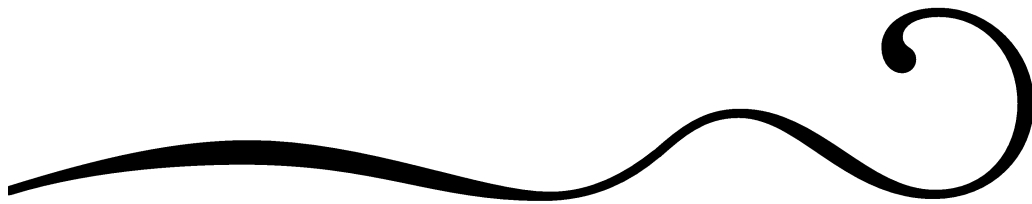


Freedom Equality Secularism



**Report on the Secular Conference,
London, UK.**

By Kiran Opal

With additional notes by Hilary Baxter

***International Conference on the
Religious Right, Secularism, and Civil Rights***

Saturday 11th October – Sunday 12th October, 2014
The Tower Hotel, London, UK.

North of the scenic Tower Bridge, next to the historic Tower of London, sits the Tower Hotel where the two-day **International Conference on the Religious Right, Secularism, and Civil Rights** was held on 11th and 12th October, 2014. By all accounts, the unique conference, which was the first of its kind, was a rousing success.

A broad coalition of vibrant, articulate activists for secularism, including believers, free-thinkers, agnostics, and atheists from the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and the Diaspora assembled at this historic Secular Conference. The 57 speakers originated from many diverse countries, including Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Israel, Libya, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Turkey, Tunisia, and Yemen.¹ They traveled to London, UK to discuss local and international resistance movements against the repression and violence of the religious-right, including the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL/Da'esh). One common theme in all the talks and discussions was the urgent need to defend secularism, universal human rights, and equal citizenship for all.

The 250+ delegates who attended the conference made an unequivocal stand with the brave women and men of Kobane fighting against jihadists, and [adopted the Resolution](#)² stating:

“We, the participants of the International Conference on the Religious-Right, Secularism and Civil Rights unequivocally stand with the brave women and men of Kobane. Their struggle is ours. Their fight is a fight for us all. We are all, today, Kobane.”

Shortly before the conference, organizers **Maryam Namazie** and **Marieme Hélié-Lucas** spoke with author and law professor **Karima Bennoune** for [an interview for openDemocracy.net](#). Asked why they decided to organize this conference at this time, Namazie said, “Our era is marked by the rise of the religious right, and in particular Islamism, with its unspeakable brutality... 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.”³

¹ See official conference website for complete list of speakers: <http://www.secularconference.com/speakers>

² See official conference website for adopted resolutions: <http://www.secularconference.com/resolutions>

³ "Promoting the global secular alternative in the ISIS era" - Marieme Hélié-Lucas and Maryam Namazie - 4 October 2014 : <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/marieme-h%C3%A9lielucas-maryam-namazie/promoting-global-secular-alternative-in-isis-era>

Pointing out the crucial importance that this conference holds particularly in the contemporary context, Marieme Hélié-Lucas said in the interview, “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.”

Among the [Secular Conference’s speakers](#), two thirds were women and 75% were people of colour. Organizers, volunteers, and delegates also constituted a mix of people. This diversity serves to shatter the notion — often propagated by anti-secularists and far-right fundamentalists — that secularism belongs exclusively to “white men”. Many speakers directly challenged the patronizing idea that women, people of colour, ethnic and sexual minorities, and citizens of non-Western countries cannot comprehend, handle, or fight for secularism, freedom of conscience, and universal human rights.

Day 1

The Conference began on Saturday, 11th October with a passionate opening speech by Iranian secular activist **Maryam Namazie**, called “[Secularism is our Challenge to Islamism and the Religious-Right.](#)”

“There is, within this hall, decades of experience in fighting the religious-Right whether it be the Buddhist-Right in Sri Lanka, the Hindu-Right in India, the Christian-Right in Poland or Britain, and of course, the Islamists from Algeria, Iran to Pakistan. Many of the people sitting here are the conscience of our societies and world. And never have they been more needed than in the era of ‘ISIS’.

We are here to say that the response to the likes of ISIS is not more US-led militarism, which, with neo-conservatism, neo-liberalism, and cultural relativism has created the climate for this rise. The response is not the so-called ‘war on terror’ and an attack on civil rights. It is not seeking out the so-called ‘moderates’, appeasing them, or having behind-the-scenes wheelings and dealings with sections of the religious-Right. The response is not xenophobia and bigotry.

It is also not — as many on the post-modernist Left have shamelessly done — defending and siding with the oppressors at the expense of class politics and progressive social movements. The response in the face of

unbridled barbarity is not more barbarity and inhumanity.

The human response, our response to the religious-Right, is an uncompromising defence of secularism — the complete separation of religion from the state — and an insistence on equality and citizenship rights.

Our message today is that secularism is not a western ideal; it is a demand and a desire of many people in the world. Faced with the barbarity of the religious-Right, it is also an urgent task and necessity.

Our message today is that it is not only atheists who are secularists. Many believers in the Middle East, North Africa, Asia and the Diaspora are secularists even if they don't call themselves that. No one understands the need for the separation of religion from the state than those living under the boot of the religious-Right.

At this conference we will reflect on these realities, show our strength and depth of experience and facilitate efforts to build an international front of secularists. Islamism is an international movement - so are we.

We want secularism. We want it today. We want it now.”

-Maryam Namazie, Iran/UK.

Spokesperson One Law for All, Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain.

This was followed by **Algerian Sociologist and feminist Marieme Hélie-Lucas**, who spoke about the “[Attacks on Secularism](#)” (some portions edited).

“There is now a shifting meaning of the word ‘secularism’. Secularists are now branded as having ‘sold out to the west’. The word is attacked like the word ‘feminism’ as an ‘inauthentic’ concept vis a vis other cultures. France passed laws on the total separation of state from religion back in 1850. These laws created ‘universalism’ and said you cannot favour any one religion. In 1905 Article 1, Title 1, Sections 1-2 of French Law: it said that the state would guarantee universal human rights. There would be no more funding of religion or churches.

Citizens would be free to practice what they liked but there would be no support from the state. No religion could become a legal entity and no citizen, civil servants or schools could display religious affiliation. Children should learn to be free citizens, not representatives of their community. The English language press is very biased on this. Secularism is a legal provision defining the position of the state in relation to religion. Secularism is not a solution to all problems, but it is a pre-condition for basic human rights. Secularism is not anti-Islam or anti-Muslims – it pre-dates today's issues.

President Sarkozy didn't need to outlaw burqas, the 1905 Law already covered it. He did it as a PR move to court the extreme-Right vote, which actually weakened the law by stating ‘ostentatious clothing is banned’, when

the 1905 Law had already made it plain that all religious clothing was banned. It gave the Muslim fundamentalists something to complain about, since it could be interpreted as a special attack purely on them. It gave all the religious-Right groups a common ground.

The Islamic Front in Algeria said: 'if one has the Law of God, why do we need a law of the people?' The former is the law of the land. Note that because God's Law is historic, it cannot be changed by the people, so takes away their democratic rights. The minority can deprive all citizens (and especially women) their universal rights by continually quoting God's Law.

Anyone who complains against this is branded a 'secular fundamentalist' and belittled as selling out to the west. (ie not being a proper Muslim). The most successful attack on secularism has been the shift of the original meaning of secularism (as separation of state from religion), to meaning that all religions should be treated as equal entities with equal rights. The state now negotiates with all religions as political entities. This has raised the rights of religions over individuals, and has reduced the rights of individuals, especially of women. This has led to equal political tolerance and funding by the state of all religions in the USA, the UK, and Europe, and in their former colonies.

