Refusing Holy Orders
Religious fundamentalism is gathering strength. It has gained succour from both Left and Right. And, argue Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis, it is women who stand to lose the most.

The ‘Salman Rushdie affair’ and the mass demonstrations of Muslims in protest - not only against the "Sarcastic Verses" and its author but also at the ways the British state privileges Christianity - revealed the issue of fundamentalism at the heart of the British political agenda. But different fundamentalism movements: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and Hindu, have been growing in Britain during the last few years - partly as a result of international developments and partly because of the situation in Britain itself.

Women, their roles, and above all, their control, are at the heart of the fundamentalist agenda. That they should conform to the strict confines of womanhood within the fundamentalist religious code is a precondition for maintaining and reproducing the fundamentalist version of society.

Fundamentalist movements throughout the world are basically political movements. They seek to harness modern state and media powers to the service of their religious ideology. Religious fundamentalism aligns itself with different political trends in different countries and manifests itself in a variety of forms, sometimes as a form of orthodoxy - a maintenance of traditional values and sometimes as a radical phenomenon, dismissing impure and corrupt forms of religion to return to original sources.

What is common to all fundamentalist movements, however, is that they claim their version of religion to be the only true one. They use political means to impose it on all members of their religion and feel threatened by pluralism of thought. Militant fundamentalism has to be differentiated, therefore, from liberation theology which, while deeply religious and political cooperate with, rather than subjugate, non-religious political struggles for freedom.

The rise of fundamentalism is linked to the crisis of modernity, to a general sense of despair and disorientation. This has moved people from all over the world to return to religion as a source of solace and even as a means of escape and a solid anchor to provide a sense of stability and meaningful orientation, and coherent identity.

In the West the most influential fundamentalist movement has been evangelical, which is at the heart of the 'moral right' in the USA. In the Third World, and amongst Third World minorities in the West, the rise of fundamentalism is also intimately linked to the failure of nationalist and socialist movements to bring about successful liberation from oppression, exploitation and poverty.

Religion has also been deployed by militants as an 'indigenous' ideology with which to mobilise the 'masses' and confront racism, imperialism and superpower interventions. This has become particularly powerful since the Iranian revolution, and has affected in turn, not only Muslims in other countries, but also Jews, Sikhs, Hindus and other religions. Of course, specific local conditions have contributed to the rise of these movements. In this article we want to look at the particular conditions which exist in Britain.

The issue of fundamentalism around the Rushdie affair has been deeply confusing and has created divisions within both the left and right in Britain. For example, during the mass Muslim demonstration in London in June 1989, the group of women who had just recently established the organisation ‘Women Against Fundamentalism’, counter demonstrated. They wanted to register their voices in opposition to the fundamentalist leadership of the demonstration, its demands for the extension of the blasphemy law, and especially against the position on the role of women.

The Anti-Fascist League demonstrated alongside the main Muslim march, emphasising the Muslims’ right to resist racism and physically confronting a group of fascists who opposed the demonstration on racist and nationalist grounds. Another fascist organisation supported the demonstration, seeing it as Muslims expressing their inherently different and separate cultural-national essence. However, both factions of fascists, as well as the Muslim fundamentalists, opposed the Women Against Fundamentalism. Similar unusual if not ‘unholy’ alliances and splits have appeared in the press around, for instance, the “Sacred Chasm” pamphlet of Fay Weldon.

This confusion springs from the different political ideologies with which fundamentalist movements have aligned themselves. One of the unchallenged ‘truths’ of the left for many years has been the assumption of the inherently progressive nature of anti-imperialism.

By extension, any attempt to criticise and challenge the authority of fundamentalist leaders is seen by the left as racist. They have been thought by multiculturalist and anti-racist strategists to hold the ‘ammonium of minority communities’ and to view them as internally homogeneous. ‘Identity politics’, which has emphasised people’s right to express their ‘difference’ has drawn its power from the slogan, ‘the personal is political’. Ironically, by construing the political in the realm of the personal, the Left has been unable either to analyse or to challenge religious fundamentalism.

From a very different perspective, some of the new Right in Britain, while deeply racist, have felt that the cohesive, tightly controlled, multi-racial model of “Asian families”, for example, is highly conductive to the type of moral system they wish to see strengthened throughout society.

So, on the one hand, fundamentalism in Britain has been encouraged by different political forces to homogenise and unite the British collectivity, religiously and culturally; and on the other hand, to heterogenise and separate it. This contradictory process has been made possible firstly, because of the particular relationship between religion and the state in Britain, and secondly because of the relationship between fundamentalism and multicultural policies.

Full separation between religion and the state has never occurred in Britain. This is all too often ignored in left analysis and that of sociologists of religion, in which the hidden, and frequently open, assumption is that in modern nation-states, nationalism has taken over from religion, which has either disappeared in the secularised society, or has at least withdrawn into the private area.

According to the latest statistics (‘Social Trends’ 1989), fewer than 20% of the population are members of religious organisations (only 15% are members of the ‘Trinitarian’ churches, such as the Established and the Catholic churches). However, 75% of the population has a religious affiliation, the majority through the Established Churches. In a survey carried out by the Independent Television Authority in 1970, eight out of ten Britons saw Britain as a Christian country to be very important or important to them. This was the context in which the Powellite notion of Englishness, expressed in his ‘rivers of blood’ speech, has to be seen.

The Christianity of Britain, however, is not simply a question of religious affiliation or even a part of British nationalist ideology. It is anchored in the law which means much more than the status of the queen as a symbolic head of the Churches of England and Scotland. Firstly, the church hierarchy participates in the House of Lords. Secondly, the blasphemy law protects the Church of England from offensive attacks which are legal against other religions. The blasphemy law might not be often invoked, but it has been (by Mary Whitehouse) and it can be, and therefore its importance is more than symbolic alone.

Thirdly, and probably most importantly in contemporary political debates, is the fact that under the 1988 Education Reform Act, all state schools are required to have a daily act of Christian worship. (Significantly, this amendment originated in the house of Lords). Christianity, therefore, is given an affirmed legal status as the ideological cement of national culture. There is an assumed correspondence of national and religious identity which means that non-established churches and particularly non-Christians can be partly excluded from the British national collectivity and are defined to a greater or lesser extent as outsiders.

Yet, while membership of the Established Churches has fallen by 14% in the last three years, membership of minority churches (like Spiritualists and Jehovah’s Witnesses) has risen by 26% and non-Christian religions, especially Muslims and Sikhs, have almost doubled their membership. Religious affiliation has come, therefore, in different ways, to signify collective identity also among Britain’s ethnic minorities.
In part, this phenomenon relates to global developments and the rise of fundamentalist movements in the countries of origin of non-Christians living in Britain. However, it is also a result of the multicultural policies prevalent in British education and other parts of the ‘race relations industry.’ Paradoxically, these policies have attempted to legitimise heterogeneity in British national culture but have entailed creating a space in which separatist and fundamentalist movements have developed and sought to impose uniformity and homogeneity among all their adherents.

The policy of multiculturalism is one of the many attempts to deal with the related problems of racism and the absorption by mainstream British society of minorities drawn from the old Empire who settled here after the war. It has been widely adopted as a more tolerant way forward than full integration into a ‘British way of life’. It has been accepted as a tool of social policy and in education, where it was first articulated.

Fundamentalist leaderships have been the main beneficiaries of the adoption of multiculturalist norms. Sometimes portrayed as ‘medievalists who have rejected British values’, in fact, their campaigns have been fought within the framework of multiculturalism - it has provided their chief ideological weapon. They have argued to extend the blasphemy law to Islam and for separate schools for Muslims in the name of equal rights.

Under the terms of the multiculturalist consensus, racism is not as a form of institutionalised inequality, but as a matter of cultural difference, where mutually exclusive ways of life must be preserved, their arguments are unanswerable.

Minority communities were defined by their culture, which increasingly has become seen as a matter of religious identity. So children in ‘multicultural’ schools were taught about the various religious holidays as one of the main ways of acquainting them with other cultures. Even more serious was the way the British ‘race relations industry’ (mostly community relations bureau and local councils) have been financing mosques and temples (but not churches - even black churches) as a major part of their race relations work.

The racialisation of religion, especially of Islam, has reached a new peak after the Rushdie affair. Communities which were previously known by national or regional origin - Pakistanis, Mirpuri, Bengali, Punjabi - are now all seen as the Muslim community. This is a construction brought about by external agencies like the press, and by self-definition.

Minority communities have therefore come to be seen not only as defined primarily by religion, but also as being internally unified, homogenous and with no class or gender differences or conflicts. Women’s demands for freedom and equality are clearly outside ‘cultural traditions’ (often themselves only half-understood) and therefore regarded as legitimate. By contrast, the most conservative traditions are considered the most ‘authentic’. Appeals to culture and tradition are used to attack women organising autonomously.

Women affect and are affected by ethnic and national processes in many significant respects. Some of these are central to the project of fundamentalism, which attempts to impose its own unitary religious definition on the collectivity and its symbolic order. The ‘proper’ behaviour of women is used to signify the difference between those who belong to the collectivity and those who do not. Women are also seen as ‘cultural carriers’ who transmit the ‘cultural heritage’ and way of life to future generations. Being properly controlled in terms of marriage and divorce properly ensures that children who are born to these women are not only biologically but also symbolically reproduced within the boundaries of the collectivity.

