

Sex segregation in UK universities - a step forward for the Muslim religious right

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The authorities of universities in the UK made public their policy of bending to religious fundamentalists by condoning sex segregation on university premises. The battle that is being waged now in the UK concerns us all : attempts by fundamentalist forces to undermine secularism and to destroy hard won gender equality laws have been going on steadily in most European countries, in the name of rights. The education system is especially targeted, as controlling the minds of the youth is critical.

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A battle that concerns us all is being waged in the UK right now and has surprisingly very little echo outside Britain : Universities UK- a body that officially represents universities - made public their new guidance, according to which sex segregation could be practiced in the universities of the kingdom at the request of guest speakers representing religious groups. [1]

While protests flew in and an international petition 'Rescind endorsement of sex segregation at UK Universities' was posted on November 23, 2013 [2], UUK published a response that pretended that they were only envisaging a theoretical case, a mere 'hypothetical case study (p.27) in which an external speaker on faith in the modern world requests that the audience is segregated according to gender'. [3]

They also pretended that there were only trying to apply ' a wide range of legislation from equalities law through to criminal law and the duty to protect the safety of university staff, students and visitors', with the aim of 'accommodating everyone's views' and 'ensur(ing) that no one is unlawfully excluded from the event'.

This was a blatant lie, as a brief search in the media clearly shows. And it was only one among the many lies that were uttered by university authorities on the issue of sex segregation, secularism, high education and the pervasive political importance of religious organizations in the kingdom.

Facts

In short, here are some facts : in March 2013 a Prof made the local news, when he started walking out of a debate in which he was one of the two speakers at University College London, if sex segregation was enforced on the audience, as was the case. A video shows him saying « quit the segregation or I'm out of here » after security staff tried to throw out three men who had gone to sit in the women's section of the audience. Prof Krauss added « You are in a public arena and not in a mosque, not in a private event. »

Not surprisingly, women were seated at the back of the room : according to a student, 'females were allocated seats at the back corner of the auditorium to view the debate from a disadvantaged position'. [4] Dana Sondergaard who attended the event, wrote on her Facebook page : "After having been told the event would NOT be gender segregated, we arrived and were told that women were to sit in the back of the auditorium, while men and couples could file into the front".

The debate entitled *Islam or Atheism : Which Makes More Sense ?* was organised by the Islamic Education and Research Academy : Prof Krauss, a theoretical physicist and director of the Origins project, was to debate on the question of science vs religion with Mr Hamza Andreas Tzortzis, a lecturer and IERA member.

Interestingly, rumours had been spreading beforehand that sex segregation will be the rule during this debate, and Prof. Krauss had approached the authorities, making it clear that he would not speak to a segregated audience ; he was assured in advance that this would not be the case. [5]

In the week before the event, word of a segregated seating arrangement began circulating. On Friday, Dr. Krauss posted the following status on Facebook :
'News update : Have now been informed that the event in London will NOT be gender segregated.'

However, one of the organisers said that the segregation had been agreed with the University and suggested more than once that the men should be refused entry.
[6]

Similarly, students alerted their unions and the authorities and were given similar re-assurance. However segregation signs were posted on doors in advance. [7].

In a statement by concerned students, it is made clear that 'Separate entrances were in place for women and men', and that 'A policy of sexual segregation was enforced at an event at University College London on Saturday, with the organisers' security trying to physically remove members of the audience who would not comply', and that 'A policy of segregation was suggested by IERA in a statement before the event'.

This was raised by students with UCL, who gave assurances that no segregation would be allowed. [8]. 'Several attendees approached UCL's security personnel to alert them to the situation, but found that the staff were unwilling to intervene, and were instructed to comply with the organisers' policy of segregation'.

Interestingly UUK first denied that enforced segregation took place, then argued that sexes were separated left and right, and not front and bottom, and finally said that, at a last minute arrangement, there was provision for a mixed area for married couples !

UUK went on stating that segregation of the sexes at universities is not discriminatory as long as "both men and women are being treated equally, as they are both being segregated in the same way."

Students speaking to different media after the event used strong words to describe the situation and their reactions : 'shocked', 'intimidating', 'threatening and divisive', 'genuinely fearful of the repercussions', 'disgraceful', 'insulting', 'a scandal', 'a violation', 'disappointed at UCL (which) did not keep its promise' ...

So much for the 'hypothetical case study' that UUK pretends to have addressed in its guidance document. Moreover, UUK lied to Prof Krauss as well as to students about not allowing segregation. It also pretended to ban in future religious groups that would request sex segregation, while they

were in fact preparing the infamous guidance document that justifies this very segregation.

On the occasion of this incident, and thanks to Prof Krauss making his dissent public, one learnt with dismay that sex segregation had been enforced for over a year - at least - in many public debates or conferences, at the initiative of vocal Muslim fundamentalist organizations.