If you google 'universal declaration of Islamic rights' this is now recognised by the UN. This breaks my heart. Secularism was indigenous for centuries in many places, it is not a new concept of the west. We now hear of 'Muslim human rights', 'Sikh human rights' and 'Buddhist human rights', no longer universal human rights anymore.

The Left-wing politicians fail to recognise the forces against secularism are from the Right. Muslim fundamentalism is extreme Right-wing, like Fascism and Nazism. They believe in the following:

- *Muslims are a superior creed/race. Islamic history glorified and idealized.*
- *They have a right to eradicate 'unter-mensch' i.e. non-believers (infidels) and apostates (those who leave Islam)*
- *They are pro-capitalist. Women "can be treated as cattle and do with them as you will" (quotes from the Quran)*
- *Sharia Law should be above that of local / indigenous countries' laws*
- *New definition of secularism as equal tolerance of all religions over individuals*

-Marieme Helie-Lucas, Algeria.

Founder of Women Living under Muslim Laws.

Next, **Karima Bennoune** — Algerian-American Professor of International Law and Author of **Your Fatwa does not Apply Here** — shared a [tribute](#) to some of the women and men killed by extremists in the name of religion. Some of the people Bennoune listed:

- **George Tiller** – murdered by Christian fundamentalists for performing abortions in the USA
- **Narendra Dabholkar** – Indian activist fighting for social justice and the rights of untouchables. Murdered 2013.
- **Salwa Bughaigis** – Libyan woman and human rights activist murdered for her women’s rights campaigning in Benghazi. 2014.
- **Mohamed Brachmi** – Tunisian, founder of the People’s Movement, gunned down in July 2013.
- **Katia Bengana** – Algeria. 17 year old student. Dragged away from school and shot by Islamists in February 1994, because she refused to wear the hijab.
- **Salman Taseer** – Pakistani governor of Punjab who spoke out in defence of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death for the charge of committing ‘blasphemy’. In January 2011, Taseer was shot 26 times with a sub-machine gun. His assassin was his own bodyguard, who was celebrated by Islamists in Pakistan.
- **Saado Ali Warsame** – Somali musician and member of parliament. Known for her songs critical of corruption. Shot to death by Al-Shabab in July 2014.
- **Hanifa Safi** – a woman teacher and minister in Afghanistan. Worked on cases of violence against women. Killed by car bomb in July 2012.

Bennoune mentioned several more activists and everyday people who have been killed by religious-Right extremists, while fighting for secularism and equality. She concluded her moving talk by saying, “Instead of just feeling defeated, let’s draw inspiration from these people and continue their work. We have that responsibility now.”

The first multi-speaker panel was focused on Secularism, and chaired by British human rights activist [Peter Tatchell](#). Panellists included French author and editor [Caroline Fourest](#), Indian-born UK journalist, film-maker, and activist [Gita Sahgal](#), Iranian Marxist analyst and writer [Hamid Taqvaee](#), co-founder of Survivors Voice Europe, [Sue Cox](#), Turkish MP and secular activist [Safak Pavey](#) and Bangladeshi lawyer and human rights activist [Sultana Kamal](#).

Gita Sahgal, who serves as the Director of the Centre for Secular Space, [discussed](#) how the Muslim Council of Britain and the East London Mosque preach and propagate ultra-conservative brands of Islam, and yet they are the ones British politicians turn to for advice. “Many of these people would not be tolerated in their own countries and this is why they have come to the UK,” she said. “The key parts of political Islam from South Asia and the Middle East, who ally together in London – the Jamaat-e-Islami affiliated East London Mosque and the London Muslim Centre – are all connected to the Muslim Brotherhood. They try to control Muslims but they do not represent the majority of Muslims who are not Jamaat-e-Islami or Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi/Jihadi. Yet they advise the UK government. This

started with Tony Blair. Now we talk to Al Qaeda because we think they are the only ones who can negotiate with ISIS on behalf of hostages.”

Hamid Taqvaei, Leader of Worker-Communist Party of Iran, brought up some [critical questions](#), “What has led to secularism’s downfall today? Secularism rose a few hundred years ago. We have gone back to the middle-ages with a religious state of mind. What happened to the golden age of democracy? Now we have gone back to a few select male leaders having all the votes. Where are the votes for women?” Taqvaei went on to say, “We have to fight against Sharia courts in Europe. We shouldn’t let Imams and Muftis speak on behalf of immigrants and those in Muslim communities who have fled from religious laws in their original countries. Don’t let them drag us back to the middle-ages. Secularism isn’t about suppressing religion but about promoting human rights.”

Caroline Fourest, editor of Magazine ProChoix, [spoke about](#) a publication that published the Danish cartoons of Muhammad. She has also been beaten up by neo-fascists for supporting equal marriage in France. “All religious devotees think that their religion is best. We mustn’t spend too long debating religions but must focus on secularism and how to protect it,” she said. Fourest’s book *Crossfire* compares Jewish, Christian, and Islamic fundamentalisms. She has received death threats for her opposition to Islamism and Sharia. Fourest explained that Laïcité (the French word on which the word ‘secularism’ is based), is a somewhat deeper term. She said, “It’s about a refusal to live in a society where the legal system, the justice system, the state are inspired by religious rules, instead of human laws. This independent philosophy means that the state is not here to recognize equally all religions and give all religions special rights it does not give to other organizations. The state is supposed to look at religions like it does any other organization.”

Sue Cox, founder of Survivors Voice Europe, is a survivor of rape, Catholic clergy abuse, alcoholism, addiction, and is a single mother of six children! Now a grandmother in her sixties, she has taught 13,000 health care workers, including those who work in prison and military health services. She spoke about her own experience of abuse at the hands of Catholic clergy. Cox has nine life-threatening conditions, mostly caused by the abuse she suffered. Cox [spoke about](#) the importance of looking past stereotypes and empowering people. “We should focus not just on the abuse she (and many others) have suffered at the hands of the Catholic Church, but on the environment itself and how it was allowed to occur. The Catholic Church infiltrates and indoctrinates young minds. It goes deep and lasts long. The Church is a narcissistic organisation which cares only for itself. It barks orders at people and hijacks them. Those who have been hijacked will regularly praise their hijackers.” This is also called Stockholm Syndrome. Cox’s work focuses on empowering people to recover from religious abuse, and she emphasized that secularism is the way forward. She concluded with a call to join up with others who have suffered under religious and other abuse, and to stand in solidarity.

Safak Pavey, Turkish Parliamentarian, 2012 International Woman of Courage and 2014 Secularist of the Year, [talked about the rise of religion in Turkey](#) at the hands of the narcissistic ideology of Islamism. She described how faith schools are not teaching girls properly and new mosques are being built instead of much needed schools and hospitals. Pavey stated that Western intellectuals oversimplify the issues, and say that it is Recep Erdogan's (the Turkish Prime Minister's) character that is the problem. In truth, Erdogan is good at deceiving the West. Pavey said, "Government supporters are granted special privileges. The formal (secular) law is no longer implemented. Political Islamists have strengthened their presence. Turkey is destroying secular education. In 2002 there were 70,000 pupils in secret religious schools, now in 2014 there are 1 million. Erdogan has put his son in charge of the education department. Thousands of modern toilets are being destroyed, debilitating women's freedom. The state is now in charge of toilets. Segregation of boys and girls has been introduced into schools and universities." Pavey's sister was a Physics teacher at a school in Turkey. For the last 5 years, she was told to sit in the staff room while a cleric taught her class and spouted fundamentalism. She was kept there as a staff member, so it looked to the outside like they were being taught modern Physics. She has now resigned.

