Attar, Dena. "The Portable Cage: Women and Fundamentalism (1990)." *The Trouble & Strife Reader*. Ed. Deborah Cameron and Joan Scanlon. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. 71–77. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849662956.ch-010>>.

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10. The Portable Cage: Women and Fundamentalism (1990)

Dena Attar

If you count yourself part of Christendom, this is for you. If you don't, it's also for you — a reminder that Christendom is still where you're living.

There used to be an old joke about a stock response to news of any event: is it good or bad for the Jews? Now we have another one: is it good or bad for women? The events in Eastern Europe since last year have forced both questions on us: the images of strong communist states have fractured, and amid the dust and rubble the power of the Christian church, hidden before or perhaps grown stronger recently, is once more visible.

From a constant stream of such examples, I note four recent news items: the Catholic hierarchy is issuing new edicts reaffirming in the strongest terms its hostility to abortion, contraception, divorce, and all things feminist; the collapsed Israeli government has managed to re-form as a working coalition only with the aid of some extreme right-wingers and ultra-religious elements; the British foreign minister, under pressure, made some political statements about the government's respect for Islam and its moral code; the American president of the international writers' union PEN reported a rising tide of censorship in the USA, particularly of school books, at the behest of the fundamentalist religious Right.

I take all these things personally, as I think all feminists must. Mary Daly's words in *Beyond God the Father*, first published in 1973, now read extraordinarily:

As the women's movement begins to have its effect upon the fabric of society, transforming it from patriarchy into something that never existed before ... it can become the greatest single challenge to the major religions of the world, Western and Eastern. Beliefs and values that have held sway for thousands of years will be questioned as never before.

In the early 1970s it was possible to believe that religion was in retreat, that feminism could make the great challenge without meeting much of a response. Since 1979 — the year of the Iranian revolution, of the ascent of the radical Right in Britain and the start of the Reagan campaign for the US presidency which vowed support

to anti-abortionists — that has no longer been possible. The extent and viciousness of the backlash becomes clearer all the time.

It's also becoming clearer that we are virtually on our own. Daly is right to describe feminism as the greatest challenge, if we treat feminism only as an idea. But historically the greatest challenge has been posed at a theoretical level by Marxism and, in the struggle for real power, by totalitarian states claiming to put Marxism into practice. As the power of those states wanes, the Left everywhere seems to have lost its ability to provide a critical analysis of religion, or to offer an alternative. Now, when millions of women are falling victim to the rise of fundamentalism, have feminists also gone weak on religion? I am desperately afraid that we have. I want to understand why. I want us to talk about how much it matters.

Confusions and contradictions: just a piece of cloth?

The feminist response so far has been so contradictory that it allows for all kinds of confusions: a range of responses, from conservatism to denial and dissociation, are being claimed as 'feminist'. Writing this, I have four other women in mind. They've all been touched by feminism, know how to use its language, and may even call themselves feminists. The first, a Bradford woman, told me she could not discuss the Salman Rushdie affair¹: as a non-Muslim it was not up to her to have a view. The second, Rana Kabbani, published *Letter to Christendom* in response to the Rushdie affair. The third featured in a TV programme and refused to be filmed praying behind her brother because she did not wish to be used in a stereotyped portrayal of oppressed Muslim womanhood. The fourth, in another interview, dismissed criticisms of the *chador*, saying it was just a piece of cloth.

I shall start with the piece of cloth. I grew up seeing Orthodox Jewish women in a nearby London district wearing the *sheitel*, a wig covering their own hair so that only their husbands might see it. The *sheitel* was easily dismissed as an abhorrent survival of bygone times, worn by women with no interest whatever in feminist debate. They can still be seen, but now I am more used to seeing the varieties of modest head-coverings (*hijab*) worn by Muslim women.

Some defenders of *hijab* now claim that they are the truest feminists, since those claiming to side with freedom are really siding with sexual exploitation, western decadence or, most tellingly, with racism. Rana Kabbani argues that *hijab* has now become a political choice for Muslim women, enabling them to form networks and work together more effectively, and is a symbol of rejection of western values and permissiveness. But this picture of a politically active Muslim sisterhood consisting

mainly of professional women who have freely chosen to wear *hijab*, and who are released by it from family surveillance, the 'trap of western dress' and even class difference (Kabbani argues that 'since all women look the same in it, it is a most effective equaliser') is selective: against it must be set the evidence of feminist researchers, activists and refugees from Muslim countries around the world. There are countries where wearing the veil is still compulsory for women, and others where most women are veiled and presumably have little real choice. The idea that the veil can be appropriated for women's own purposes does not stand up to analysis either. Could women with shorn hair who wear the *sheitel* claim that as a liberating choice? It seems unlikely, yet the rationale behind the *sheitel* is exactly the same: preserving a woman's modesty and keeping her from being seen as a sex object; reserving her charms for her husband, and protecting men from temptation.

