

Promoting the global secular alternative in the ISIS era - “By using ‘religious right,’ we make it clear that this phenomenon is not religious, but political”

Sunday 5 October 2014, by [HELIE LUCAS Marieme](#), [NAMAZIE Maryam](#) (Date first published: 4 October 2014).

While many of us watch in horror as ISIS advances, and fundamentalist ideas spread across religious traditions around the world, Maryam Namazie and Marieme Hélié-Lucas - secular feminists from Iran and Algeria - told Karima Bennoune why they are convening the International Secular Conference in London next weekend.

Karima Bennoune : Can you explain your own journey to secularism?

Marieme Hélié-Lucas: I have been a secularist [1] throughout my life, someone who believes a democratic state should not take orders from religions. My mother was a mystic, but also a secularist, and was strongly aware of the anti-women stance in all religions. Her feminist teaching on religions always remained within me, especially when I was confronted with the rise of Muslim fundamentalism in Algeria.

Maryam Namazie: I became a secularist after Islamists expropriated and suppressed the 1979 Iranian revolution and established an Islamic state. I knew instinctively that there was something very wrong with religion in power, as do many people living under the boot of Islamism or the religious right - even if they do not call themselves secularists. My father was raised a strict Muslim (by my grandfather who was an Islamic scholar) but he never made me feel different because I was a girl. I never had to be veiled or felt unequal, until an Islamic state came into being.

Bennoune : Why did you decide to organize the International Conference on the Religious Right, Secularism and Civil Rights [2] now?

Namazie: Our era is marked by the rise of the religious right, and in particular Islamism, with its unspeakable brutality. There has been many a slaughtered generation from Iran to Algeria [3]. For every shocking and tragic beheading of a journalist and aid worker by ISIS that makes headlines, there are countless unreported others beheaded, crucified, flogged, segregated and “disappeared” via the veil...

In the fight against these movements, secularism is key, including for many believers. No one better understands the need for the separation of religion and state than those who have lived under the religious right. Secularism may not be the only challenge, but it is certainly a minimum precondition for freedom [4] in any given society.

Hélie-Lucas: In a way the public acknowledgement of the war crimes of ISIS creates a favorable climate for more openly demanding secular states as a protection from these extreme right political forces. We have a better chance now to be heard by progressive forces than in the past.

Bennoune: What are the goals of the conference?

Hélie-Lucas: We want to bring secularists from the regions and the diasporas together to develop networking, and common strategies and analysis; to find ways to support each other. In particular, we want to promote secular initiatives. Most of all, we want to let the world know that we exist.

Namazie: This conference is our show of strength. Islamism is an international movement - so are we. The conference will also reiterate the human alternative to the far right [5] that does not involve US-led militarism, behind the scenes wheeling and dealing with “good” Islamists or racism. The demand for secularism, citizenship rights and universality is our response to the religious right.

Bennoune: Why do you use the term “religious right” rather than “fundamentalism” in the conference title?

Hélie-Lucas: By using “religious right,” we make it clear that this phenomenon is not religious, but political. Fundamentalist organizations work under the cover of religions. They claim that one is intolerant vis-à-vis religion itself when one criticizes their political actions. In many instances, governments now tend to deal with social and political problems by calling on so-called ‘religious leaders’ - in a very undemocratic way, as though one elected these supposedly community representatives. We need to force governments to look at fundamentalist movements in political terms as extreme right forces. In Algeria, we have been calling them “the green fascists”.

Bennoune: Speaking of fascists, how will current events like the terrible crimes of ISIS [6] be addressed in your meeting?

Namazie: You cannot have a conference today on the religious right and not begin and end with ISIS. The fight against ISIS [7] is not about western versus eastern values, but a fight between secularists and theocrats. ISIS is the result of the retreat of universality, secularism and the Iraqisation or division of the world and societies into everything from religion to ethnicity, rather than seeing them as human beings and citizens first and foremost. We have the historical task of raising those ideals and demands.

Bennoune: What is the role of feminism in this meeting?

Namazie: You cannot speak about the religious right without speaking about women’s rights [8]. Women are the first targets of the Islamists and religious right. The submission and “disappearance” of women are the first things one notices when they come to power. The burka is one such symbol of Islamism’s war on women. “Sharia” law courts are another [9]. Ironically, despite all their efforts, it is women who are often most vocal in the fight against the religious right and for secularism [10].

Hélie-Lucas: We stand up first of all as women whose rights are being undermined by the fundamentalists. We protest the hierarchy of rights put forward in which women’s rights come last after minority rights, religious rights and cultural rights [11].

Bennoune: Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the global struggle against fundamentalism now?