It is not incidental, therefore, that the control of women and maintenance of the patriarchal family are at the heart of all fundamentalist agendas. Paradoxically, some women have been attracted to fundamentalist movements as the place where they can find refuge from the sexism and racism of their host society and gain some empowerment which is legitimate within their communities. Such empowerment, however, is under the strict control of the male leaderships of fundamentalist movements and subjected to a narrow definition of a ‘woman’s place’. Women themselves have been recognised as and establishing organisations in different countries to challenge fundamentalism.

One such group - Women Against Fundamentalism - was set up in London in the spring of 1989. Although the direct impetus stemmed from public debate around the Rushdie affair, the organisation encompasses a broad range of women’s groups and individuals from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The preoccupations of Women Against Fundamentalism centre on the three central areas through which fundamentalisms operate in practical terms against women. They are: the question of separate religious schools; women’s refuges; and the anti-abortion campaign.

The issue of separate religious schools - and particularly single-sex schools for girls - is one of the major demands of fundamentalist leaders. In Britain it has now become compulsory for schools to be conducted through state education. Private schools have educated the elite, and voluntary-aided schools have been the semi-private system in which religious schools (mostly Church of England and Catholic) have been partially financed by the state.

Single-sex schooling for girls has often been considered by feminists to positively enhance girls’ academic achievement. However, this feminist thinking assumes a structure and curriculum which is similar to that of a mixed school. This is not the case where religious education is concerned. The story of Catholic education in Britain provides a warning and an example. By lowering expectations of their pupils, many Catholic schools have helped to maintain the Irish in low-paid, ghettoised work. They have presented a strong sense of Catholicism while wiping out any sense of Irish identity by failing to teach Irish history or language. Yet many in the Irish community would oppose their disestablishment. They are cherished as a sign of success of the struggles of Irish Catholics in Britain.

Muslim fundamentalists have campaigned to establish such voluntary-aided schools for their communities. Until now, most of them have been rejected by government school inspectors because their standards have been too low. The vast majority of private Muslim schools, with the exception of a couple of religious seminaries, are for girls only. Their purpose is very clearly to bring up girls to be dutiful wives and mothers. They teach creation theories in science (like Christian Fundamentalists) and offer poor facilities for the achievement of any qualifications.

Although most Asian parents would probably prefer single-sex education, they would not want to send their daughters to these schools; even fewer would risk their sons’ futures. However, only a few parents would publicly oppose a religious demand. By making separate education for a girls a central plank of their national campaign, Muslim fundamentalists have shown a keen awareness of their fears of their constituency. Their discourse ties the control of girls to the dangers of growing up in a secular society in the morally-degenerate West. A few years ago in Manchester there was a successful campaign involving Asian feminists, to stop a state school from being converted into a Muslim school. In the more intimidatory and cohesive atmosphere following the Rushdie affair, such a campaign would be more difficult to organise.

Though Muslim fundamentalists are the most vocal, they are by no means the only group demanding separate schools. Jewish Hassidic, Seventh-Day Adventists, Sikhs and Hindu groups have all demanded separate religious schools. These demands are likely to be fuelled by the education crisis, which has caused severe teacher shortages in many schools. In the East End of London, for instance, where Britain’s biggest Bangladeshi community is settled, thousands of Bangladeshi school children are without school places. Local voluntary-aided Catholic schools do have vacancies, but these are not available to these children.

Conflict over the control of women in fundamentalist communities has not been confined to the question of separate schools. It has recently spread also to women’s refuges, which were initially established by the feminist movement to provide women with a separate space away from their husbands’ violent attempts to control them. The debate about refuges shows how the contradictory influences of feminist and multi-culturalist policies adopted by the local state (mainly in Labour-led councils) affect the rights of minority women.

In the early 80’s black women who had set up autonomous women’s groups took up the issue of domestic violence and began to argue for local council funding for refuges. They were bitterly opposed by conservative community leaders who argued that domestic violence did not exist, or that it was a problem by traditional mechanisms within the community. Some white feminists also felt that
separate refuges were in contradiction to the central idea of the women's movement: the notion of 'sisterhood'. Black women countered...

religions on the other hand, are fertile ground for the growth in influence of fundamentalist militancy.

Non-Christian fundamentalism is proving confusing not only to the white Left, but also to parts of the radical black autonomous movement who have been critical of multiculturalism. Their theorists, like A. Sivanandan from the Institute of Race Relations, have charged multiculturalist theories with ignoring racism as a social and historical force. They argued that it was not only culture which helped to form black communities, but their historical struggles against imperialism and the British state. It was issues such as police harassment, housing, and immigration which were crucial for communities to establish themselves around.

This heroic tradition celebrates black women who fought beside their men, but also ignores internal conflict and sees any mention of it as divisive. By stressing those elements which brought communities together, including (but not exclusively) religion, this perspective has found it difficult to analyse fundamentalism. Its rise has been blamed on the failure of radical anti-racist movements, ignoring the centrality of the control of women in all fundamentalist agendas.

Women who have pointed this out have been accused in those political circles of causing a racist backlash. It seems that the notion of 'Izzat' or the honour of the community, which women have traditionally upheld, has been transferred to the anti-racist struggle as well. Women are expected to submerge their own interests to uphold the honour of the heroic anti-racist tradition.

But many do not and cannot accept this. The challenge ahead is to find effective ways to confront the contradictions and conflicts within minority communities as well as oppression and racism in the state and society at large. To find ways of resolving the tension between autonomy and tolerance, diversity and equality, to have the right to dissent and oppose racism and fundamentalism. And sexism.

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Washing Our Linen: One Year of Women Against Fundamentalism
By Clara Connolly

Origins
The Ayatollah's fatwa against Salman Rushdie, in February 1989, has had equally unsettling effects on the left as on the mainstream of British politics. The campaign against the "Satanic Verses" has revealed an increasingly confident and militant section of the Asian community, marching under the banner of Islam rather than anti-racism. Socialists - long unused to the passions aroused by religion - were taken by surprise. Feminists, beginning to absorb the emphasis that Black feminists were placing on cultural autonomy in the face of racism, were equally puzzled by the metamorphosis of "culture" into a celebration of masculinity on the streets. Though uneasy in the knowledge that the defence of free speech has traditionally been the oxus of radicals, both movements left the defence of Rushdie largely to his peers in the liberal literary establishment.

On International Women's Day however, at the height of the post-fatwa furor, Southall Black Sisters (SBS) and Bailing Labour Party Women's Section held a public meeting in defence of Rushdie which was to help dissipate such confusion. SBS, now a mainly Asian advice and campaigning centre in West London, was formed ten years ago in the heat of Black and anti-racist political ferment. Its seminal report "Against the Grain" (SBS, 1990) gives an eloquent account of its evolution and present concerns. Organizing against domestic violence has brought them into conflict with local community leaders and the anti-racist left. Accused, in common with other Black and ethnic minority feminists, of "washing our dirty linen" at the expense of anti-racist unity, they have countered with a spirited attack on the politics of multi-culturalism, which views minority communities as homogeneous entities at the expense of class and particularly of gender conflict (Shahg, 1989).

One of the factors that has allowed SBS some degree of tolerant the character of Southall, a Sikh (not a Muslim) stronghold, with a strong tradition of political organizing along secular lines. Nevertheless, the climate of the times gave the meeting they organized a dramatic quality. It was well-attended, and a defiant statement was issued in Rushdie's defence, insisting that women's voices be heard over the fundamentalist clamour. "Our lives will not be defined by community leaders" (WAF, 1989),- the tone issued a strong challenge to anti-racist orthodoxy.

Encouraged by the response to this meeting, SBS decided to establish a network of women opposed to religious fundamentalism. The first
meeting, at the London Women's Centre in May 89, drew feminists from other Asian groups, and from a variety of ethnic minorities, who because of their struggle against powerful religious establishments abroad could grasp the threat posed to the self-organisation of Asian women. Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF) was formed, with a founding statement calling for "the separation of state and religion in Britain as a precondition for defeating fundamentalism" (WAF, 1989). The initial impetus of WAF was the concern of Asian feminists to distance themselves from religious leaders - why then this emphasis on relations between state and religion in Britain? It is worth pausing to unpack the logic here, since it is the key to WAF's political purposes.

Religion, Education, Fundamentalism

Britain is in the peculiar historical position of being largely indifferent to religion in its civil life, progressive in its statutes on such key issues as abortion and divorce, and yet constitutionally professing and privileging a form of Christianity whose origins are notoriously political. There is an established church, closely connected to parliamentary institutions; a set of blasphemy laws which protect only the Christian denominations; and a state education system profoundly influenced by Christianity. Anglican Churches are full of tourists and empty of worshippers, but Anglicanism remains a central component of genteel Englishness. (The more ebulient forms of Christianity being the preserve of the UK's outer regions or lower orders.)

WAF's emphasis on the domain of politics flows from our understanding of modern fundamentalism as the mobilization of religious affiliation for political ends. The fundamentalist project has two interlinked goals. First comes the phase of politico-religious self-definition, by a process of re-discovery (or invention) of the "fundamentals" of religious belonging. This invariably happens at the expense of women's and children's autonomy - they are regarded as communal property in need of protection, particularly in the secular sphere, from unruly outsiders. This both enhances and reduces the status of women and children - hence the sometimes fragile nature of their gratitude to their protectors.