Sultana Kamal, Bangladeshi lawyer, human rights activist and Director of Ain o Salish Kendra [spoke about secularism in Bangladesh since 1971](#). "Things were much better in 1971," she said. There was a movement for secular education and liberation of the individual, and Bangladesh achieved state secularism in 1971. They no longer wanted people to be identified by their religion. However, in 1975 the President was assassinated, leaving two daughters. There was an army coup and secularism was struck out and replaced by state sponsored Islamism. There is a clear connection between militarism and Islamism: they are both about control of the masses. Kamal said that Bangladesh never wanted to become an Islamic state. "Now we have an army-led government back in power. We have brought secularism back into the Constitution, but it is not being enforced. Islam rules. Secular schools are attacked." Kamal is intimidated and followed by army soldiers who ask her what religion she follows. "You must be a Sunni Muslim. The country now belongs to Sunni Muslim men. This is promoted by state government and every aspect of life. There were 42 Fatwas against women in 1992, now there are thousands. Islam has taken over the schools, hospitals and the government. You can do anything in the name of Islam. Without secularism, there is no democracy and society".

After a lunch break, **French-Tunisian film-maker Nadia El Fani** screened parts of her films "[Neither Allah nor Master](#)" and "No Harm Done". The film "Neither Allah nor Master" documents the growing Islamist influence in post-Arab-Spring Tunisia, which is not officially an Islamic state. She filmed men eating in cafes during Ramadan. They didn't want to be filmed out of fear of abuse at the hands of Islamists. There were so many complaints about her film, and threats towards her, that she had to flee the country. El Fani said that the Islamists want a caliphate

established in Tunisia. No discussion is possible. She couldn't keep the film's title in Tunisia; its name had to be changed to "*Laïcité, Inch'Allah!*" She said, "Shame on Francois Hollande who went to Tunisia recently and announced: 'Islam is consistent with democracy'. How can he say this in the face of so many religious murders?" Her second film is called "*No Harm Done*", and there were demonstrations against that film too. El Fani had no support from the police. She also received many death threats via Facebook. Facebook did not do anything to counteract these threats or close the pages that threatened her. In Tunisia, El Fani said, the Islamists have been getting clever. The University of Manouba was occupied by Islamists in Nov-Dec 2011. They didn't want to be democratic, they said: "The law is for god, not the people".

The next panel, focusing on "Religion in State, Law and Politics Panel" was chaired by [Terry Sanderson](#), writer and President of the National Secular Society, UK. Panellists included founding member of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain [Fariborz Pooya](#), Senegalese Sociologist [Fatou Sow](#), Iranian-born Canadian political activist [Homa Arjomand](#), Polish feminist atheist writer [Nina Sankari](#), and women's rights and human rights activists [Pragna Patel](#).

Fariborz Pooya, founder of the Iranian Secular Society, argued that while people, including religious believers, can be moderate, there is [no such thing as 'moderate religion'](#). "Moderate people are very different from moderate religion. Religion doesn't need moderates. Religion needs to stay the same to survive, so it wants to stop change and progress and people's rights. Religion has perfected the art of survival by becoming part of the state in most countries. There are very few secular states". Pooya continued, "What does 'Moderate Islam' mean? We must not conflate religion with other things. Religions have survived across the centuries, despite the progress of mankind, because we are not allowed to challenge them. The Bible has many disagreeable sentiments, just like the Quran. To implement its edicts would create a fascist state. Under Islam, apostasy gets the death sentence and women are subjugated. There is no people power within religion." Pooya spoke of his experience taking part in the 1978-79 revolution in Iran, which was hijacked by Islamists. "There is too much money in religion. Religion is big business now, and promotes its own interests rather than giving power to the people. No religion is democratic."

Fatou Sow, Senegalese activist, and director of Women Living under Muslim Laws [spoke about](#) how, in Senegal, to be a feminist is to be seen as being 'Western'. For her campaigning for women's rights, Sow has been the subject of much derision. Islam is now written into the Senegalese constitution and women have been stripped of their rights. Sharia courts take care of inheritance, marriages, and domestic setups. Women stand to inherit only half of what their brothers inherit, they can't own homes or land and have no rights within marriage. Sow emphasized she's often called to academic conferences, where she has to be 'polite' about the

state of women's issues in her country. She was thankful to be able to speak openly at this Secular Conference.

Homa Arjomand, Iranian-Canadian campaigner, who runs the International Campaign Against Sharia Law in Canada and One Secular School System spoke about how she has been [battling against the rise of Sharia in Canada](#). Sharia nearly got voted into law in 2008, but was staved off due to campaigning efforts. Most MPs seemed to have had no idea of how discriminatory Sharia Laws are particularly to women. Arjomand also focused on children's rights. She asked, "Why should we inflict religion on them? The rights of children should be universal. The focus should be on teaching children academic knowledge not religious separatism. They should learn and play together with other children, regardless of faith. States are allowing religions to recruit children to their gods. Schools and universities have become the perfect breeding ground for religious extremists. Every religion wants to control the education of women, to create the next generation of believers."

Nina Sankari, vice president of the Atheist Coalition in Poland discussed "[In the Shadow of the Church: Failed Democracy in Poland](#)". Sankari said, "Poland had its first free elections in 1989. We should be having a 25 year celebration of this in 2014 but instead we are under the boot of the church. We are not getting democracy in Poland. Religion has risen under the neo-liberal governments. Secularism is being dismantled by the rise of the clerics." She talked about the rise of Catholicism in Poland. She provided a timeline of events since 1989, and described when and how Polish women lost the right to abortion, IVF, and the new family and civil codes have been imposed. Sankari revealed, "There are now crosses in every classroom and Christianity gets taught ahead of science. In 1992 there was a big campaign to allow abortion in Poland. One million women signed a petition, but the issue was not passed. The EU accepts this inequality, nothing has been done. Polish women have lost their rights."

Pragna Patel, director of Southall Black Sisters (UK) [discussed the increasing privatisation of justice](#), how the ending of legal aid has affected the most vulnerable, and the increasing adoption of faith based courts in Britain. Patel reported that there are now 85 Sharia courts operating in the UK, and that women often don't have a choice when their family members tell them to use these religious courts. She gave four examples of Sharia application by stealth:

- 1) Gender Segregation Advice by Universities UK which attempted to legitimise gender segregation in universities.
- 2) The Law Society drawing up guidance for how solicitors can make Sharia Compliant Wills. This would allow Islamists to allocate to women only half of the inheritance their male relations receive, in direct contradiction to the UK Law.
- 3) Banks devising Sharia Compliant Mortgages and "Islamic banking".

4) State support for religious arbitration systems (e.g. Sharia Councils/Courts).

Patel continued, “There is now a real struggle to hold the law to account for ethnic minority women and a struggle to access justice. Alternative dispute resolutions are now being accepted by the state, because these reduce costs and pressure on the English Law system and the fact that ethnic minority women’s rights are being reduced doesn’t seem to bother politicians.” Unfortunately, support for Sharia Law comes from the Left-wing neo-liberals and people like the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. See Southall Black Sisters study of women using Sharia Councils and the lack of justice they got. “Advocates of parallel legal systems miss the point. Women don’t have a choice of access to English Law, they are opted out by their relatives and culture.”

British philosopher AC Grayling [spoke about faith-based schooling](#), describing how education is at odds with religion. Religion impacts on education in four ways, he noted. (1) Faith based schools. (2) Legal requirement for act of worship within schools. (3) Religious education classes. (4) Interference in girls’ education (e.g. gender segregation, no science lessons and no sport). Grayling said, “Education is about encouraging people to think critically and question what they are told by looking for evidence to back up theories (evidence based analysis). This is exactly the opposite of religion, where people are taught not to question or think critically, but to have blind faith in what they are told, and that nothing should be changed.” Grayling quoted Amartya Sen on identity: “We all have many different identities, for different situations, contexts, and people. To adopt just a single identity is very dangerous, because it forces others to have to treat one person according to their religion rather than according to their individual characteristics.”

