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**Defending Secularism is the task of the Left**

**Maryam Namazie**

Secularism is an important principle and fundamental human right. By secularism, I am referring to the French ideal of laïcité, which is the separation of Church and state and the state’s disengaging from and declaring itself incompetent in matters of religion. (Helie-Lucas, M. 2011. [A Definition of Laïcité/Secularism](https://www.wluml.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/D30-31.pdf). Women Living Under Muslim Laws, page 17.)

Whilst secularism is often portrayed as western, the demand for secularism is on the rise, particularly in countries ruled by the religious-Right. In fact, no one understands the need for the separation of religion from the state better than those living in theocracies. The large numbers of refugees fleeing Islamic states and movements to secular societies is one case in point. As is the rising tide of the ex-Muslim movement in the Middle East and North Africa despite the fact that atheism, apostasy, blasphemy and heresy are punishable by death in over a dozen Islamic states. (Holleis, J. 2021. [Middle East: Are people losing their religion?](https://www.dw.com/en/middle-east-are-people-losing-their-religion/a-56442163) DW.)

A secular society is a minimum precondition for the enjoyment of rights and freedoms, especially for minorities. People have a right to religion and belief as personal matters. When people enter the public space, however, they must do so as citizens not members of ‘tribes.’ This is key because beliefs can and will conflict. Not all citizens think alike. It’s only a secular framework that safeguards the believer AND the non-believer. In secular societies, the choice belongs to the individual. Have an abortion or don’t. Be an atheist or not. Wear the hijab or discard it. In plural societies with many differences of opinion, it’s crucial that citizens are equal and have full rights and freedoms irrespective of beliefs. Of course, this leads to tensions, like when the Islamist project wants to impose veils on children in secular schools, or when a far-Right mayor instructs police to remove a woman wearing a burkini on a French beach (a decision overturned by a French civil court). In general, though, the main source of conflict comes from religious rules, backed by violent fundamentalists, not secularism.

Another point that needs to be made is that the equality of citizens is not the same as the equality of beliefs or religions. All beliefs are not equal or equally valid. For example, enabling Sharia courts to operate in Britain because of the existence of Jewish Beth Dinn shows more concern for ‘equality’ of beliefs rather than women’s equality. Women’s rights must trump religion and religious courts that discriminate against women if women are considered equal citizens and not extensions of the family, community and male honour.

One has a right to their misogynist beliefs but imposing those via religious courts, community leaders or religious states has nothing to do with the right to a personal religion and everything to do with the right of fundamentalists to impose their political project on the society at large. A pillar of which is controlling and erasing women from the public space. Fundamentalists ‘reduce plural spaces and the right to interpret, dissent and doubt.’ (Dhaliwal, S, Cowden, S. 2016. [Nationalism, Fundamentalism and the Monopoly on Violence](https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2843-nationalism-fundamentalism-and-the-monopoly-on-violence-a-reply-to-sara-r-farris): A Reply to Sara R. Farris. Verso Books.)

Unfortunately, the concept of citizenship, which is key for secular societies has been diminished. This is rooted in the end of the Cold War where the collapse of the Soviet Union ‘meant also the demise of the West as its opposite pole.’ (Hekmat, M. 1991. [The Gory Dawn of the New World Order](https://www.marxists.org/archive/hekmat-mansoor/1991/02/gory-dawn.htm), US War in the Middle East. Worker Today.)

The 1991 war on Iraq and the US’ division of Iraq based on religious and ethnic identities marked a new era of identity politics and an end to concepts of citizenship and universal values and rights. So much so that this ‘Iraqisation’ can be seen everywhere, including in Europe under the guise of ‘multiculturalism’ as public policy that separates and divides citizens based on their so-called community. Instead of citizens and individuals with rights, we have now group identities and group rights.