Next comes the marching phase, when the newly conscious politico-religious movement flexes its muscles against the state. In countries like the US, Egypt or India, where a popular strand of nationalism has been either anti- or multi-denominational, their demands have been either anti-sectarian or non-religious in either case a serious challenge to the status quo. But in Britain they are for more of the same rather than less of it. So, for example, Christians can insist that Christian-in-form become Christian-in-fact (as is happening in education) and Muslims, have, apparently, only to ask that majority privileges be extended to minorities. This gives the demands of Muslim fundamentalists a reasonable air, which, self-confessed, moderates can support. The Rushdie Affair has been the crucial catalyst of a seemingly seamless (and supra-racial) Muslim consensus in Britain. It is this kind of politico-religious affiliation, a threat to more progressive political identities, that WAF opposes. It should go without saying, but it doesn't, that WAF supports the principle of freedom of worship - it is not an anti-religious organisation.

WAF's Public Profile

Our counter-demonstration against the Muslim march of May 27 last year gave WAF the opportunity to state our case in the media - within limits. Researchers always asked for "Muslim" speakers, and were far more interested to hear arguments against Muslim religious leaders than against the privileging of Christianity within Britain. We had to fight hard for recognition as a "non-Muslim organisation" (the BBC's words), equally opposed to all religious fundamentalism. This was perhaps inevitable, given our origins and initial focus, and the media's reluctance to question the predominance of Western liberal and secular values, but it did mean that many Black and ethnic minority women, sympathetic to our aims, were discouraged from openly joining the organisation by the anti-Islamic character of our media image.

We received a less patronizing audience among sections of the Left, on such occasions as the Socialist Movement Conference in Sheffield, and a large fringe meeting organised by "Voices for Rushdie" at the Labour Party national conference. Local women sections of the Labour Party, and teachers union groups, invited us to numerous meetings to state our case. During the year the focus changed from the right of Black and ethnic minority women to dissent from religious and "multicultural" orthodoxy, to the more particular issues of Muslim schools.

Education Campaign

In the wake of the Rushdie Affair, Muslim demands for separate state-subsidized religious schooling have grown more confident. This has thrown up the state "partnership" between Church and state in Britain into crisis. As many as one third of state schools in Britain are part of the "voluntary" or religious sector; the overwhelming majority of these are Church of England or Roman Catholic, and a few Jewish (CRE, 1990, p.4). Legally, there is no reason why Muslims, Sunday School Adventists, or any other minority religious group should not establish their schools also, but there has been considerable reluctance by the Secretary of State for Education to the request. For example, the Islamia School in Brent (North West London) has twice been rejected. The grounds have not been made public.

A further cause of grievance is the clause in the 1988 Education Reform Act which introduced "a compulsory act of daily public worship in all county (or secular) schools. This must be "broadly or mainly Christian" in character - a provocation to all non-Christians, including those of no religious persuasion.

Against this background, it would have been impossible for WAF to adopt a position of opposition only to Muslim schools, though our Interest in the education debate stemmed from this opposition. Our concern was that Muslim schools were being set up for girls, in an effort to police their sexuality, and to reinforce their religiously defined roles as future wives and mothers. It is our contention that "at the heart of fundamentalist agendas is the control of women's minds and bodies" (WAF, 1989). This was the basis of our objection to the idea of separate Muslim schools.

Another objection is to the creation of racially segregated schools, which runs counter to the ideal of a culturally dynamic, pluralist society which is the (possibly Utopian) aspiration of many of us. But we recognize that the Christian school sector is open to that accusation, with far more justice. The Catholic Commission for Racial Justice has argued that "some Catholic schools prefer to white parents desire to send their children to a white school" (Catholic Media Office, 1984). Melanie Phillips referred to a particularly embarrassing example in a recent article:

"In Tower Hamlets, in London's East End, some 400-500 Bangladeshi children languish without education because there are not enough school places for them. Yet the Roman Catholic state-aided schools in the borough have dozens of empty places because they will only offer 10 per cent of them to non-Catholic children." (Guardian, 1/6/1990)

After much internal discussion, WAF produced a model resolution on the religious schools issue. It calls for the phasing out of state subsidies to the voluntary (or religious) sector, and the abolition of the right to establish religious schools in the public sector; the withdrawal of the clause imposing "mainly Christian" worship on secular schools; and the development of a strong anti-racist education policy, which would grant rights of private worship, diet and dress for any religious group in a state school. Our aim in producing a model resolution for circulation to sympathizers was to attempt, primarily, to influence the policies of the main party in opposition, the Labour Party. (In the early eighties, the Labour Party had moved sharply to the left, and although social-democratic in character, still has many members who are radical socialists). We then support from local branches, and particularly their women's sections, but our campaign ran into head-on collision with the party leadership's (scandalously successful) efforts to squash local autonomy and de-radicalize its image before the next General Election. So, for example, our resolution, submitted by a London Branch to the Labour Party Women's Conference (throughout the eighties a lively event), was voted out of order on the absurd grounds that it was on "more than one issue", and so was not debated. The party leadership were alert from an early stage to the challenge that a secularist position would pose to their refurbished respect for religious, as opposed to racial, minorities (Labour Party, 1989). This has been a serious blow to our campaign, and it is clear with hindsight that we devoted too much energy trying to shift the Labour Party internally, through its (now powerless and demoralized) left and socialist-feminist members.
Other Constituencies

A dilemma for WAF over the past year - and particularly after the early euphoria wore off - has been to define where our potential allies are, and how to use them effectively. Our position on secularism and the state, though proceeding from socialist-feminism, is in fact a classic democratic demand of the kind that has been fought and won long ago in other Western countries such as France and the United States. On the left, there has been a lack of sympathy for secularism for many decades. An indication is that Chapter 88, the centre-left group arguing for a Bill of constitutional Rights in Britain, remains impervious to the need for a constitutional settlement on the established Church and the right of religious minorities. One reason for this indifference is undoubtedly the mild character of established religion, which I referred to earlier. Anglicanism, the confident religion of rulers of empire, has put its "civilising" mission before Evangelicalism. Another is the undefined character of the bourgeois English Revolution - with its accommodation to the ancien régime at the expense of republicanism or secularism - and the subsequent distortions of English nationalism.

One of the few organisations that have offered wholesale support for our stand on secularism has been the South Place Ethical Society, a humanist group based at Conway Hall, London, and related organisations such as the Rationalist Press Association. Admirable as they are, however, they are a small minority. The most important, by far, is the support we have needed, and have received, from what I term the "dissenter" of all kinds, they remain bemused by recent political developments in Britain such as the women's and anti-racist movements.

On the other hand, we have had support in our opposition to fundamentalism ("you brave girls") from individuals and groups who would not yet consider opposing the dominance of Christianity in education - such as the Movement for the Ordination of Women, and other radical religious groupings. This kind of support, however well-intentioned, is difficult to respond to, because of the sheer volume of public noise about "Islamic extremism". Fay Weldon is, unarguably, the best known example, in print, of the revitalized crusader attitude among Western liberals (see Connolly, 1990 and Desai, 1990). Some of the response we've had from teachers also, is of the patronising kind that "teachery" sorry for Muslim girls, while ignoring their own discomfort about the introduction of Christian worship in schools (they simply skip assembly). The "middle ground" is treacherous for us, especially where some Black feminists remain ambivalent about, or hostile to, WAF's anti-Islamic image, and some of the best known radical anti-racists (like Sivaniadan, at the Institute of Race Relations) maintain a careful silence on the Roshidic issue.

The Women's Movement

We have attempted, with some success, to situate ourselves within the broader women's movement. For example, we organized a successful hustings for WAF, in Conway Hall, an unusual venue for a women's disco. The attendance included many lesbians, Black and white - a fact which gave rise to adverse comment from some of the Conway Hall women ("Greenham was destroyed by them, don't let it happen to you"). A subsequent WAF meeting expressed support for lesbians and declared that the struggle for self-determination is an integral part of the fight against religious fundamentalism.

It is a reflection on the present state of the women's movement that we thought of launching ourselves with a political rather than a cultural event, but it did provide an opportunity for hundreds of feminists to express their solidarity with us.

The turnout contrasted sharply with a different event we organised - a picnic of the Irish Embassy in London to coincide with the opening of a case in the European Court of Human Rights, on the right of information on abortion for Irish women. Support for this came mainly from Southall Black Sisters itself, and the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group. As small as it was, it nevertheless was reported by the media (particularly the "Independent") and helped to shift slightly our public image away from an exclusive concentration on Islam.

For International Women's Day, 1990, we organised a public meeting on religious fundamentalism, with a platform of women activists from Bangladesh, Britain, Israel, Ghana, the US and the USSR, discussing how women have been fighting fundamentalism in those countries. It was a speaker from the floor, however, Rabina Khan, who provided the real focus for the evening. In moving speech, she described her escape with her husband from Pakistan, where they were jailed under the law of adultery, her subsequent ill-treatment by him, and her attempts to evade the Home Office's determination to deport her to Pakistan, where she would be subject to harassment and jail. She had been fighting her case, but they outlined the need for a wider political campaign on the issue of refugee status for women suffering persecution on religious or sexual grounds. In asking us to create a widely important legal precedent.