Delving into Christian doctrine, Grayling noted that, “It is a little known fact that the body of literature that represents what happened to Christ was only agreed some 400 years after he died. Remember that Christ’s followers thought they lived at the end of history. They believed they didn’t need money or children because the world was about to end, because Christ had died. But after 400 years, they realised this wasn’t the case, so they needed to come up with another story! How accurate can the Christian story be? And yet it is handed down verbatim to successive generations of children, who are told to believe it and not to question.”

Grayling continued, “Religious extremists today may actually not be part of a resurgence, but just our perception based on the violence of very few, and due to our globalised perspective. It may in fact be that religion is in its final death throes before scientific discovery puts it into the pale once and for all. This may also explain why the most retrograde religions are so determined to control women and reduce their access to education, and especially scientific education, to prevent proper evidence based analysis by the next generation”. Grayling asserted that “Religious Education” should be taught in school, but only as part of a “History of

Ideas” curriculum, where religions are taught among all the various philosophies and ideologies that humans have devised over the millenia.

Shortly thereafter, feminist comedian **Kate Smurthwaite** [lit up the room with her jokes](#) about being a political activist and a comedian, especially the “best” death threat she has received. A man had emailed her that he wanted to brutally kill her and then “eat the flesh off her bones”, and that he was going to do it on the 4th of December. She asked the audience, “Can you imagine hating someone so much that you want to rip the flesh off of their bones, but you are a bit busy till the 4th of December?!” She declared, “I refuse to be intimidated by someone who doesn’t know how to write a to-do list!” The audience was roaring with laughter. Smurthwaite ended her bit by stating that she wanted to give the Islamist protestor who had been standing outside the conference a book called, “God wants you to enjoy your genitals!”

The next panel, focusing on “Multi-faithism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship” was chaired by **Rumy Hasan**, an author and senior lecturer at the University of Sussex. Panellists included One Law for All Campaigner **Aliyah Saleem**, secular student activist **Chris Moos**, Yemeni writer and academic **Elham Manea**, writer and broadcaster **Kenan Malik**, Algerian sociologist **Marieme Hélie-Lucas** and Director of Muslim Educational Centre of Oxford and Imam of the Oxford Islamic Congregation **Taj Hargey**.

Aliyah Saleem, **British secular education activist of Pakistani heritage**, [gave a moving account of her experiences](#) at an Islamic Boarding School in the UK. She became an agnostic at age 12, but was told to keep quiet about “her corruption” and not “pollute” other girls’ minds. She and her classmates were stopped from doing sport and didn’t receive history or science lessons. She pointed out that in the name of ‘multi-culturalism’ and ‘diversity’, nobody seems to care about how children are not given a choice if their parents enroll them in religious schools. “Children are being deprived of their education,” she said. Saleem declared that those children matter too! She said she and her friends came out of school without a proper education. She has had death threats for speaking out and now looks over her shoulder whenever she walks down the street. She noted that the Birmingham Trojan Schools scandal shows that religious schools are preventing girls and boys from getting a proper education, and that there is no room in those schools for the transgressors: the lesbian, the trans person, the pianist, the agnostic. This was her first public speech and she said she was very nervous, but her talk was met with an extended applause from the audience.

Chris Moos, **nominee for Secularist of the Year Award** gave a talk titled, [“The Fox, The Hen House, and The One who Let Him in: The Religious Far-Right and its Enablers in Higher Education.”](#) He attended the London School of Economics (LSE), where he found out that, far from being challenged on issues like

gender segregation, homophobic speakers, and preachers who advocated death to apostates, the Islamic Society was being appeased. Many university religious societies discourage gender mixing and some ban women from speaking. The National Union of Students (NUS) has refused to condemn ISIS “because it would be Islamophobic”! The Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS), representing 15,000 students, promote speakers that openly advocate armed jihad, FGM and “painless beheadings”. LSE & other student representatives rejected the formation of an Ex-Muslim student group because “that would be offensive to Muslims.” Moos asked, why are such hate speech promoters allowed to exist on state-funded UK university campuses? “The soul of higher education is slipping through secular fingers.” Moos concluded, “Moral & cultural relativism cannot be an excuse for inaction in the face of the religious far Right. Groups that promote homophobia, chauvinism, misogyny, or violence must not be given an opportunity to prey on the young and impressionable, regardless of whether they do it in the name of religion or not.”

Elham Manea, Yemeni academic based at University of Zurich, [delivered a powerful critique](#) of the UK’s approach of appeasing Islamism. She summarized the four features of what she calls the “Essentialist Paradigm”, the subject of her upcoming book *Islamic Law in the West: The Essentialists*. Manea said that the Essentialist Paradigm

“(1) divides people along cultural, religious, ethnic lines, setting them apart in parallel legal enclaves, (2) perceives rights from a group perspective; the group has rights, not the individuals within it. It insists that each group has a collective identity and culture, an *essential* identity and culture, which should be protected and perpetuated, even if doing so violates the rights of individuals within the group, (3) is dominated by a cultural relativist approach to rights, argues that rights and other social practices like values and moral rules, are culturally determined, (4) is haunted by white man's burden, formed by a strong sense of shame and guilt over the Western colonial and imperial past, and a paternalistic desire to protect minorities or people from former colonies. It is a mindset that perceives 'the other', whether a member of a minority group, or an entire third world country, as the oppressed, and human rights as the tool imposed by the Western oppressor. It considers those who are fighting for universal human rights in their own societies as not being authentic representatives of their counties. And in the process it ignores and justifies dire human rights violations committed in the name of group rights, or cultural and religious rights.” Manea concluded by saying, “‘One law for all’ is not just a slogan. It is a guarantee for equal treatment and the protection of the weakest in our societies. Protecting citizens especially women and minorities on an equal basis requires a secular, single legal order, based on respect for human rights. Simple but fair.”

Kenan Malik, writer and BBC Radio 4 presenter spoke on “[What’s Wrong with Multiculturalism?](#)” He praised the lived experience of vibrant, cosmopolitan

diversity while denouncing multiculturalism as a set of state policies to 'manage' that diversity. Multi-culturalism as policy is divisive, he argued, and does not promote diversity; in fact it does the opposite by insisting on putting people into boxes. Multicultural policies have allowed many on the far-Right (and others) to blame minorities for social problems. On the other hand, it has allowed many on the Left to "jettison classical liberal beliefs, free speech, liberties, in the name of tolerance and diversity." Malik noted that the irony of multi-culturalism is that it undermines diversity. Multiculturalists fear diversity; by avoiding the clashes and conflicts (cultural differences) multiculturalism suppresses progress and tolerance. Multiculturalism also homogenizes groups and ignores or silences the internal dissent and diversity within groups. Progressive voices get silenced by the politicians and the most conservative voices ('community leaders') get promoted instead. It is deemed safer to avoid offending the all-male conservative clerics and not worry about the women. Comments like: "Anyone who isn't offended by cartoons of Muhammad, is not a proper Muslim", ensure the moderates are silenced. This is how Left-wing anti-racism can morph into Right-wing anti-Muslim bigotry: where opposing bigotry has transformed into accepting the most regressive and reactionary voices as the authentically Muslim voices. The right to practice religion in public (e.g. prayer rooms funded in the work place) is now accepted and funded by the taxpayer, whilst our right to private views has been curtailed. Malik called upon the audience to challenge this odious use of pluralism.

Marieme Hélie-Lucas spoke next about "[Hierarchy of Rights in Non-Secular States](#)." She argued that, "the rights of communities are upheld over individual rights. 'Difference' is used again and again by the far Right throughout history to get their way. We are essentialising Islam. Who defines religion? Old, all male, conservative, self-appointed leaders. Throughout the EU, politicians are relying on unelected, non-democratic, religious, all male leaders to define the needs of their community. No-one is speaking for the feminists or the young. Different legal rights are being granted to different citizens. Women do not have equal rights under Sharia Law; this is constantly being ignored. Women's rights keep coming last and are continually traded for peace in Arab states. It is only victims of state persecution (mostly men) who can seek asylum whereas women escaping death threats or abuse from their husbands and family cannot." Hélie-Lucas asked us to look at class and gender politics, and the hierarchies of power within Muslim communities.