Hélie-Lucas: On the one hand, we have all these religious militias who impose their beliefs on everyone. We have the Hindu right imposing a Hindu identity on all citizens of India and considering

Muslims as non-citizens. The Buddhist right implements ethno-religious cleansing in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. We have the Christian right gaining ground in Europe as far as reproductive rights are concerned and teaching creationism in the USA.

But on the other hand - and maybe because of the crimes committed by the religious right all over the planet - there are more and more initiatives by young people against them. The demands for secularism have been increasing in all countries [12] marked by the threatening presence of fundamentalists: there is a lively Forum For Secularism in Pakistan which holds public events; there are "dé-jeuneurs" (non-fasters) groups who organize public picnics during Ramadan in North Africa; there are ex-Muslims organisations.

Namazie: The idea that Islamism and the religious right are people's demand is one of the myths of cultural relativism. How can anyone freely "choose" to live in a society where they can be stoned to death for love or executed for freethinking? If Islamism was truly "the people's" demand, then Islamists would not need to kill, threaten and unleash their "morality police" to ensure submission.

In fact, there are innumerable individuals across the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia... who have refused and resisted, often at great risk [13]. In another sense, then, our era is also marked by this incredible human resistance and a demand to live lives worthy of the 21 century. A number of these wonderful people will be speaking at the conference.

Bennoune: Why should people make sure to attend this conference in this particular political moment?

Namazie: We must create a strong international front of secularists and the mechanisms to work together more closely. And we also want to raise the profile of secularists from the "South" who have been fighting this fight for a very long time. We have come to a turning point where people are more open to hearing our message. People are seeing through the racist concept of cultural relativism and understanding the distinctions between believers and the religious right. Now we must link them with secularists internationally and organize our movement further to push back the religious right [14].

Bennoune: Why should progressives prioritize fighting against the religious right and for secularism in 2014?

Namazie: Secularism and the rehabilitation of the concept of the human being who is a citizen irrespective of religion or culture are some of the big issues of our century. This is a fight we need more people to join. One message we hope to send to secularists in the west is: It is not racist to defend equality or secularism. In fact, it is racist to deny people the same rights and freedoms because they are deemed "different". Also, secularism is not a western concept but a universal one. It is a demand of people everywhere. Nor is it "progressive" to support Islamism vis-à-vis imperialism. Islamism is our far right. Any progressive person or group must oppose all forms of fascism [15], including the religious right [16]. And they must support and show solidarity with those who have survived and are resisting. This is a fight we need more people to join.

On 11-12 October, the Secular Conference 2014, will take place in London - an unprecedented international gathering of progressive opponents of fundamentalism.

Speakers include Houzan Mahmoud, spokesperson from the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, Pakistani commentator Pervez Hoodbhoy, Tunisian scholar Amel Grami, Oxford Imam Taj Hargey and Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin.

Marieme Hélie-Lucas and Maryam Namazie

4 October 2014

Register for the Secular Conference 2014 here.
Religious-Right, Secularism and Civil Rights
11-12 October 2014

P.S.

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<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/marieme-hélie-lucas-maryam-namazie/promoting-global-secular-alternative-in-isis-era>

Footnotes

- [1] <http://www.wluml.org/resource/dossier-30-31-struggle-secularism-europe-and-north-america>
- [2] <http://www.secularconference.com/about/>
- [3] <http://www.amazon.com/Your-Fatwa-Does-Apply-Here/dp/0393081583>
- [4] http://zeneucnom.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=47&Itemid=109&lang=en
- [5] See available on ESSF (article 30002), [Your fatwa does not apply here - Women resisting far right fundamentalisms](#).
- [6] <http://www.wluml.org/news/womens-voices-must-stay-alive-isis-controlled-regions>
- [7] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karima-bennoune/a-tenpoint-plan-for-defeat_b_5851544.html
- [8] http://fitnah.org/fitnah_english.html
- [9] <http://www.onelawforall.org.uk>
- [10] See available on ESSF (article 33196), [Tunisia - Opposing political Islam: Mohamed Brahmi's widow speaks out](#).
- [11] See on ESSF (article 3385), [Fundamentalist Non State Actors, Democracy and Human Rights](#).
- [12] http://www.amazon.com/struggle-secularism-europe-North-America/dp/1907024220/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1412354804&sr=1-1&keywords=Marieme+Helie+Lucas
- [13] See on ESSF (article 33157), [Human rights activist - We all know about jihadists, but what about those waging an 'anti-jihad'?](#)

[14] <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/secularism-today-now>

[15] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/meredith-tax/double-bind-tied-up-in-knots-on-left>

[16] <http://www.meredithtax.org/books/double-bind-muslim-right-anglo-american-left-and-universal-human-rights-0>