Rabina Khan's case represents the kind of issue that WAF can and should raise within the women's movement: women subject to racism and religious persecution should be our priority, drawing white women into campaigns that Black women have been fighting for years.

One of WAF's strengths has been the number of members with political experience from around the post-colonial world, including Indian anti-communists, Iranian oppositionists, Israeli anti-Zionists, Irish anti-clerics. This has given us a determination to support feminist struggles on an international level, but it has also provided us with a dilemma. How can we help to fight the battles of women represented in WAF on our home ground? The Irish embassy picnic was one reflection of this concern, the large international platform at our public meeting another. We will continue to report the work of feminists worldwide, and involve ourselves in international networks such as Women Fighting Under Muslim Law. But it is difficult to envisage more concentrated work aimed at the governments of other countries. As WAF members, in my opinion, our primary task is to bring our international experience to bear on the situation in Britain. To do otherwise would deplete and defuse our resources.

The Future

We have learned a painful but important lesson over the past year - that a radical analysis of religion has hardly begun in this country, and secularist movement barely exists. We have won some support on the left (particularly those who come from strong religious backgrounds), among feminists, and among anti-racists, but this support is uneven and unfocused. We cannot rely on small groups, within or without the Labour Party, to fight our cause with any effectiveness.

However, we also know that there is a public unease about the recent politicization of religion in this country. The Commission for Racial Equality's recent pamphlet "Schools of Faith", which poses the need for widespread debate on the subject of religious schools, without reaching a conclusion itself, is one reflection of this concern (CRE, 1990).

So there is no escaping the conclusion that WAF will have to take the lead in forging a broad secular coalition, with its direct target the state rather than the fundamentalists of any religion. That is the only way to recognize the legitimate grievances of Muslims ("if they have their schools, why can't we?") and at the same time contribute to driving a wedge between progressives and fundamentalists in the minority communities. It is also the only way to clarify that the support of our liberal partners is merely anti-Islamic, or are our supporters prepared to move towards the dismantling of Christian privileges?

We cannot afford to concentrate on any one constituency - feminists, socialists, radical religious groupings - and so have to draw on the strengths of all. This sounds like an ambitious project, but our alternative is to watch from the margins of political life the further growth of religious bigotry, and racist bigotry, sheltering under the name of religion. The complete separation of state and religion is not a guarantee of a pluralist society, but it is certainly a precondition. It also offers women, Black and white, a measure of legal and social protection against the efforts of fundamentalists to restrict our life-choices and sexualities.

References


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WAF Model Resolution on Religious Schools

This...welcomes the emergence of such groups as Women Against Fundamentalism which seeks to challenge the current rise of fundamentalism across religions. We recognise that the control of women's minds and bodies is at the heart of all fundamentalist agendas. We reject the stereotyped assumption that minorities in this country are internally homogeneous groups, without any conflicts based on sex or class. Therefore we reject the claims of male community leaders to speak for women.

We recognise that many people in this country, Black and White, regard their religion as a source of strength. Freedom of religious worship is a criterion of democracy and should be guaranteed. But we reject the view that the right to a state subsidised religious school is any solution to the problem of racism. We believe that a secular state and school system is a pre-condition for a pluralist and non-racist society.

Further, we believe that the emphasis on separate religious schooling for girls is based on a narrow view of them as simply future wives and mothers. This denies them the same right of autonomy and choice given to boys and is contrary to equal opportunities.

Therefore we call for:
1. The withdrawal of the right granted under the 1944 Education Act for religious schools to claim voluntary aided status, and the phasing out of subsidies to such schools.
2. The withdrawal of the clauses in the 1988 Education Reform Act which refer to the "mainly Christian" tradition in this country and enforce Christian collective worship on all county schools.
3. The development of an anti-racist, rather than a multicultural education policy which will recognise the different histories and cultures of all the people in this country, including those of the white population, and the inequalities of power that exist between and within them.

Footnote: An anti-racist policy should not be of the kind criticised in the Baramage Report as "moral symbolical anti-racism", which isolates people, both black and white, from each other and fosters cultural separation. It should rather appeal to the potential in all of us to work towards the creation of an egalitarian, non-racist society.

Rabia Janjua Must Stay Campaign

On the 8th August 1990, Rabia Janjua was granted by the Home Office "exceptional leave to remain in the United Kingdom until 8th August 1991. She will be able to apply for an extension of her leave to remain after that.

Rabia is a 27 year old Asian woman with two young children. Earlier this year, she was under the threat of removal to Pakistan where she faced a charge of Zina (rousing sex). The charge carries a likely sentence of 10 years imprisonment and public flogging. Rabia escaped this country with her husband who then subjected her to severe violence. She eventually left him, but immediately faced the prospect of removal to Pakistan. A campaign was launched in March 1990 to prevent Rabia and her children from being removed.

The campaign would like to thank everyone, particularly members of the public and the press who supported her in her fight against the unjust and discriminatory immigration laws of this country, and the degrading and inhuman Zina laws of Pakistan. Without their support, the outcome to Rabia's case would have been entirely different.

However, we cannot claim the Home Office decision as a major change in immigration policies. In refusing Rabia's application for refugee status, the government has shown once again its intransigence on the question of refugees. It is still failing to give recognition to many legitimate applicants who are in fear of persecution if returned to the harsh regimes from which they are seeking sanctuary. This seems to be the case especially for women like Rabia who are escaping persecution on the basis of their gender.

Moreover, there are many women like Rabia, whose cases are simply not heard. Immigration rules stipulate that if their marriage breaks down within the first year, upon their entry into this country to join their husbands, they are liable to deportation because the basis of their entry to this country is no longer considered to be in existence. For their husbands, this "one year rule" becomes a useful weapon with which to control and discipline them. If they leave violent homes, they face deportation. Women and children are thus trapped and their lives are put at risk. One such case is that of Lai Ying and her two year old child who are under threat of deportation to Hong Kong. Her crime? She left a violent husband within the first year of her marriage.

The campaign urges supporters to help end the racist immigration laws including the notorious "one year rule" which places women like Lai Ying in "no-win" situations.

Statement by WAF; 29 August 1990

For further information contact The Rabia Janjua Must Stay Campaign, c/o Women Against Fundamentalism, 52 Norwood Road, Southall, Middlesex. Telephone: 081.571.9595

Granting Civil Rights to the Foetus in Ireland - A Victory to Christian Fundamentalists Worldwide

By Ann Rossiter

On May 15th, 1990, people passing the Irish Embassy saw a strange sight. A small but vigorous picket of women were protesting against the Irish government's policy on foetal civil rights in which the rights of the mother and the foetus are on par. There were, of course, Irish women on the picket; but what surprised many observers was the vociferous presence of a group of Asian women singing irreverent songs in different languages. Women Against Fundamentalism were making their second public protest.

The Background

The living may have to struggle for their civil rights, but the unborn were granted theirs in one fell swoop in the Republic of Ireland in 1983 as a result of the amendment to the country's constitution. A coalition of right-wing Catholics representing a number of lay organisations such as Opus Dei, with powerful backing of the Catholic Church and fundamentalist Christians in Britain, the USA and elsewhere, succeeded in pressuring the main political parties in the Republic to put this constitutional amendment to the electorate, despite the fact that abortion under any circumstances is prohibited. However, up to 10,000 Irish women travel to Britain each year to have legal abortions. In certain age groups (22-25 years old) an Irish woman is as likely to have an abortion as her English counterpart although there are heavy costs, financially and emotionally. In fact more Irish women have abortions per head of population than Dutch or Danish women. So whatever the legal situation, abortion is very much an option for Irish women faced with an unwanted pregnancy.

In 1986, in an attempt to stem the flow of Irish women seeking to abort in Britain, the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC), a British organisation which has branches in Ireland, succeeded through the Irish courts in suspending the provision of non-directive counselling by the only two bodies providing such a service, the Well Woman Centre and Open Line Counselling, both located in Dublin. It is now a criminal offence to give the names and addresses of foreign abortion clinics.

In 1989 SPUC successfully brought a legal action against members of the Irish University Students Union and prevented the publication of the names and addresses of British abortion clinics.

In 1990, the British women's magazine, Cosmopolitan and Company were 'advised' by the Irish censorship board that they should drop articles or advertisements about abortion or face being banned in Ireland. As of March,
1990, the 5,000 copies of Cosmopolitan distributed in the Republic of Ireland had had their abortion ads lifted, leaving blank spaces in their place.

In May, 1990, the Irish Family Planning Association was fined €400 in a Dublin court for selling a condom from its stall in Richard Branson's Virgin Records store in Dublin. After the court's ruling, Richard Branson said: 'The Irish Government holds the FC presidency and are a modern Western democracy, but they appear to be treating their citizens with the same regard as Ceausescu did in Romania.'

In May, 1990, The Dublin Well Woman Centre and Open Line Counselling began their campaign in the European Court of Human Rights to overturn the legal ruling against them and to allow Irish women the right to the names and addresses of British abortion clinics. This demand is in keeping with the provisions of the Treaty of Rome which grants free flow of information between member states.

Why Women Against Fundamentalism Picketed the Irish Embassy

Since its formation on International Women's Day, 1989, WAF has insisted that the control of women, especially their reproductive rights, is at the heart of the fundamentalist agenda worldwide. It is becoming increasingly clear that Ireland is merely the launching pad for a converted attempt by Christian fundamentalists to impose US-style legislation in Europe and in the USA. In fact, similar legislation is being proposed in several states in America and the US administered Pacific Island of Guam has recently introduced a law prohibiting the publication of names and addresses of abortion clinics outside the territory. Needless to say, abortion is banned in the island.