Taj Hargey, Founder of the Muslim Education Centre at Oxford, [spoke as "a real, moderate Muslim"](#) about why we should ban the face veil. Hargey said, "It is not a theological requirement to wear the Burqa. Facial masks are banned in Mecca. Burqas and full face covering predates Islam and has been used in many societies over the ages. Do not listen to mullahs and clerics who insist it should be worn. The Quran says only breasts should be covered, not faces. Face covering is used to keep women submissive and to exclude them from society and each other. There is a battle going on for the hearts and minds of Islam in the UK." He

continued, “The Burqa is divisive, degrading and repressive. It is bad for a woman’s children. It is a huge security risk. It is a health risk. Many Muslim women who wear it have rickets because they have Vitamin D deficiencies. The Niqab is a tribal not religious contraption used by men to control women. It is a fad by modern British women who want to rebel against the state. Why do we condone this dehumanising of women?” The UK judiciary were due to issue a ruling about banning the use of the Burqa/Niqab in court in November 2013. They still haven’t done this a year later. Harjeet argued that, “there is increasing conservatism amongst academics who end up mollifying the extremists.” He warned us to be careful of appeasing the most conservative branches of Islam at the expense of women.

Pervez Hoodbhoy, Pakistani nuclear physicist and social activist delivered a passionate speech titled, “[Has the Islamic State Ever Been a Historical Reality?](#)” He noted that no mention of such a state is found in the Quran. He discussed all the confusion surrounding Sharia, all the confusion about all the different types of Islam: the Shias, Sunnis, Wahhabis etc. Each one accuses the other of: ‘not being a proper Muslim’. He said that the Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a failed state because of religion. Even as we talk, he said, blood is reddening soil across the world by ISIS and other Islamist groups who want an Islamic state. Hoodbhoy elaborated the blood price one can pay for having killed someone in an Islamic state – if a Muslim man is killed, the blood money is: 300,000 rials; for a Muslim woman: 150,000 rials; for a Christian or Jewish man: 50,000 rials; for a Christian or Jewish woman: 25,000 rials; for any other man: 6,666 rials; and for any other woman: 3,333 rials. “There is no price for an atheist, maybe they would pay you!” He talked about how a woman in Pakistan can’t get an X-ray or scan because religious rights over the female body trump her own rights over her body. Hoodbhoy asked, “But what is an Islamic state?” The caliphate was perceived as existing when Islam was great, so everyone chases after this utopian idea. But that was a community, not a state. He argued that today, Muslims are confused. He relates the story where he asked some of his Muslim students: “Would you prefer to live in a secular state or a state run by Sharia Law?” They all opted for the latter. Then he asked: “If you committed a crime, which state would you prefer to be living in, the UK, Saudi or Iran?” They all opted for the UK! When questioned, most of them said they didn’t think Saudi Arabia was a proper Islamic state. “An Islamic state is hell for minorities. Muslims make themselves the supreme race and all others are second-class citizens”, he added.

Hoodbhoy explained that he grew up in Karachi, when things were much better than they are today. Society was far more diverse, with Christians, Parsis (Zoroastrians), and Hindus. Now, when he goes back, there are no non-Muslims (or none who will admit to it). In 1994, one of his academic colleagues was shot dead for being an Ahmadi Muslim (a minority Muslim sect). The next day, Hoodbhoy was the only one who turned up for this man’s funeral. Close colleagues and friends were scared to be associated with him. “An Islamic state is the end of all progress.

They have got rid of minimum age limits for marriage in Pakistan. A man can marry as many wives as he wants and doesn't even have to tell the others. DNA evidence is now banned in rape trials," he noted. Hoodbhoj spoke extensively about the sectarian violence that is at the heart of Islamic history and identity. He concluded his powerful talk with some personal insight into the impacts on progressives, secularists, and liberals in Pakistan who have to deal with the fanatics infuriated at things like Muhammed cartoons. He asked us to consider the effects of our actions on those who are living there, fighting for change from within.

Day 2

The second day of the conference started with **Karima Bennoune**, [speaking about her book, *Your Fatwa does not Apply Here*](#). She brought up the book 'Do Muslim Women Need Saving?' by Lila Abu-Lughod that's become popular among leftist academics in the West. Bennoune argued, "This is a very dangerous book, because it attacks women's human rights defenders, and promotes Sharia." She emphasized that secularists are not necessarily atheists, and we should make that distinction carefully in order to create an inclusive space for believers, agnostics, atheists, freethinkers of all types who support secularism. Bennoune took a moment to acknowledge that the day before, "35 people were killed in car bombs in Bahgdad, and more in Kobane".

Bennoune told the heart-breaking story of Amel Zanoune, a law student, gunned down in Algeria just for going to college. She showed a photo of Amel's wristwatch forever stuck at 5:17PM, and talked about her mother crying with despair through the streets afterwards.

"We need some strategies to fight back against religious extremists:

- 1) We need to expose their sources of funding
- 2) Defend women's rights (every step forward for women is a step back for them)
- 3) We cannot stand still on women's rights, because that is moving backwards
- 4) Defend the notion of universality and fight back against indoctrination
- 5) Unpack the myth of the "moderate" Islamist
- 6) So much is written in Arabic – we need to translate it
- 7) Get into the loud speaker distribution business"

Bennoune explained that she got the name for her book from a theatre play in Lahore, which was under threat of closure. She had to fight to keep the title. She interviewed nearly 300 people, from stay at home moms to clerics and activists. She asked herself, "Why are all these normal people who have been so brave, not

better known? Osama bin Laden and other terrorists are far more famous than the victims who stand up to them. This is wrong and the media should change their approach. Why don't they hail a victim and downplay those who did the atrocity?"

She asserted that, "We need an anti-racist critique of fundamentalism. We need to distinguish between Islam and Islamism. We need to promote discussions of secularism. Our religious opponents are very organised and disciplined. We need to work together internationally. Look at what has been achieved here with such a small budget. Who is going to organise the next conference? We need better networks, we need to raise money and capture media outlets; we need to seize the moment of opportunity. There is a window of opportunity now because of what ISIS has revealed."

Bennoune talked about being careful about not feeding into the far-Right bigotry against Muslims and those of Muslim heritage. There is too much loathing of Islam and Muslims, she said, and we must focus on the extremists, the Islamists, not Muslims in general. Bennoune concluded by asking everyone to write down one thing they were going to commit to after this conference. She also recommended the book, *The Struggle for Secularism in Europe & North America*, which is about women from migrant descent fighting against the rise of fundamentalism.

The next panel, focusing on "Women, Religion and Religious-Right" was chaired by [Julie Bindel](#), an English writer. Panellists included Afghan human rights activist [Horia Mosadiq](#), Libyan women's rights activist [Magdulien Abaida](#), Jewish sociologist and an anti-racist feminist [Nira Yuval-Davis](#), Iranian-German film-maker [Siba Shakib](#), and founder of the Association for Mixing, Equality and Secularism [Soad Baba Aïssa](#).

Horia Mosadiq, Afghanistan human rights activist wrote a paper titled, "[Religious Fundamentalism and its Impact on Women and Girls in Afghanistan](#)." In the 1960s and 1970s, Afghanistan was a liberal country. Women had the vote there in 1919, before women in the UK got it in 1928. Women could become Parliamentarians, and there were large numbers of women enrolled in universities. Repeating the scenario of Russia invading Afghanistan in the 1980s, now it is the USA and the UK invading and occupying the land. Women students and teachers were killed before, as they are being killed again. The US and UK have often closed their eyes to the suffering of women. Mosadiq spoke of how she has been woken up many nights from 1992 onwards to hear Islamists dragging girls out from their homes and raping and killing them. She talked about sleeping in chicken coops to avoid being attacked, raped and killed by fundamentalists in Afghanistan from 1992 onwards. Similar things happened to many of her friends. Eventually, Mosadiq had to flee the country. She said that the media give virtually no voice to women victims of war and fundamentalism. We mostly just hear the voices of male leaders and perpetrators. Governments end up making 'peace' deals with the male leaders of

the winning army and Islamists. Peace should not come at the expense of women's rights, as it did in the 1980s with the Taliban and post 2012 Arab Spring. Mosadiq said that the current generation of Taliban are more brutal than they were in the 1990s. They are more like ISIS now.