We know, however, that no society, group or community is homogenous. And this is the crux of the problem with identity politics. Complex human beings with innumerable identities, often conflicting, are reduced to one primary homogenous group identity. Therefore, if you are presumed Muslim and unveiled, or are an atheist or socialist, you are not an authentic member of the so-called community. The more reactionary one is, the more authentic since it is those in power who decide who is authentic and who is not. An ‘authentic’ Muslim, for example, is a stereotype of the worst Muslim (the fundamentalist or green fascist). Both Right and Left are guilty of fostering, albeit for different reasons this stereotype. The Right does it to show that Muslims are incompatible with life in the West; the Left does it to show its patronising support of a minoritized group by defending the powerful at the expense of victims and survivors. Both place collective blame or acclaim by seeing Muslims in the image of their fundamentalists.

In the face of this anti-democratic contract between states and minoritised communities, ‘it has become increasingly difficult and risky to engage in internal critiques of minority culture and religion and to challenge a policy consensus built around cultural relativism and moral absolutism. The consequence is a rise in violence against women, gender segregation in schools, the imposition of discriminatory religious personal laws, and strict dress codes all of which has threatened to wipe out the gains made in the struggle for women’s human rights and citizenship.’ (Patel, P. 2022. Personal Correspondence.)

Identity politics, used by both Left and Right, doesn’t acknowledge our multiple identities, social and political movements, class politics, material realities or for that matter systems at play. It doesn’t recognise human complexities and more importantly our common humanity. It doesn’t make a distinction between oppressor and oppressed. For the Right, all Muslims are fundamentalists. For the Left, it is also very much the same; under the cover of ‘anti-racism,’ many defend the fundamentalists.

According to Algerian women’s rights activist, Marieme Helie Lucas, the Left’s support of identity politics is what Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop used to call ‘Leftist laziness.’ She adds, ‘Highly contaminated by the virulent identity politics virus, Left parties in Western Europe lazily fail to analyse the new extreme-Right political force that emerged in Europe more than 40 years ago, after having invaded and deeply damaged our own countries. They reduce it to an oppressed religious indigenous movement and justify its inhuman and draconian policies and punishments against us, the people, by its supposedly victim character. The Left fails to identify its pro-capitalist character and the ideological analogy one can draw between the so-called "Muslim fundamentalism," in fact a devastating religious far-Right, and the Nazis and fascists doctrinal key points.’ (Helie Lucas, M. 2022. Personal Correspondence.)

Writer Elif Shafak further explains the negative impact of identity politics. ‘We grow up in cultures with narratives that tell us who we are by ways of simplification and this is happening everywhere... All extremist ideologies what they have in common is they simplify complexity and they base it on identity politics… based on a distinction between us versus them and the presumption that us is better than them, sometimes expressed, sometimes not…If I can have multiple belongings there's a bigger chance that my multiple belongings will converge with yours but if I am defined on the basis of a single exclusivist identity politics there is no way we can find common ground.’ (Shafak, E. 2022. [On multiple identities and radical humanism](https://youtu.be/4bVqldzCtHE). Nexus Institute.)

For identity politics, it’s not our common humanity or values that matter but difference. ‘The idea of difference has always been the fundamental principle of a racist agenda. The defeat of Nazism and its biological theory of difference largely discredited racial superiority. The racism behind it, however, found another more acceptable form of expression for this era. Instead of expression in racial terms, difference is now portrayed in cultural terms.’ (Namazie, M. 1998. [Cultural Relativism is this era’s fascism](https://maryamnamazie.com/cultural-relativism-eras-fascism/).)

Interestingly, whilst identity politics is the mainstay of Right-wing politics and states, it is often the Left that is criticised for ‘cancel culture’ or ‘woke’ politics. All you hear is how universities are breeding grounds for this. Whilst I myself have been barred from universities or had talks cancelled by Left-wing student unions and groups that think that defending fundamentalism is the same as defending Muslims against bigotry, the claim against universities is somewhat exaggerated as Salman Rushdie has also stated. (Rushdie, S. 2017. [On identity politics, trigger warnings and the weirdness of reality](https://youtu.be/3Vg4Yxsj1Lc). ABC News.)