WAF was also concerned to demolish the myth that religious fundamentalism in the contemporary period is somehow the exclusive preserve of Islam and to highlight the fact that in Europe and America we are witnessing the massive growth of fundamentalist Christianity. Highlighting the Irish situation, however, presents certain difficulties. After twenty years of the latest Anglo-Irish war, rampant anti-Irish racism in British factories and the discussion of things Irish and their relevance worldwide. The British reaction to the Irish and their religious problems coincides almost exactly with the response to the Salman Rushdie affair: that religious orthodoxy and fundamentalism are concepts alien to the British mind, and are a part of a metaphysical world which died out, if not with the Crusades and the Reformation, at least with the publication of Darwin's "Origin of the Species". This thesis that they ignore the considerable change of mood in the nation during the Thatcher years. It ignores the fact that theological objections to the ordination of women, to homosexuality and lesbianism, for instance, have won a large measure of secular support in Britain. It also underestimates the religious fundamentalism which forms the basis of most, if not all, the recurring challenges to the 1987 Abortion Act.

The Rise of a Catholic State in the Republic of Ireland

Interestingly, the Irish Free State, variously known as the Republic or South of Ireland, grew out of what was in the 1920's a state with increasingly secularised way of life, namely Britain. Almost as an act of rebellion or declaration of ideological difference, a Catholic-style constitution was promulgated in 1937 with opposition from a very small minority, many of them feminists. While the new constitution did not establish a hierarchy in the sense of total marriage between church and state, as in contemporary Iran, it nevertheless established a constitutional state. The Catholic state was accorded a 'special position' which had the effect of formalising the central role of Catholicism in the political life of the new Ireland as well as ensuring that religion became the prime feature of national identity of the people. That being said, church and state were to be independent of each other at a formal level and no concordat between the Irish state and the Catholic Church has ever been negotiated. The church was to remain an independent body with regard to finances, dependent on donations from the faithful for the salaries of its priests and the upkeep of its churches and seminaries.

The state has had no say in the appointment of bishops and gives no special recognition to the clergy who are forbidden by their superiors to take active part in politics, although this prohibition has been frequently violated.

Religious Fundamentalism, education and women's Rights

It is in the field of education that the Catholic Church's influence and power is most evident in the Republic of Ireland. Primary and secondary schools have traditionally been privately owned, although funded by the state. With the exception of a small number of Protestant, Jewish and non-denominational schools, the majority are owned by the Catholic Church. Policy matters, such as teachers' conditions of employment, ethical matters, such as sex education for pupils, and generally how the state curriculum is interpreted, are decided by the private owners of schools. As far as the universities are concerned, these are formally non-denominational, but the National University of Ireland has colleges in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick has had members of the Catholic hierarchy in its governing bodies since its establishment in 1908. Also, many hospitals, orphanages, homes and welfare institutions are run by the religious orders.

Apart from education, hospitals and welfare institutions, the heavy hand of the Catholic Church is in much evidence in the formulation of policies concerning women, marriage and the family. Article 41 of the 1937 constitution states that "by her work in the home woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be maintained". Therefore the state shall endeavour to ensure that "mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home". In practice this led to severe restrictions on married women's right to work, and until Ireland joined the EEC, state services could dismiss a woman employee when she married. The 1937 constitution further declared the family to be the basic unit of society and prohibited divorce. Even before 1937 a string of legislation had been passed by the new state aimed at regulating sexual mores, outlawing the use of contraceptive devices and censoring sex education information. The general conservatism and growing fascism in Western Europe at the time, with countries like France, Germany and Italy introducing pro-natalist and anti-women legislation, meant that the South of Ireland neither saw itself, nor was seen to be especially out of joint.

The Church continues to maintain its grip on education into the late 20th century, as the notorious Eileen Flynn case showed. Eileen was dismissed from her job as a secondary school teacher in a state-funded convent when she gave birth to a baby as an unmarried mother, the father of the baby being a separated married man. She appealed against her dismissal, but a Labour Tribunal, seemingly independent body, upheld her dismissal. Finally, in July 1984, Eileen Flynn lost her legal case when her appeal against the Labour Tribunal was thrown out of court. Some positive changes in social legislation and thinking did however occur. In 1979, the struggles of Southern Irish feminists, whose influence was much wider than their numbers would suggest, resulted in the right to contraception being granted, but to married couples only. It took a further struggle to persuade the state to extend this right in 1985 to everyone over eighteen, married or unmarried. The modest gains of the women's movement in the early 1980's were to prove short-lived, however. In 1981, an alliance of right-wing forces, both clerical and lay, and calling themselves the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign (PLAC), formed on an anti-abortion platform. This choice of platform seemed difficult to understand at the time, given that abortion had been made illegal in Ireland in 1861 when Victoria ruled the entire island, and this was one aspect of British legislation which the new state had not sought to alter. Matters became clearer when it emerged that PLAC had strong support from the Moral Right in the USA and from many like-minded organisations in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. Evidently, Ireland was seen as fertile ground from which an international campaign could be launched.

PLAC seemed to have little difficulty in persuading the government of the day to hold a referendum on the right of life of the unborn, and after an acrimonious national debate a majority vote was achieved. In 1983, the constitution of 1937 was duly amended to include the civil rights of the foetus, placing those rights on a par with the mother's. Thus, the Republic of Ireland became the first country to pass such legislation, and set an important legal precedent.

The Politicization of Religion in Ireland

The historic relationship between the Irish people and Catholicism, which uniquely in
Western Europe has survived in such strength to the late 20th century, has to be understood in large measure as a form of resistance to imperialism. It has to be remembered that it was the British imperial enterprise that first opened up the Pandora's box of religion, especially following the formulation of the Penal Laws in the 18th century. The idea was to retain Catholics to a servile caste by debarring them from the vote, from public office and many of the professions. Catholics were forbidden to open schools or to teach in them, to manufacture or sell newspapers and books. Bishops were ordered to leave the country, and the numbers of priests and their movements were heavily regulated, as was Catholic public worship. In time the impact of certain of these laws was reduced, either by being violated or circumvented where possible. What was successful, however, were those aspects of the Penal Code concerned with property. Catholics had been subjected to special taxes and to special restrictions if they were landowners. For instance, no Catholic farm could be inherited intact: it had to be divided at death between all the male children. Catholic ownership of land was in the region of 90% in 1600, by 1703 it had fallen to 14%, and by 1770 it was only 5%. Although by the mid-1800s Catholic Emancipation had been achieved, which meant that many of the civil rights withdrawn from the Catholics by the Penal Code were now returned, the use of religion to distinguish colonist and colonised had already been established.

The partitioning of Ireland in 1920 further reinforced the powerful force of religion, with the British government according to the Northern Irish Unionists' demands that a state be carved out which would ensure a Protestant majority. The embittered pent-up animosity of the Northern Irish Protestant has been consistently bolstered by religion as part of the device used by the unionists and Unionist politicians to unite Protestants across class. This ensures a consensus or a "social contract" amongst them which would be unattainable in normal circumstances. Fundamentalism has thrived and its effects are especially noticeable in attitudes to sexuality, the family, and to women. For instance, the Abortion Act of 1967 does not extend to the statelet although it is under British rule. The combined forces of various Protestant Churches, the Catholic Church, Unionists and Nationalists parties (with the exception of Sinn Fein) have ensured that the old British legislation of 1861 still obtains. Only a small number of abortions are carried out every year in cases of rape or grave physical danger of the mother which means that, as in the South, most women have to travel to England for terminations in private clinics.

Although divorce is accepted by more liberal Protestants in Northern Ireland, the fundamentalist position that it is a sin blocked the extension of the British 1969 Divorce Reform Act until 1978. Equally, the demonization of homosexuality was blocked until an individual case, taken to the Court of Human Rights at Strasbourg, established the right of extension, public and political opinion being more in tune with the Reverend Ian Paisley's biblical "Save Ulster from Sodomy" campaign.

In a number of other areas such as rape, incest, domestic violence and family law, anomalies exist in relation to the British norm.

One of the lessons to be learned from the Irish experience is that religious fundamentalism is neither geographically specific nor the product of any one religion or culture. Islam and Catholicism may be more obviously associated with extreme orthodoxy, but given certain economic and political circumstances the fundamentalist tenets of Protestantism can also be strictly invoked, as the Northern Irish - and indeed, the South African - situations so clearly demonstrate. With such a great deal of attention focused on "the Salman Rushdie affair" perhaps we should bear this in mind when acquisicing, if only by default, to the drive in Thatcher's Britain for a return to "moral values".

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**Iranian Women's Fight Goes On**

By Ziba

For decades the question of the right of women to choose and to have control over their bodies, has been one of the major issues of the women's movement. Throughout history, the major role of women in human society has been seen as being one of child bearing and child rearing. This has also been the major weapon in the hands of patriarchal society to control women and suppress their demands for equal rights.

The advance of science and technology has provided women, to some extent, with an opportunity to control their reproductive power. But existing methods of contraception are neither satisfactory for all women, nor are they available to all women.