Magdulien Abaida, president of Libyan Hakki Organisation for Women's Rights was very nervous about [speaking at this conference](#) because the last one she spoke at in Benghazi was interrupted by members of an Islamist group who subsequently abducted her. She was beaten by them and had to flee in fear of her life. She declared, "We talk about women's rights in Islam; there are no women in Islam, let alone their rights!" Abaida elaborated that women in Islam are defined by the state of their hymen. She related how she was sent to a mosque as a girl and realised how little regard Islamic doctrine has for women. "According to the Quran, it is fine for Muslim men to have female slaves and to trade them. If a Muslim man can't afford to have a free woman he can take a female slave. Since women slaves are cheaper, why have free women? The Quran makes no mention of rape, so it is not a crime. In Libya the minimum age of marriage was 21, now there is no minimum age. Child marriage and domestic violence are rife". Abaida concluded by saying, "The Quran promotes subordination of women. It is time for intelligent, educated Muslims in the west to wake up to the Quran and understand how it threatens women's rights and speak out against it".

Nira Yuval Davis, diasporic Israeli Jewish sociologist and an anti-racist anti-fundamentalist feminist [discussed her works](#), "The Role of Religion in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflicts and its Effect on Women", and "Women Against Fundamentalism: Stories of Dissent and Solidarity". She talked about Zionism, the settler project, and the construction of the Israeli personality in contrast to the Jewish personality. Jewish orthodox women started to wear the veil to prove their piety (taking a lead from Islam). The Rabbis didn't like it because they hadn't suggested it, so it was banned. Yuval Davis also talked about a recent flight from New York to Israel, which was held up for 11 hours because some orthodox Jewish men refused to sit next to women on the plane.

Siba Shakib, Iranian-German film-maker and author of: "*Afghanistan: Where God Comes to Weep*" [discussed](#) "*How Religion Determines the Lives of Women and Girls and Education as a Way to Free Yourself*". Shakib asked, "90% of women in Afghanistan are illiterate. How can they fight for equal rights when they can't read?" She helped organise secret schools for girls in Kabul. "The village elder is always a man. When there is conflict and an invading force comes into an Afghan town, the village elder is held up as the spokesperson for the town and given raised powers".

Shakib created a group of women carpenters in her town in Afghanistan, because women couldn't have male carpenters in their houses to fix all the broken

things after the fighting (broken windows, etc). They had lots of success, so the Mullah came over and asked to speak to the boss. She said they have no boss; he would have to speak to all the women. This empowered them. He said they were showing up his Mosque as being dreary so he asked them to paint it. They asked for money, and got paid. Shakib argued, “We must stop using the term: Middle East and Far East. These are colonialist terms. Middle East from where?”

Soad Baba Aïssa, Algerian-French founder of Association for Mixing, Equality and Secularism (AMEL = hope in Arabic) [spoke about the second-class status of Algerian women in France](#). Her speech was titled: “*Double Fight Against Islamic Terrorism and Ideology*.” Born in France, Baba Aïssa went to live in Algeria from 1993 to 2012. She has now returned to France and says things are much worse for Algerian women. Women used to be equal in France, but not now.

Lila Ghobady, Iranian-Canadian writer and documentary film-maker delivered a talk next titled, “[Female Iranian Artists: A Portrait of Anti-Regime Women in Exile](#).” Ghobady said, “Iran holds one execution every 7 hours. Many of women are in prison waiting to be stoned”. She was forced to flee to Canada in 2002. She longed for a place where her neighbours didn’t ask her religion. She discovered it wasn’t the utopia she had expected. Multiculturalism was imposed in Canada, and there was a call for Sharia Law. Canada has many links with Iran. She took part in the protests against Sharia and said that multiculturalism has far-reaching and negative effects on women. She still has nightmares about being a woman living under a religious regime. She and a friend were eating in her car during Ramadam in Tehran in 2001. They were caught by the Islamic police and threatened with lashes and imprisonment. They had to bribe the police to escape. She had to cover up from a young age. Ghobady related that in Ottawa in 2005, all students were asked not to have lunch on campus during Ramadan, lest it offend Muslim students who were fasting. Female students were told to not dress too sexily. She was asked, “Why no veil, why no fasting?” A professor at her university said that, “Stoning of women is a cultural issue not a crime”. The university has a large poster of Ayatollah Khomeini, who is held up as a hero. Western governments kept Khomeini in power for years. She screened her documentary “*Forbidden Dance*”. This showed unveiled women in Freedom Square in Tehran in 1979, demonstrating against a new law to make veiling compulsory.

Amel Grami, Tunisian academic at University of Manouba, [talked about the Arab Spring revolution in Tunisia](#). She said that the women stood side by side with the men in the demonstrations, hopes were high, and they dreamt of equality after the revolution. But only a few weeks after the fall of the regime in 2011, a group of women asked for the “right” to wear the niqab. Feminist activists at the same time asked for full equality. Women were encouraged to stand as MPs. The Muslim Brotherhood promised “restoration of women’s rights according to Sharia Law”. (i.e. no women’s rights). The Muslim Brotherhood started to discuss FGM,

rape, child marriage, Niqab, polygamy, slavery etc. “Why are men so afraid of women that they spend so much time writing and implementing laws to control and repress them?”

Soon after, Grami related, Tunisia became Islamicised. Gender segregated classrooms were imposed. She was told to stop teaching gender studies and was then eventually kicked out of the university. Whenever she tried to talk to the press, she got death threats. The President addressed women as: “Veiled and unveiled women”. Unveiled women are portrayed as prostitutes and deserve what they get. Women were taught to be ashamed of their bodies. One Mullah refused to sit on a seat that had been used by a woman 3 days previously.

Grami went on a demonstration and was arrested. “Muslim men don’t like women in the public domain because they think it should belong to them.” She also discussed “*Female Bodies in Post Revolution Tunisia*”.

Sameena Zehra, Indian-British comedian, [took the stage next](#). “Last week I was planning my husband’s funeral. He’s not dead yet, but that’s what I do when I’m angry with him”. She commented on Malala Yousafzai: “Much as I admire Malala Yousafzai, when she got out of hospital after being shot in the head by the Taliban, she said: ‘I want to thank God for saving my life’. I wanted to say to her: ‘I think you’ll find that science saved your life and it was god who got you shot in the head’.” She talked about the Citizenship Test that immigrants now have to sit when they come to the UK. There are lots of questions about Christianity. When is Lent? What do people eat for Christmas dinner? “Why are so many religious questions in there?” she mused.

In a pre-recorded message, **Egyptian atheist Ben Baz Aziz [addressed the delegates](#)** at the Secular Conference 2014. He answered the question of why secularism is important to him and to others like him in Egypt. He said that if people are disallowed from thinking for themselves, and figuring out their own beliefs, they can easily become tools for the state. Ben Baz Aziz was invited to be a speaker at the conference but was not given a visa by the British Government so he sent a message instead. Similarly, **Palestinian atheist Waleed Al-Husseini** also [sent a pre-recorded message of solidarity](#) to Secular Conference 2014. Waleed was also invited as a speaker at the conference but was not given a visa.

Next, the audience watched a moving music video, called “**[Sisters in Danger by Simponi from Indonesia](#)**.” **Simponi** were the winners of One Law for All’s Sounds of Freedom Competition.