Other writers who do not share the view that the veil is a reclaimable neutral symbol (Edward Said described the *chador* as a 'portable cage') argue either that it is expressive of a basic hostility towards female sexuality, or that it serves to mark out all public space as male, to be entered by women only on condition that they effectively become invisible. Whatever the wearer's motives, the message of *hijab* is still that a woman's presence in the world outside home must be in some way justified. Whatever the circumstances which lead to this, we cannot mistake it for feminism or liberation.

It remains true that at certain times, in certain places, many women have seen it as being in their interests to adopt *hijab*. In Iran, for instance, Westernisation under the Shah had undermined cultural self-esteem and also added to women's burdens, so that many felt they had nothing to lose by supporting the fundamentalist revival. As Andrea Dworkin has argued about the American religious Right, conservatism may appeal to women because it offers respectability, protection and male support. Fundamentalists of different religions share an emphasis on traditional roles for women; they promote, for example, the idea that women with children should be able to stay at home and be financially supported by men. Overburdened Iranian women may well have seen this as desirable, although the reality they were then faced with was virtual sexual apartheid, a diminishment of legal rights and status, sanctions against women not wearing the *chador* or who were not supported by men, and no relief, in the end, from overwork and poverty.

Ideologically *hijab* can't be reclaimed for feminism, but feminist support for women's struggles has to include support both for those who refuse to wear it and are persecuted — as in Iran — and those who do wear it, and are also persecuted. We must support the rebellious women and girls in every case. It would

be dangerous, though, for us to confuse support for the right to rebel, oppose racism, and wear what we want, with support for fundamentalism itself.

Responses to Rushdie

Rana Kabbani wrote her *Letter to Christendom* primarily as a response to the Rushdie affair. A very different response came from Southall Black Sisters, who joined with supporters from various religious backgrounds in May 1989 to set up Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF). I have found it striking that since the beginning of the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* there have been just two groups affirming unwavering and total support for the book's publication, and without any racist taint. One is WAF; the other is made up of organisations like PEN which represent writers internationally, and oppose censorship throughout the world. These groups have been able to see the allegedly anti-racist opposition to the book for what it is: a convenient means for the fundamentalist leadership to assert its power and suppress dissent.

The first activity organised by WAF, their picket of the May 1989 anti-Rushdie demonstration, showed up dramatically the scale of the opposition to feminist dissenters from religious communities. Since then WAF has organised a benefit (jointly with 'Voices for Rushdie') and a public meeting addressing the rise of fundamentalism around the world. These events have all taken place in a climate of threat, which for some women has been real and urgent. The May picket was a frightening experience; at the summer benefit, where the atmosphere was still tense, some of the expected performers felt unable to appear; at the public meeting one woman at risk of being deported to Pakistan and imprisoned there for 'adultery' (the crime of having been abducted and raped) spoke of what had happened to her as a direct result of Pakistan's adoption of religious law.

Speakers reporting on the rise of fundamentalist religious movements in Iran, Ireland, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, Israel, Africa and Eastern Europe, pointed out a double threat. One is direct—attacks on women's reproductive rights and on the right of women to be educated, to work, to be politically active, to resist unwanted marriage, abuse or mutilation. The other is at least as dangerous: attacks on secular democracy and attempts to increase the power of religious or communal leaders in the political arena, so that the civil law can be usurped by religious laws which inevitably accord women fewer rights.

Several speakers dealt with the problem of how fundamentalism still manages to attract so many women. Part of its attraction is that, like fascism, it mobilises supporters against external enemies, and thus appears to empower women. Religious practice also gives women an alternative source of power, in the sense they can use its authority to balance the power of the men closer to them. This feeling of empowerment encourages women to become involved. Another speaker described the wealth of the American Pentecostal churches which are buying their way into Ghana, and how that draws vast numbers of the women who bear the brunt of the country's economic crisis. There were some positive reports too, of a growing resistance, particularly among disillusioned Iranian women, and in Bangladesh where feminists see the importance of keeping a secular constitution and fighting to resist a clause denoting Islam as the state religion.

There appears to be an emerging consensus that feminists should, as far as possible, seek to use the civil law to defend women against religious laws. In the case of women threatened by anti-adultery laws in their countries of origin, for instance, we should seek to establish their entitlement to refugee status as victims of political persecution. Similarly, French feminists have sought legal protection for women whose male relatives wish to force them into marriage, by defining such actions as kidnap and abduction and seeking to ensure that the French government acts to protect its citizens, even when the woman concerned has been taken overseas.