The extent to which women in society have control over contraception depends on various factors. The most important of these are: the attitude of governments to women's problems, the role of women in society, their level of consciousness and the general level of development of society. Cultural and religious factors play a very important role too, but they could easily become the subject of prevailing politics.

In a country like India, where population explosion has, for decades, been one of the major worries of the government, no real progress has been made in population control.

In this case it is the severe poverty, lack of proper education and health service, deep and widespread religious beliefs and lack of any social value for women which prevents families and women in particular to take contraception seriously. In a country where access to medical care is a luxury, legality of abortion becomes a farce.

In Iran, during the Shah's reign, women for many years had been fighting for access to contraceptives and legalisation of abortion. Many women became victims of back street abortions and drastic methods to force miscarriage. It was in the last few years of the Shah's rule when pill and other contraceptives became more readily available and family planning became a government slogan that the position of women was marginally improved. Abortion was legalised, although it was not available to all women. Like India, help and education was not getting to those who really needed it. Many women were still falling victims of ignorance and poverty. Nevertheless, there were resources available to many women.

After the down fall of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, women became the first victims of Islamic ideology. One of the rights taken from women was the right of access to contraception and abortion.

Abortion was illegalised with vicious persecution for both the doctors and women who took part. Yet again motherhood became the first, god-given role of women and any attempt to prevent or terminate pregnancy was severely discouraged. Although, ironically, this same regime executed many pregnant political prisoners!

In the eleven years since the revolution, the population of Iran has risen from 36 million to about 50 million. As is usually the case, this explosion has mainly affected the poor. The Iranian regime, amidst its critical political and economic problems, has been unable to cater for this population growth. Now it has suddenly decided that contraception and abortion are not such great sins after all! Although it has not legalised abortion, it does not prosecute those who take part.

The fact remains that it is not providing any resources to educate women or provide health centres or consultation. All the burden of finding ways and means are put on women. Those belonging to the upper classes have always been able to find suitable means. Those in the middle and the working class are still suffering.

Despite all this, many women are taking advantage of the regime's forced change of heart. Many voluntary health centres, engaged in family planning, have been set up. Some have actually taken their services to the poorer areas, hoping they would serve those who are most in need. These are usually run by women who are not working for profit but to raise the general consciousness of women.

Throughout the past eleven years, women in Iran have constantly been the subject of abuse and repression of the regime. And this case is not any different. But what is obvious is that women in Iran are becoming more conscious of their situation and their rights. They will not give up the fight to gain full control over their destinies, their lives and their bodies.

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**Iranian Civil Code Article 1105:**

The husband is the head of the household. Between a husband and wife the head of the family is the man's quality and right.

**Iranian Civil Code Article 1095:**

The husband has the right of choose the place of family residence.
Iranian Civil Code Article 1143:
The wife should obey her husband's wishes and if without any reasonable excuse refrains from performing her matrimonial duties she will not be entitled to maintenance.

Iranian Civil Code Article 1133:
A man has the right to divorce his wife upon any pretext.

Iranian Civil Code Article 1029 & 1130:
The law permits women the right to ask for divorce only under very exceptional circumstances.

Iranian Civil Code Article 1169:
Upon the dissolution of the marriage, a woman loses the right of custody of their children to their father after the age of 7 for girls and 2 for boys.

A father has the sole right of guardianship over his children. Upon his death, the paternal grandfather acquires this right. In the latter's absence anyone who had been nominated by the father is entitled to the guardianship.

Iranian Civil Code Article 1060:
The marriage of Iranian Muslim women to non-Muslim men is strictly forbidden.

A married woman's right to travel abroad is subject to the written consent of her husband.

All the above articles are in direct contravention of clauses C, D & F of article 16 of the UN Convention on the "Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women".

Female Sexuality and Islam
By Farhat Rahaman

History reveals that sexual oppression of women, in one form or another, exists in every society in the world. Nevertheless, it has been achieved by different methods, economically, intellectually, physically and psychologically. The control of women's bodies, or in other words physical mutilation, was raised with the rise of patriarchy.

With the rise of patriarchy, many customs and traditions were developed. Of these customs and traditions, many have disappeared or been gradually abandoned, while some remain. Female circumcision is one of the customs still surviving and practised in the name of religion. i.e. Islam with the justification of Islamic traditions. Although it has no religious basis and the custom is pre-Islamic in origin, the practice spread and gained strength with the rise of Islamic traditions, which bear the distinctive impress of Arabian social history and of the Arab mind and character of the seventh century.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that destructive qualities of female sexuality have been quoted in many Hadith (sayings of the Prophet) as well as in the writings of eminent Muslim scholars like Ghazali, Shahrul-Isha' and others. In all these books of Hadith and Fiqh, as well as in the interpretations of the Quran, one can easily find the chapters related to the destructive powers of women's sexuality which strongly support the physical mutilation of women, i.e. circumcision. Although Islam does not favour the practice, it provides the ideological justification.

From centuries ago, right from the beginning when Islamic traditions and jurisprudence were compiled, women were considered as "empty-headed blabbers" causing all the chaos of mankind. In one interpretation of the Qu'ran, commentators placed women, children and animals at the same level. (Mawridul Qu'ran and Tafsir Ibn-Kasir, Surah Al Nissa verse No. 6).

Woman has further been regarded as more disposed to passion and emotions than to reason (Nagia, Al-Aqil). She has been considered as a symbol of disorder and Fitan (chaos and discord):

"After I have gone, there will be no greater menace to my nation more liable to create sedition and trouble than women." (Bukhari 1868:419).

Fitas, in this sense means that sexually irresponsible, beautiful women who disrupt the world order.

In order to perpetuate male domination and to limit women's Fitas, women were relegated to a submissive role by giving them a negative concept of themselves: this takes many forms, e.g. chastity, sexual repression, seclusion, female circumcision, polygamy (for men), monogamy (for women), motherhood and so on.

In Islam, extra marital sex for men has become an inseparable part of life and society, whereas for the women Islamic society upholds the value of virginity and marital fidelity.

Islam does not set limits on the freedom of man in the practice of sex with his wife without her consent. This is based on the Qu'ranic ayah (verse) which says "women are the land which is yours to plough - you may therefore plough them wherever you wish." (2.222).

On the other hand, Islamic teachings forbid women to desert their husbands in bed. According to the Hadiths, often quoted by Muslim jurists and scholars to give an image of an "ideal Muslim woman", if a woman spends the night deserting her husband's bed (without a reasonable cause) she is sinful (Bukhari).

Ahu-Humira narrated: The Prophet said: "If a man invites his wife to sleep with him and she refuses to come to him, then the angels send their curses on her till morning." (Bukhari).

"When a man calls his wife to satisfy his desire she must go to him even if she is occupied at the oven". (Mishkat i, p.691).

Muslim scholars explained later that all these commands were made for the security of the social order, or prevent men satisfying the sexual needs with prostitutes. These grave distortions have been used to justify the practice of polygamy.

On the other hand, men could desert their wives if they felt suspicious about her character, following the famous event of Aisha (Prophet's wife) when the Prophet deserted her for a month. (Sunnah al-ninah). On another occasion when the Prophet had decided to abstain from eating a certain kind of food and was blamed by Allah for doing so (Sunnah Al-Purhur verse No.1) His wives were accused as the cause of His taking that decision and He deserted them for one month (Bukhari).

Here I would like to quote a few traditions (sayings of the Prophet) related to women, considering her as a source of evil.

1. A woman is the string of the devil. (Abyan-al-alm-din, Ghazali)

2. A woman is like a private part when she comes out, the devil holds her high. (Ibid.)

3. The duties of a wife towards her husband are many; the foremost is to preserve chastity. (Ibid.)

4. Truly, among your wives and your children, there are enemies for you (i.e. they may stop you from the obedience of Allah). (Bukhari)

5. "Abu Ubaid, Allah's Apostle said, "Evil women is in the women, house and the horse." (Ibid.)

6. Usamah bin Zaid narrated: The Prophet said, "After me I have not left my affliction more harmful to men than women." (Ibid.)

7. A woman advances in the form of a devil and retires in the form of a devil, the Prophet says "When one of you is charmed by a woman and she affects your heart, he should go to his wife and have intercourse with her, for that will repel what he is feeling." In another tradition, the Prophet, after a personal incident, says, "If any man sees a woman who charms him, he should go to his wife, for she has the same kind of thing as the other woman". (Mishkat, p662)

8. The Prophet saw a woman. He hurried to his house and had intercourse with his wife Zainab, then left the house and said: "When the woman comes towards you, it is Satan who is approaching you. When one of you sees a woman and feels attracted to her, he should hurry to his wife. With her, it would be the same as with the other one". (Tirmidhi)

9. Usama narrated: The Prophet said, "When I stood at the gate of the fire I saw that the majority of those entered it were women. When asked what is the reason for that, He replied, "because of their ungratefulness to their husbands". (Bukhari)

10. A man will not be asked about why he beats his wife (Mishkat i, p.693).

Men (husbands) have been regarded as Majeer-e-Khusha (next to God). "I will not order anyone to prostitute herself before another, I would order a woman to prostitute herself before her husband." (Mishkat).