Shelley Segal, Australian singer/songwriter [performed next](#). Segal was brought up in a Jewish school where each day the boys chanted: “Thank you god for not making me a woman”. The girls had to sing: “Thank you god for making me what I am”. Amongst orthodox Jews, women’s voices are not allowed to be heard,

she noted, because their voices are considered too arousing. “So now that I have escaped from this, I’m going to sing to you”. One of the songs she played was the Phil Ochs’ classic “*When I’m gone*,” with lyrics like, “All my days won't be dances of delight when I'm gone. And the sands will be shifting from my sight when I'm gone. Can't add my name into the fight while I'm gone. So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.”

The next panel, focusing on “Blasphemy and Apostasy” was [chaired](#) by [Salil Tripathi](#), an award-winning journalist. Panellists included Femen leader [Inna Shevchenko](#), Pakistani-Canadian writer and activist [Kiran Opal](#), US-based lawyer [Maha Kamal](#), and Sudanese Spokesperson of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain [Nahla Mahmoud](#).

Inna Shevchenko, leader for FEMEN [spoke passionately about the role of women in challenging patriarchal religious dogmas](#). Her colourful talk started with the words, “Dear secularists, secular believers, atheists, heretics, witches, non-believers, doubters, agnostics, infidels, defectors, sinners, everybody who’s supposed to be beheaded and all those who are promised to burn in hell, thank you for these two wonderful days full of hope for progress.” She discussed the notion that ideas — whether feminism or religion — should be open to being scrutinized. Shevchenko argued, “Religion is just an idea. We should be able to mock it and criticise it, just like feminism.” She had chopped down a cross in Ukraine; for this she was called a blasphemer and charged with ‘hooliganism’. She had to flee the country, and now lives in France.

Shevchenko continued, “Blasphemy is a phrase used by religious people who choose to be offended. They can decide what blasphemy is, and can then stop all conversation or criticism of their religion in defence of their feelings. The secularists have no voice. We can be offended by calls to prayer or crosses or church bells ringing, but we’re not allowed to object to this. Female blasphemy makes much more sense: it is a fight back against male dominated religions. We are told we are brought to earth by a male god. Religion is not true, it is an intolerant ideology, demanding tolerance from us and preventing equality”. Shevchenko concluded by pointing out the difference between criticizing religion and attacking people. She said we can criticize religion, including by committing so-called blasphemy, without personally attacking people who are believers.

Kiran Opal, Pakistani-Canadian co-founder of Ex-Muslims of North America delivered a talk titled, “[The Human and the Kafir: How Fear of Apostasy Fuels Islamist Power](#).” She spoke about the way that the takfiri doctrine (excommunication by Muslims of anyone they deem to be ‘kafir’) dehumanizes people. She was raised in Pakistan and lives in Canada/USA. She realized as a teenager that she could no longer believe in Islam and became an ex-Muslim. Opal

emphasized that ex-Muslims are a very diverse community and that no one of them speaks for all.

The Quran defines all non-believers as “Kafir”, and how they constitute ‘the other’, a kind of sub-human category, just like any racist concept. Islam permeates every aspect of a Muslim’s daily life, “from spiritual concerns to daily habits like what to eat, what to wear, who to associate with, and even how to go to the bathroom.” It defines your humanity. Therefore, logically anyone who doesn’t live like this, has no humanity. All outsiders are kafirs, and the Quran says these people are sub-human, and it is fine to kill them in some cases. There are so many different kinds of Muslims, and any Muslim can say another Muslim is not a true Muslim. This is how extremists justify what they do and put themselves beyond the reproach of others. The sectarianism that Pervez Hoodbhoy highlighted the previous day means that most Muslim sects don’t recognize many other Muslims as Muslim. Opal argued, “Besides the big Shia-Sunni split, there are multiple splits within those 2 groups, then there are the Ahmadis, and the Sufis, and sub-sects within those as well. And members of most of these groups will be quick to tell you that all those other groups don’t follow the ‘Real Islam’”. Yet, since we have to let people define themselves as they want, everyone who claims to be Muslim is Muslim, right? Opal said that this leaves us with the liberal paradox, “that awkward situation of having to accommodate beliefs that are themselves unaccommodating, in the name of accommodating all beliefs.”

Opal talked about ex-Muslims and how they live under the watchful eye of religious family members, having to starve and go thirsty during Ramadan against their will, having to pretend to be Muslim, even though they don’t believe in Islam anymore. She explained that besides the honour killings and suicides that some face, many live with economic and social pressure to conform every day, and most of them are ‘closeted’. She ended her talk by saying, “One of the best and most efficient ways to stave off Islamism is to give platforms to diverse ex-Muslim voices. Diluting the identity politics that is the lifeblood of Islamism is possible. Moderate Muslims often avoid supporting ex-Muslims, perhaps out of fear of being called Kafir themselves. But more and more are realizing that we are *not* anti-Muslim. We may criticize Islam, like we do all religions, but we stand in solidarity with anyone, including Muslims, when they are being targeted out of hatred and xenophobia.”

Mahal Kamal, lawyer, [spoke about the incompatibility of International law and Sharia law](#). She had also related how she was disowned by her parents for renouncing Islam ten years ago. This made her life very hard in many ways, not least of which is the deep sense of loss she has had to cope with. She also has had to fund her own way through college.

International Law encompasses a lot of separate laws. She relayed a bit of the history of human rights, originating as ‘natural rights’ i.e. rights that we all have,

that don't have to be given to you. She quoted one of her professors, "There is a relative universality of human rights. Not a universal relativity of human rights."

Kamal argued that the idea of universal human rights is not a purely Western concept, something Islamists like to claim — it could have originated anywhere. There's nothing inherently "Western" about it because the West has gone through a number of political battles within itself throughout history. She also noted that the problem with the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights and the Arab Declaration of Human Rights is that they tried to take the UN Declaration of Human Rights but impose Sharia Law onto it, which completely defeats the purpose of Human Rights. Sharia law treats non-Muslims and 'apostates' as less than Muslims. Cultural relativism is in direct conflict with natural rights. Kamal pointed out that, in Islamic states, not everyone accepts Sharia law, and it shouldn't be assumed that everyone does.

Nahla Mahmoud, Sudanese Spokesperson of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain spoke about "[Islamic Apostasy in the West: Reality and Challenges](#)."

Western governments are so focused on what is happening in Arab states and waging a war on terror that they don't notice what is happening in their own countries, she argued. Mahmoud came to the UK from Sudan in 2010, and was shocked by the influence of Islamists here. "There are currently 85 Sharia Courts operating in the UK. There is forced marriage to girls as young as 9. Thirty under-aged girls were forcibly married in Islington alone last year", she said. Mahmoud said, "One third of UK Muslims aged 16-24 years think that apostates should be killed. (Daily Telegraph 6th Sept 2010). What will happen in 20 years when these people come into positions of power?"

Her views after four years of living in the UK:

1. The cowardice of the left and liberals who won't speak out against Islamism
2. Media bias. Extremists always get a platform when they don't represent anyone but a fringe minority.
3. Censorship and political correctness, multiculturalism
4. Faith schools and mosques – who's monitoring them?

Last year she criticised Sharia law, got death threats and her family in Sudan were threatened. The police blamed her and only gave her an alarm to protect herself against those threatening her. "What about freedom of speech? When will we do something about those who make death threats?" Mahmoud recommended writing to MPs and local councillors and asking them where they stand on Sharia Law.

The final panel, focusing on "the Religious-Right" was chaired by [Yasmin Rehman](#), a women's rights campaigner. Panellists included founding member of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain [Bahram Soroush](#), Senior Researcher at the International Center for Ethnic Studies in Sri Lanka [Chulani Kodikara](#), advocate for

gender equity and justice for women **Faizun Zackariya**, labour historian and Indian public intellectual **Dilip Simeon**, and journalist, film-maker and rights activist **Gita Sahgal**.

