'Algerians', — and no more 'Muslims' or 'indigenous' as the French colonisers did — we have now gone back to colonial labels and fundamentalists have imposed on all the Algerian people a single forced 'Muslim' identity, exclusive of any other.

Moreover, this label is being adopted by many people outside Algeria who, a few decades ago would not have dared call us a Muslim (but respectfully an Algerian), and now feel thoroughly dissatisfied with our sole national identity and insist on labelling us by religion, ethnicity or tribe (it happened to me so many times), and do not even see any problem in insisting on it.

Layout of administrative forms in more and more countries, even secular ones, now provide a line on which the applicant should indicate his/her 'religion', and sometimes even his/her 'origin': does that mean race, ethnic origin...? Should it at some later stage help track impure blood within nationality and create second class citizens?

Does this ring a bell?

To me, the epitome of this trend lies in labelling 'Muslim' one of the *nationalities* in former Yugoslavia, in the general silence and indifference of other nations and of the European Left. The fact that a vast majority of the so-called Muslims in former Yugoslavia were non-believers, and that 'Muslim' cannot here refer to a faith, does not seem to disturb anyone.

Is one a Muslim by birth? Is it as unwashable as the original sin? Is it a race? a colour? A culture? If it were a culture, does it mean that all Muslims of the world are alike? Those who veil women and those who let them walk around with bare breasts; those who practice female genital mutilation and those who have never heard of this practice; those who seclude women and those who export them as domestic workers in the Gulf countries; those who have women as heads of state and of political parties and those who forbid them to drive a car: those who believe in God and those who are communists and atheists. Can anyone declare against your will that *you are or should be a Muslim*? Because of your birth place, your family origins, your country? And if it happens, what can you do about it? Is there such a thing, as fundamentalists pretend, as "The Muslim World"? Is it a political entity (from kingdoms to feudalism, democracies, capitalism and socialism?) The *Umma* is the community of believers, but what on earth is "The Muslim World"? Why are so many people, not only inside Muslim countries and communities where fundamentalists are at work, but in the outside world too, prepared to believe in such an entity, and what is its epistemological content?

The construction of Muslimness is a common task undertaken jointly by Muslim fundamentalists and by all those who, from the Hindu Right to the European Left and many others, identify a person or a group by this religious label without the concerned people's consent and regardless of other markers of identity one wants to be identified by. Far from showing respect for 'the others' culture, unwarranted religious labelling is an offence to individual and collective freedom. There is less and less space for non religious markers of identity, and this constitutes a real threat to humanity.

Mere secularism is now seen as an attack on religion, the right to be secular has been severely curtailed everywhere in Muslim countries, *fatwas* for alleged blasphemy, apostasy or for defaming Islam are on the rise-recently in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Chad, Egypt, Algeria, etc.

Half a century ago, Andre Malraux wrote that "the 21st century will be religious". Muslim fundamentalists would certainly not contradict him. The expansion of Islam as a faith, hence of the *Umma*, will not satisfy their greed to construct a 'Muslim world' of which we have everything to fear. We also have experienced the pressure to shift from our general human rights perspective, which in our view also included working for reform of supposedly religious laws, to working more exclusively from within the frame of religion.

The network of Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) is not an organization of 'Muslim women'; it draws its name from a mere socio-political fact: that women born in Muslim contexts on the one hand share some similar situations and on the other hand live under striking differences. These differences are due to several factors: different interpretations of Islam, different cultures in which Islamisation took place, different political situations, political misuse of religion and traditions, etc.

Knowing about these similarities and differences will enable women to challenge the divine character of customs and laws, and promote the best laws and practices, from *both* within and outside the so-called 'Muslim world'. However, we could not ignore that some of the similarities in our situations may come from religious interpretations. WLUML was therefore bound to work *both* from within and from outside the frame of religion, and did not find in this process any ontological contradiction. We were rather catering to different needs: many of the WLUML's activities are secular in nature, others promote interpretations of religion by women.

Two reasons have prevailed in the WLUML's decision to also work in the field of reform within the frame of religion; on the one hand, many women could not come to fight for their civil rights and human rights because they internalised the accusation made by fundamentalists that, by putting forward their demands for women's rights, women were betraying Islam, their community, their country. These women had to find for themselves, within their own religion, inspiration and justification for their struggles, their issues and their strategies.

Fundamentalists so far were the only ones to speak of religion and they had invaded the field, leaving no space to reformists who were threatened, reduced to silence or killed in several countries.

There was an obvious need for religiously minded women to hear a more progressive and hopefully feminist version of Islam, to be in touch with feminist theologians of Islam, and liberation theology in Islam, in order to be reassured and comforted in their right to reinterpretation.

On the other hand, Islam bashing made it difficult for us all to denounce the rise of the religious right-fundamentalist-parties and trends without disassociating their activities and practices from those of non fundamentalist Muslims. At this stage, one had to avoid entering in an essentialist debate on Islam. Most of us who are not theologians and do not intend to become so, only deal with the socio-political realities of what Muslims do, rather than what Islam should be, wants to be or claims to be.

However, the mere fact that, as a network of women from varied backgrounds, we did not exclude working with women from the religious framework has provoked interesting reactions. First of all, we had to get accustomed to being accused of being either 'too religious' or 'not religious' depending on the flavour of the day.

Moreover, it is of concern to me that, over the years, the activities which get reported outside our own countries are those that relate to interpretation and reform within the frame of Islam, while our secular activities are considered less 'typical' (or exotic ?) and are rather ignored. Our work with Islamic feminist theologians receive wide publicity abroad; we would have felt happy with-if it were not an exclusive interest operating to the detriment of other points of view. More and more feminist conferences in Europe and North America include themes or even focus on 'Muslim women', a concept which they unfortunately use very lightly, with a total lack of political awareness and which, in my view, tends to comfort-unwittingly, I assume-the fundamentalist idea that women born in certain places are necessarily believing Muslims. Feminists should know better.

I cannot help but view this growing interest as another form of labelling which secludes people ("Muslims") into their 'Muslimness' and excludes them from their share of humanity, trap them into a faith they may not believe in and an imaginary homogeneous Muslim culture which does not exist anywhere in the world.

This is the agenda of fundamentalists. It should not be the one of progressive people. Respect of differences, of other people's culture or religion should not lead to ghettoisation, but to openness and tolerance.

As a secularist: I stand for my multiple identities. Secularism is the only guarantee that I may be able to preserve the diversity of the human wealth which is my heritage, and share it with others, without being sentenced to death for apostasy or blasphemy.