Several other traditions show that women are looked upon as things to be enjoyed: The Prophet reported to have said, "The
THE RUSHDIE AFFAIR

Women Defend Salman Rushdie

On 9 March 1989, nearly 200 women gathered at the Dominion Centre, Southall, to mark International Women’s Day and discuss the resurgence of religious fundamentalism across the world. Women talked about the effects of fundamentalist religions in Pakistan, India, Iran, Iraq and in Britain. At the end of the meeting, the organisers, Southall Black Sisters and Southall Labour Party Women’s Section issued the following statement:

As a group of women of many religions and none, we would like to express our solidarity with Salman Rushdie. Women’s voices have been largely silent in the debate where battle lines have been drawn between liberalism and fundamentalism. Often it has been assumed that the views of local community leaders are our views, and their demands are our demands. We reject this absolutism.

We have struggled for many years in this country and across the world, to express ourselves as we choose within and outside our communities. We will not be dictated to by fundamentalists. Our lives will not be defined by community leaders. We will take up our right to determine our own destinies, not limited by religions, culture or nationality. We believe that religious worship is an individual matter, and that the state should not foster one religion above any other. We call upon the government to abolish the outdated blasphemy law and to defend, without reservation, freedom of speech.

Women Against Fundamentalism Reaffirm Their Solidarity with Salman Rushdie

On February 14, 1990, people who value the democratic right of free creative expression will mark the first anniversary of the late Ayatollah Khomeini’s motorcyle-fawm and death sentence against the author Salman Rushdie, especially after his wife Komai renewed this call on 9th February 1990 at Tehran’s mass Friday prayer meeting.

In Britain during the past year we have witnessed the continuous rise of fundamentalism in all religions and the fact that politicians of all complexities in Britain continue to facilitate its development.

At the heart of the fundamentalist agenda is control of women’s minds and bodies such as the imposition of restrictions on the right to abortion, freed and equal education and the right of women to organise autonomously.

We reject the idea that the fundamentalists can speak for us. We will continue to doubt and dissent and will carry on the fight for our right to determine our own destinies, not limited by religion, culture or nationality.

We call for the separation of religion and the state as a precondition to defeating fundamentalism. We also call for the abolition of the blasphemy law.

We are taking this opportunity to reaffirm our solidarity with Salman Rushdie. We defend the right to free expression and call for the publication of the paperback edition of the "Satanic Verses".

12 February 1990

Islam and Women

From a 17-year-old Asian woman

I am a 17-year-old Asian woman, brought up as a Muslim in an extremely "fundamentalist" family. I support Rushdie, as do several of my friends, but none of us can take the risk of voicing our support in our families or communities.

My father would not allow Rushdie’s article in last week’s "Independent on Sunday" into our house. I had to read it in the library.

Rushdie’s words opened up a whole new world for me - a world in which we are not policed by the mullahs, in which religious diversity is tolerated, and, most of all, in a world in which men do not brutalise and rule over women.

Those Labour leaders who think being anti-Rushdie proves their anti-racist credentials should read his article and think again. What hope for a brave socialist education policy if Muslim girls are to be brought up in schools which insist on their obedience to men?

Does this not contradict Labour’s commitment to equal opportunities? If Labour wants to do a little research into the ways in which Muslim fundamentalism is detrimental to Asian women I suggest they start at our battered women’s refuges. They may meet my aunt there - a woman who refused to stay with a violent man, and paid the price by being ostracised from her community. That’s the ugly face of fundamentalism and there are many others.

Thank you Salman Rushdie. I want to live in your world, and one day I know will. There are dissidents out there but, like me, they are often too scared to speak. If only we all lived in enough freedom to speak out against this mad vendetta against Rushdie. You must forgive me for withholding my name and address.

Name and address withheld

(Letter, Independent on Sunday, February 1990)

“The Satanic Verses” in the High Court

On 9th April appeals to reverse the refusal by magistrates to grant summonses against Salman Rushdie and his Publishers, Viking/ Penguin for offences against Section 4(1) of the Public Order Act 1986, Seditious Libel and Blasphemous Libel were dismissed.

Mr. Sayed Shahjan, an Iranian businessman resident in the UK for fifteen years, had stated that he and his workforce were affected by the violence of a fire bomb attack on King’s Road Penguin bookshop where “The Satanic Verses” was on sale. In June 1989, he had requested the Home Office’s Road Police Force to issue a summons alleging that Viking/Penguin had distributed a book “containing abusive and insulting writing whereby it was likely that unlawful violence would be provoked contrary to section 4(1) of the Public Order Act 1986”.

Mr. Abdul Hassam Choudhury, a member of the British Muslim Action Front had sought an order squandering a refusal in March 1989 by Sir David Hopkin, the Chief of the Metropolitan Magistrate to issue summonses against Mr. Rushdie and his publishers accusing them of unlawfully and wickedly publishing or causing to be published a blasphemous libel concerning Almighty God (Allah), the Prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael, Mohammed, his wives and companions and the religions of Islam and Christianity contrary to common law.

The judgment noted that this was the first case in which a would-be prosecutor has claimed that the offence of blasphemy is applicable to religions other than Christianity. It further stated “were it open to us to extend the law to cover religions other than Christianity we should refrain from doing so...It would be virtually impossible by judicial decision to set sufficiently clear limits to the offence and other problems involved are formidable”.

Women Against Fundamentalism whilst welcoming the decision of the High Court, demands that the discriminatory outdated laws of blasphemy should be abolished as recommended by the majority of the Law Commission in its report of 1985 and calls on the Government to unconditionally defend freedom of opinion and expression.

Fundamentalism - A Universal Phenomenon

By Nawal El Saadawi

What is called the fundamentalist movement is a universal phenomenon. It operates under different religious slogans, but it is a political movement using God to justify injustices and discrimination between people, nations, classes, races, sexes, colours and creeds.
Everywhere I travel in the Arab world, in Africa, Asia, Europe, the United States, Latin America, I discover the presence and activities of fundamentalist groups working in the name of religion.

While in Italy during May 1989, I read in one of the newspapers that is issued in Bologna (Al Karama) an article about the history of the Mafia in Sicily. It mentioned that the Mafia of today in Italy and the United States and Canada has close connections with a movement called the International Movement for Islamic Liberation. The economic resources of this Islamic movement is, like the Mafia, drawn from the sale of arms, trafficking in drugs, speculation in foreign exchange - activities which make huge profits, the money from which is "laundered" by Islamic banks.

Fundamentalist movements and other Islamic fanatic groups acquire their political power by organizing large numbers of young women and men, under the guise of forming society and fighting corruption by a return to the values and moral teachings of Islam. They use mosques as recruiting centres, provide services and economic help to poor migrants from the villages and students, and collect financial contributions from middle and upper class families and invest in Islamic banks, using the most flagrant profiteering practices (distributing high returns) including speculation on the money market, monopolising essential goods and raw materials, and then running away with the capital they have collected by investing it abroad.

A glaring example of these practices was presented in the recent legal proceedings engaged against a number of Islamic investment companies in Egypt, "Al Rayan", "Al Hadâ", "Al Badr" etc.

Tens of thousands of investors have had their money almost confiscated by such Islamic investment companies and all claims to refunding have so far met with no response.

In many cases, Islamic fundamentalist movements have constituted fanatic military groups like "Al Giahd", "Al Tahiri Wa El Hidjâr", "Al Nagoon mena el Nâr", "Harakat El Tahrij El Islâmî", "Hizb Allât" etc. Such groups in Lebanon, for example, played an important role in accentuating and maintaining religious strife whenever it was needed to calm down.

A major factor in creating and propagating fanatic religious tendencies and religious strife, is the existence of the Israeli fundamentalist state and the policies followed by Jewish religious fanatic parties and groups. Fundamentalist Jewish tendencies and policies cannot be maintained unless religious fanaticism continues to flourish in the surrounding states.

All fundamentalists, whether Moslem, Jewish, Christian or otherwise, are partners in the attempt to breed division, strife, racism and sexism, helping international capitalism to maintain its control, and overcome popular resistance to the policies which lead to war, increased exploitation and economic dependence in the so named Third World countries. This, despite the fact that from time to time and in certain situations, contradictions arise between them.

Lebanon is a typical example of the fate which awaits countries where religious fundamentalist movements hold sway. Women, especially poor women, suffer most when fundamentalist movements become powerful. These movements direct their main attack against women and minority groups.

Movements built on exploitation and domination need to mobilise people against an imaginary enemy, and so in the Arab countries of today we witness violent campaigns against women and their rights. Women must no longer be visible, should they be imprisoned in the home, they should not participate in public life, they are a shame and dishonour which must be veiled, for the essence of female nature is innate.

Day after day and hour after hour, men of religion, and so-called leaders of Islamic movements and parties, discourse on the subject of women, give advice on the details of their private and family life, and encourage an atmosphere in which there is a focus on sex discrimination, sexism and an emphasis on women as dangerous entities. Thus people in this way and public opinion can be occupied with a subject which arouses great interest in a segregated society, and keeps them busy with false issues instead of directing their attention to the real social, economic and political issues which need to be faced if they desire to create a more prosperous, free and just society, and if the relations between religions, creeds, races and the sexes are to be based on equality, tolerance and a real humanism.

The fundamentalist movements are a distortion of all religions, which originated as an integral part of the struggle for the improvement of life. This is true historically of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. A blatant example of this distortion is Khomeni's appeal for the assassination of the novelist Salman Rushdie. Islam is misrepresented by leaders like Khomeni, for in many respects, including the rights of women, Islam is relatively advanced if we compare it with other religions.