Bahram Soroush, political activist and Commentator spoke of [confronting the 'Islamic State'](#). He spoke about the political factors that brought about the rise of the Islamic State. He said “Western states are not going to save the people of Kobane; it is an assembly like this that will save the people of Kobane. The burden of defending secularism is on us. We are alone in this fight but we are not small. I want to defend the Left actually. Since yesterday people have been talking about the Left. I think we have to define what you are talking about. If you are talking about the Socialist Workers Party here in Britain or Stop the War Coalition, yes they are not the Left. If Left turns Right then it is Right. Call them by their name.” Soroush emphasized that whatever our differences, the one thing we cannot and must not compromise on is our dedication to humanity and human rights.

Faizun Zackariya and Chulani Kodikara, Sri Lankan co-founders of Muslim Women's Research & Action Front [delivered a joint presentation on Sinhala Buddhist Ethnonationalism in Sri Lanka](#). The government defeated the Tamil Tigers in 2009. Since then there has been a rise in violence and attacks on Muslims, (8% of population) by the Buddhist-Right. At the same time, there has been an “Arabization” of Sri Lankan Muslims. ‘Ten Commandments’ were issued in 2012 by the ruling Sinhalese Nationalist Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) government with two rules specifically for women: stopping birth control and stopping the ability of Sri Lankan women to seek work in the Gulf states, which was a good source of income and independence for them. All abortion clinics have been closed. Kodikara argued BBS wants that, “Women should stay at home and have babies and look after the family. Women must now get permission certificates from their husbands before they can do anything”. While Sinhalese Buddhist women are being effectively pressured to have more children, there are reports that minority Muslim women are being forced to use birth control.

Zackariya spoke on the other fundamentalism, Islamism, which is growing alongside Sinhalese Buddhist Ethnonationalism in Sri Lanka. Both Sinhalese Buddhist-Right and Islamists target women – as with all religious-Right movements, they victimize women's bodies and women's rights first. BBS is pushing Muslim women to remove their Islamic attire, a move which is then used by Muslim extremists, influenced by Wahabbism, to rally support for Islamist groups. Seemingly opposing forms of right-wing bigotry feed each other.

Dilip Simeon, Indian labour historian discussed, “[Communal Faultlines and Genocidal Consensus](#)”. Simeon said that, “India is fractionating into communalism. There is the mobilisation of one community against another, fueled by hatred, based on competing versions of nationalism. It's not an apocalyptic fascism like the rise of

fascism in Europe in the 1930s, but a slower growth. Armies have been privatised, there is normalisation of violence and groups of citizens undertake atrocities against others in staggered bouts”. He talked about communal violence, punitive rape, population removal, and said that India is now re-living the Partition on a regular basis. He said, “We are still paying the price of partition in 1948. There is an ideological climate of hatred and violence. Indian Communalism is a staggered form of fascism, which is on the rise and needs to be tackled by international action.” Simeon argued that, “There's an ideological project of Hindu supremacy. All Hindus are not like that. In fact, there's a strong opposition against such a project. That's why they've never succeeded.” He asserted that communalism (ethno-nationalism) in India must be tackled as one phenomenon. “If you don't take it as a whole, you miss the bus.”

Gita Sahgal, director of the Centre for Secular Space, [made an impassioned plea to progressive activists](#). She talked about the many movements of the religious-Right, not just Islamists but also of Hindus, Buddhists, Christians. She said that there is no one solution as each situation requires a unique way of dealing with it.

Sahgal emphasized that we can not fall into the trap — as some on the Left have fallen into — of supporting the right-wing movements among minority groups. Many Western progressive movements have turned their backs on non-Western progressive movements. The least we can do is stand in solidarity with people whose lives are being destroyed by fundamentalists. Sahgal said, "We have to resurrect the old solidarities that have existed among people who have organized across borders. When we're talking about post-modernists and those Leftists who are allying with fundamentalists - this is not unwitting. Let us understand, they know what they are doing, and they're doing it because they believe what they're doing. Let us leave them to one side on the scrap heap of history. Let us build solidarities between the older generations that understood another form of solidarity on the Left and among progressives and social democrats and people who support freedom and anti-colonialism as we understood it a long time ago. Let us build relationships with younger people who are fighting for their freedoms, in their personal lives, their freedom to be themselves, their freedom to practice religion or not as they choose. Let us build those relationships and let us move forward. Because there is a lost generation that has happened. We can not convince them. Leave them aside. That is a key message. Let us work with the transformative understanding of human rights, the understanding that secular values underpin human rights, and they should be overtly defended within human rights. It's not going to be done for us by human rights organizations. It has to be done by us. Let us not be cynical and let us come forward with our own plans. Let us not be afraid of standing up for what we believe."

Algerian Sociologist **Marieme Helie Lucas** addressed the delegates to go over what must happen next whilst **Maryam Namazie** addressed the delegates and speakers one last time and [introduced the *Manifesto for Secularism*](#). The conference supported the Manifesto with a standing ovation and called on people everywhere to [sign up to it](#) and join the fight for secularism and against the religious-Right.

Namazie said in her concluding remarks, “This is about fighting the religious-Right. It’s not about fighting a religious revival. The threats are real from the religious-Right, all over the world. The threats are real because the resistance is there. Our resistance is such a threat to the religious-Right that they have to use violence, murder, and mayhem to impose their rule. There are lots of small secular initiatives around the globe, and we need to coordinate and collaborate together. For us, equal citizenship, universalism, secularism (Laïcité) are most important. We will move towards an international front. We are strong today. We will be stronger tomorrow!”

Despite [serious threats](#) made to the hotel to ban the conference and Maryam Namazie, the conference was a resounding success. **Terry Sanderson**, President of the National Secular Society, [wrote about the conference](#): “Secular conference created a sense of imminent and momentous change – and women will be the driving force”.



Kiran Fatima Opal is a writer, editor, speaker who was born in Pakistan and grew up in the US and Canada. She works with organizations and groups around the world on projects and campaigns promoting human rights, freedom of conscience & speech, and equality under the law. She has been collaborating with the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain since 2008, and she co-founded Ex-Muslims of North America in 2013. You can get more information at her website: <http://www.kiranopal.com> and follow her on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/KiranOpal>

Manifesto for Secularism

Sign on to the Manifesto here

Our era is marked by the rise of the religious-Right – not because of a “religious revival” but rather due to the rise of far-Right political movements and states using religion for political supremacy. This rise is a direct consequence of neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism and the social policies of communalism and cultural relativism. Universalism, secularism and citizenship rights have been abandoned and segregation of societies and “communities” based on ethnicity, religion and culture have become the norm.

The Islamic state (formerly Isis), the Saudi Regime, Hindutva (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) in India, the Christian-Right in the US and Europe, Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka, Haredim in Israel, AQMI and MUJAO in Mali, Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Islamic republic of Iran and the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria are examples of this.

For many decades now, people in the middle-east, North Africa, South Asia and Diaspora have been the first victims but also on the front-lines of resistance against the religious-Right (whether religious states, organisations and movements) and in defence of secularism and universal rights, often at great risk to their lives.

We call on people everywhere to stand with us to establish an international front against the religious-Right and for secularism. We demand:

- 1. Complete separation of religion from the state. Secularism is a fundamental right.**
- 2. Separation of religion from public policy, including the educational system, health care and scientific research**
- 3. Abolition of religious laws in the family, civil and criminal codes. An end to discrimination against and persecution of LGBT, religious minorities, women, freethinkers, ex-Muslims and others**
- 4. Freedom of religion and atheism and freedom to criticise religions. Belief as a private affair**
- 5. Equality between women and men and citizenship rights for all**

For further information, speakers' bios, photos, and press, please visit the official website:
<http://www.secularconference.com>

More videos, including Q&A sessions with all the panelists & speakers can be viewed here:
<http://www.secularconference.com/videos/>