Working with our own minority communities or in alliance with other feminists, we are bound to meet the charges of colluding with racism or of betraying our own ethnic group or faith. Such accusations rest on the assumption that there is one ready-defined community and that we are not free to challenge its definitions. They are tactics for controlling dissidents, as Southall Black Sisters have had cause to recognise and as other speakers agreed. But they can only succeed if we submit to the judgment that freethinkers or feminists, radicals, atheists, critics of religion, must forfeit their right to belong to their original communities.

Having challenged, often in the name of feminism, the beliefs, practices and allegiances we start off with, we can't just move into a new community ready and waiting to accept us. I often used to hear that I had no choices other than to continue with Orthodox Judaism or be swallowed up into the larger society which was Christian and anti-semitic. It was a false threat in some ways: I haven't continued with Orthodoxy, and I haven't been swallowed up. But in another way the dichotomy is real, since those communities have a more continuous, more tangible existence, than any others which might fit my feminist commitment. Feminism isn't somewhere we can literally get up and go to, but a framework for understanding and changing our current realities. And feminism, as I understand it, has no place for religion, let alone fundamentalism. If it isn't a refuge or a parallel faith, feminism should be, as Mary Daly suggested, the greatest single challenge to the major religions of the world.

Feminism and religion

Since the early 1970s, feminists have adopted one of three different approaches to religion. The first, most conservative approach, dealt with change at a superficial level, without confronting the basic framework of religious law. Women who took this approach sought to rewrite texts avoiding masculine pronouns, applied to enter religious hierarchies, campaigned to alter religious law and tradition as far as interpretations of the laws themselves would allow. Some got to where they wanted and stayed content with that. Others reached the limits of what this approach allowed and were driven beyond it, an experience which could cause acute distress.

The next approach was either deeper or dafter, depending on your sympathies. It denounced the patriarchal character of existing religions and attempted to unearth through historical research a truly woman-centred alternative. Failing that, it simply gave up the historical quest and resorted to making up matriarchalist fantasies. This is open to the criticism that it fails to understand the cultural and political significance of religion in all its multidimensional forms. It is not so easy to dismiss or overtake the accomplishments of millennia of religious thought and practice, and the alternative constructions of this approach have had little to offer so far. No born-again pseudo-witchcraft tree-worshipping cult is going to be able to compete with the achievements of the golden age of Islamic civilisation, for example. The cultural forms evolved by existing religions carry meanings from so many sources that to invent overnight replacements with as much emotional resonance is really an impossible task.

The patriarchal religions to be replaced in this approach are also much more than political movements setting out to enforce patriarchy. With all their faults, they are

also ethical systems, providing a language with which to contest oppression, to set out moral obligations and to establish concepts of human rights. This makes it unnecessary for feminists to begin again in every detail, as if no work had ever been done before us. A more convincing approach to religion would start by evaluating its achievements as well as its crimes.

The last approach to religion is a rational one, capable of analysing religion in relation to patriarchy and to systems such as feudalism and capitalism; one which sees feminism as a political analysis and movement incompatible both with systems of allegedly divinely-given religious law and with systems of irrational thought. This approach asks the nastiest questions about our silliest beliefs and most comfortable allegiances. Because it's the least respectful and least tolerant, however, it's been the quietest tendency of late.

Publicly, feminism seems to have sided more with the conservatives than with the dissidents, but there is now much more to do. WAF is currently campaigning on reproductive rights and has picketed the Irish embassy to protest at Irish women being refused the right even to information on abortion and contraception. It is also campaigning for state-funded education to become secular: new legislation in Britain makes it compulsory for schools to hold a daily act of collective worship, which has to be mainly Christian unless a dispensation is granted. It makes no sense to pick on a piece of cloth if we only pick on one religion, or if we take on fundamentalism and leave the rest of religion alone. If Christendom is where we live, we have to take that on too.

Note

1. The British writer Salman Rushdie published a novel, *The Satanic Verses*, which was deemed by some religious Muslims to be blasphemous; its author, raised as a Muslim himself, was categorized as an apostate. In some British cities with significant Muslim populations there were demonstrations and book-burnings; in Iran a *fatwa* was issued which gave believers dispensation (amounting to encouragement) to harm or kill Rushdie, so that the British authorities were obliged to provide him with protection. These events exposed deep tensions between the liberal values that were assumed to be mainstream common sense (e.g. religious toleration and opposition to literary censorship) and the views of some minority ethnic/religious communities.

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