It is therefore necessary to create an enlightened interpretation of different religions, since it is the right of all people to believe if this is their wish, and since religion will continue to play an important role in the lives of thousands of millions of people in the world.

Reprinted from "Sparé Rith", September 1989

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The Bible Belt
By Barbara Day

Since the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, there has been a resurgence of fundamentalism in the US. Ronald Reagan subscribed fully to the fundamentalist world-view, including the belief in Armageddon - the coming of the end of the world. Fundamentalists, the more well-known among them including Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart, and the now discredited Jim and Tammy Baker, have come to public prominence and mainstream media attention.

Emitting from what is known as the Bible Belt, which stretches over the southern and mid-western regions of the country, the fundamentalists enjoy pockets of support throughout the US. They have captured the media, and some groups even own their own TV stations. Through their Christian Broadcasting they have also captured the untold contributions of millions of vulnerable, lonely, racist, ill-informed, frightened North Americans.

They have a clear political agenda. They totally support US imperialist interests abroad, ideologically and with financial contribution. They have set up missions throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, the clear aim being to push the US agenda.

Among the issues the fundamentalists hold sacred and have been actively campaigning for, are moving back to a segregated school system, prayer in the public schools, sex education out of the schools, a repression of sexual expression, the lifestyle and the oppression of women, exemplified by their refusal to accept abortion.

One of the major issues for fundamentalists right now is the repeal of US laws legalising abortion.

 Attacks on right to reproductive freedom have marked the means employed by the well-financed US fundamentalist rightwing in their most recent and determined drive to repress women.

Pro-choice activists view the current assault on abortion rights as part of a broader fundamentalist and fascist agenda which targets many different issues and groups, including Black people, labour organizations, radicals, gays and lesbians. The attacks on abortion, they say, are one of the main weapons of this overall reactionary program.

This anti-women crusade is two-pronged: it is being waged in the courts and on the streets. It is spearheaded on the streets by Operation Rescue, a well-organised group of activist Christian fundamentalists from all denominations.

In the courts, the legal right of a woman to choose when to be a mother is being hit by a barrage of legislative and legal initiatives on the state and national level. As documented by the New York Pro-Choice Coalition (NYPCC), these attacks include bills to severely limit or ban abortions altogether and lawsuits by men seeking to prevent their wives or companions from having the medical procedure performed.

In the streets, well-funded Operation Rescue shock troops provide the bodies to blockade abortion clinics and are suspected of links to abortion clinic bombers. They have heightened the climate of fear and intimidation leading to the repression of all women.

The godfather of Operation Rescue is Joseph Scheidler, director of the Pro-Life Action League which he likes to call the "Great Barrier of the Pro-Life Movement!". According to NYPCC, Scheidler has had a long history of associating with convicted clinic bombers and has written a manual on how to harass and intimidate abortion providers and clinic patients.
Religious Fundamentalism and Women

Extract from "The State, Religious Fundamentalism and Women Trends in South Asia"

By Amrita Chhachhi

The terms fundamentalism, revivalism, obscurantism, are often used interchangeably and loosely. There is considerable controversy over the use of these terms. In this paper, religious fundamentalism is used rather than revivalism. Revivalism implies a renewed attention to or interest in while fundamentalism implies an adherence often a strict and literal adherence of a set of basic principles. Thus there could be movement of religious revivalism which could over time become fundamentalist i.e. focussing on only one set of principles or varying as movements in Islamic Fundamentalism have pointed out. Commenting on the tendency to club together heterogeneous phenomena under the rubric of fundamentalism, O. Roy makes distinctions between fundamentalism in Islam which should be a return to strict religious practice, as we observe in many emirate milieux: return to the observance of the text (study of the Koran and the hadiths), which is the fundamentalism of the madrasah, and return to the religious law, to the practice of the Shariat, which is the fundamentalism of the ulama... (Olive Roy, Pp. 122, 1985).

Fundamentalism is the "return to... the re-reading, the quest for origins". The re-reading, return to the origins can take many different forms and therefore is not in itself a political position. A purely textual definition would equate the proponents of liberation theology in Latin America, who base their work on the original Christian communities of Christ, with the ravings of right wing televangelists like Jerry Falwell and Oral Roberts in the United States. Movements inspired by religious revivalists or fundamentalists have played a revolutionary anti-imperialist role in the national movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, and have also expressed the needs and aspirations of working people. Religious movements therefore are not necessarily conservative.

Similarly, religious fundamentalism does not always refer to the past - in fact what is being asserted as a basic tenet is often a totally modern practice. This is why it is problematic to call the recent occurrence of "sati" as a revival. In addition, the meanings that people give to these principles can also vary. For example, Iranian women who supported Khomeini, and marched in thousands, as organised militant contingents turning the veil into a symbol of solidarity and struggle, were not simply returning to the past, but were asserting a certain positive conception of the future. Islam offered an alternative to the "consumerism and the modern consumer woman" projected by the Shah's economic and social policies. (Acar Tahan and Nidhi Yeganeh, 1982) Similarly, attempts by disadvantaged groups to rise in status by strict adherence to "tradition" or the Sharia are not seen by them as a return to medievalism but in fact as symbols of achievement (Cyan Pandey, 1983).

Fundamentalism then, can only be understood in relation to a specific historical context. It is crucial to identify when it emerges, which are the social groups initiating as well as constituting the support base of this phenomenon and what exactly is being projected as the basic principles of adherence.

One feature of fundamentalism is its selectivity in choosing what is the true and original teaching. In the sense fundamentalism constructs a particular version of Islam/ Hinduism/Christianity as the only valid representation of that religion. This construction makes little distinction between what is textual and what may be local specific cultural practices. Most significantly it abstracts from history and projects the particular amalgam of belief, ritual and practice with a transcendental validity. In Pakistan for instance, the islamisation process selects elements from 19 schools of jurisprudence as well as customs and practices which existed in the 8th and 9th centuries in what is Saudi Arabia, Iran and Syria of today. Similarly, the "Hinduism" being projected by various Hindu organisations as the only true Hinduism denies the historical existence of two separate and antagonistic religious traditions amongst people designated as Hindus. One tradition was Brahmanism which was based on Vedic texts and the Dharmashastras, restricted to the upper castes, buttressed by royal patronage and the creation of a priestly caste. The Shramanic tradition (the Bakhth movements were seen as inheritors of this tradition) was popular amongst lower castes, had a universalistic ethic and exhibited a wide diversity in ritual and belief. Historically one cannot speak of Hinduism as such but a variety of "Hindu" religions (Romila Thapar, 1985). The Hinduism being claimed by fundamentalist organisations draws on the first tradition but here too it incorporates elements from caste customs, particularly Kshatriya notions of honour, as well. Social scientists have labelled this very modern Hinduism - "syncretised Hinduism" (Romila Thapar, 1985).

That this contemporary construction of Hinduism (the same process could be seen in other religions) has no need of either textual or historical verification was brought out very clearly in an interview with Ramanand Sagar, the producer of the television serial on the Ramayana recently. When asked about the historical sources of the film, he mentioned how during that period women did not cover their torso but it was impossible for him to

Reprinted from "Spare Rib", September 1989
people rose up through its youth to reclaim its dignity and sovereignty.

The Algerian people, both women and men, gave their blood to win independence: bullets and bombs were not sexually prejudiced and did not discriminate between the sexes. Did women like Hassiba Ben Bouali, Malika Gaid, the Bouattoura sisters and so many other give their lives to win second class citizenship for Algerian women? No! They fought and died for dignity, justice and complete equality without any discrimination.

Today, on the 8th March 1989, what does the legislature have in store for Algerian women? Article 28 of the Algerian Constitution stipulates that "all citizens are equal before the law, regardless of birth, race, sex, belief or any other personal or social condition or circumstance. Article 30 of the same constitution stipulates that "the goal of institutions is the equality in rights and duties of all citizens, men and women, in removing obstacles which hamper the full development of the human being and which prevent the full participation of all in political, economic, social and cultural life." Nonetheless, the Family Code which exacerbates and formalises the oppression of Algerian women and which institutionalises discrimination on the basis of sex remains in force.

It was the PNA which, in 1984, enshrined discrimination and intolerance within the Family Code.

It was the PNA which, in 1984, adopted the Family Code, the legal obstacle which hampered the full development of the human beings who are Algerian women.

Again, it was the PNA which, in 1989, tried to legislate for the exclusion of half the Algerian population from sports and thereby to render them physically powerless!

We, gathered on the 8th March 1989 at the Central University of Algiers,

declare that democracy, which presupposes the equality of all individuals, men and women in all their rights and duties, cannot exist without the recognition and guarantee of the rights of half of society - those of women.

We declare that without recognition of Algerian women’s full citizenship and of men and women’s equality before the law, democracy and the constitutional state will remain mere crude slogans rather than realities.

We declare that the Family Code stands in absolute opposition to our aspirations for justice, equality and democracy: it constitutes the primary obstacle to the full development of the Algerian woman and of the society as a whole.

We demand:

- the abolition of polygamy,
- equal rights of inheritance,
- adequate protection for abandoned children.

Declaration adopted by the participants at the meeting on 8th March 1989 at the Central University of Algiers

Called by the Association For Equality Before the Law Between Women and Men

Reprinted from Women Living Under Muslim Law, Dossier 5/6, 1989

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