What the focus on the Left’s cancel culture and universities does, however, is remove attention from the fact that identity politics is a mainstay of Right-wing politics. White identity politics via the normalisation of the concept of the white working class (what happened to workers of the world unite?), the rise of Trump, Brexit, draconian immigration laws, the criminalisation of the right to asylum, separating children from parents and putting them in cages and a policy to send the persecuted to Rwanda from Britain… are nothing but institutionalised state identity politics. Us versus them with the stated assertion that us is better than them.

According to author Kenan Malik, ‘the origins of the politics of identity lie not on the Left but on the reactionary Right. It developed in the late 18th century after the counter enlightenment, out of the romantic views of human differences and its primary expression was in a concept of race.’ He adds: ‘original politics of identity was that of racial difference... Now, identitarians of the far-Right are seizing upon the opportunity provided by the Left’s adoption of identity politics to legitimise their once-toxic brand. Racism became rebranded as white identity politics. It’s an expression of the pernicious befuddlement of today’s politics that Right-wing critics of identity politics are among the most vehement defenders of the idea of a European homeland to be protected against immigrant invaders, while Left-wing critics of white identity are staunch defenders of every other form of identity politics. (Malik, K. 2020. [Beware the politics of identity. They help legitimise the toxic far right.](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/23/beware-politics-of-identity-they-help-legitimise-toxic-far-right) The Guardian.)

If the Left is busy defending difference over our common values, identity over collective action and solidarity, how can things change? As author Asad Haider says: ‘identity politics leads to neutralisation and depoliticisation marking a retreat from the crucial passage of identity to solidarity, and from individual recognition to the collective struggle against an oppressive social structure.’ (Haider, A. 2018. Mistaken Identity: Anti-Racism and the Struggle Against White Supremacy. Verso.)

Our only way out of this quagmire is for the Left to abandon the reactionary politics of identity and once again raise the banner of secularism, citizenship and universal values. It must once again renew its politics of solidarity and collective action. After all, we are shaped by our values and our politics and choices, not oppressive, singular identities.

As the women’s rights activist Rahila Gupta says, ‘The key lesson for us on the Left is that we must organise around a shared and inclusive political platform of liberation and empowerment, which any of us should be able to promote without worrying about whether our right to speak is disabled by who we are and questionable notions of authenticity.’ (Gupta, R. 2022. Personal Correspondence.)

And finally, a plea from Kenan Malik: ‘At the heart of any radical project is the acceptance both of equal rights for all, irrespective of one’s race or nation or culture or faith or sex or sexuality, and the insistence on humans having the freedom to question everything, the insistence that humans “shape their futures by arguing and challenging and questioning and saying the unsayable”, as Salman Rushdie once put it. To place people in cultural boxes and to define their needs and aspirations by the boxes into which they have been put, is to undermine the very foundations of such a radical project. (Malik, K. 2022. Personal Correspondence.)

**Biography**

*Maryam Namazie (1966, Tehran ) is an Iranian-born writer and activist living in the UK. She is the Spokesperson of One Law for All and the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain. During decades of activism, she has produced Bread and Roses, a weekly television programme broadcast in Iran; executive produced Women Leaving Islam; published The Woman’s Quran; led topless protests at Pride London in defence of LGBT rights; taken part in a nude protest in defence of women’s rights in the Middle East and North Africa; fought against stoning laws and defended refugee rights. The Islamic regime of Iran has called Namazie ‘immoral, a harlot and corrupt;’ her TedX talk was censored and labelled ‘distressing and objectionable.’ She has received multiple awards, including the 2017 Henry H. Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism award; 2016 International Secularism (Laicite) Prize and National Secular Society's Secularist of the Year Award (2005).*