In Leicester university in a segregated event entitled *Does God Exist ?*, organized by the same group and with the same guest speaker, Hamza Andreas Tzortzis, a message on the group's website says : « In all our events, [the society] operate a strict policy of segregated seating between males and females. » The statement was removed after the *Guardian* contacted the society. A photograph passed to the *Guardian* shows signs put up in a university building, directing the segregation. [9].

Leicester University denied enforced segregation. But a Leicester student told the *Guardian* he believed segregation was common practice at the society's events to avoid offending those with strong religious beliefs.

More recently, in an article written on November 24, author states that sex segregation openly continues elsewhere : 'One recent example of an event held by the Islamic Society at the University of Northampton described seating arrangements as "open to both Brothers and Sisters, with segregation adhered-to" '. [10]

In a report written by Student Rights on 13 May 2013, entitled 'Unequal Opportunity - Gender Segregation on UK University Campuses',

[11], one learns that those are far from being isolated incidents. According to the report, '180 events logged in the period March 2012 to March 2013 were investigated for evidence of segregation ; 46 of these events (25.5%) at 21 separate institutions were found to have either explicitly promoted segregation by gender, or implied that this would be the case, with six of these cancelled before taking place'. The report concludes that 'As all 21 of these institutions have equality and diversity policies which prohibit discrimination on the grounds of gender, as well as a legal responsibility to do so under the Equality Act 2010, this briefing uncovers potential failings in these duties'.

Meanwhile, UUK wrote in their guidance document that universities should bear in mind that "concerns to accommodate the wishes or beliefs of those opposed to segregation should not result in a religious group being prevented from having a debate in accordance with its belief system" and that if "imposing an unsegregated seating area in addition to the segregated areas contravenes the genuinely-held religious beliefs of the group hosting the event, or those of the speaker, the institution should be mindful to ensure that the freedom of speech of the religious group or speaker is not curtailed unlawfully."

If we understand correctly, it creates a hierarchy of rights, in which the rights of religious groups supersede the rights of others ?

UUK 's choice of partners

Not all Muslims - far from that - nor all people from Muslim descent, nor all faith based Muslim organizations hold that genders should be segregated. In fact two extremely important women's organisations joined the protest against sex segregation, by signing the on line petition and by additionally writing separate letters to UUK, stating their dismay at and opposition to sex segregation in universities under religious pretexts : those are the international solidarity network of Women Living Under Muslim Laws - a non-confessional organization - and the Canadian Council of

Muslim Women – a faith based organization. Moreover, among the initiators (and among later signatories as well) of the online petition are numerous men and women of Muslim descent.

Who are then the religious groups that UUK see fit to invite to organize their events in the premises of universities – rather than other groups ?

According to Stand for Peace [12], they are far from being ordinary religiously minded people ; they are fundamentalists and very organized. ‘Tzortzis has previously been associated with Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an organization that campaigns for a global Islamist caliphate’. ‘He is on record condemning democratic principles and advocating for a Sharia state : “We as Muslims reject the idea of freedom of speech, and even the idea of freedom. We see under the *Khilafa* (caliphate), when people used to engage in a positive way, this idea of freedom was redundant, it was unnecessary, because the society understood under the education system of the *Khilafa* state, and under the political framework of Islam, that people must engage with each other in a positive and productive way to produce results, as the Qur’an says, to get to know one another.”’

Stand for Peace also says that ‘IERA’s staff includes Islamist hate preachers such as Abdurraheem Green, Hamza Tzortzis (the opposing speaker at the debate) and Yusuf Chambers.’ The article goes on to give various examples of such hate speech : ‘Tzortzis wants to criminalize homosexuality.’ ‘Yusuf Chambers is a founding member of the iERA. In a recorded conversation conducted with Dr. Zakir Naik (who has been banned from entering Britain), Chambers specifically asks what the punishment for homosexuality should be (the answer is “Death”), and then asks Naik to refute suggestions that homosexuality has any natural or genetic origins. In the same interview, Chambers agrees that adulterous women should be stoned to death.

Abdurraheem Green, another iERA official, recommends that death is a “suitable” punishment for adultery and homosexuality : “Such crimes thus need suitable and effective punishments that act as a sever [sic] warning to others. A public crime deserves a public punishment. Adultery is punishable by death, and a slow and painful death by stoning. All of this also goes some way to help understand why acts of homosexuality are similarly treated so harshly.” According to Green, beating women, in order to “bring them to goodness,” is permissible : The husband is allowed, to prevent her from evil, to apply some type of physical force ... It is not allowed to break the skin, does not allow to break a bone or even leave a mark on the skin. A beating that is that severe is forbidden and this is a type of assault, and is *haram*, and a crime in Islam to treat your wife like that. But a type of physical reprimand in order to bring her to goodness is allowed.

The iERA’s Abdullah Hakim Quick has been condemned by New Zealand’s broadcasting authority for his anti-gay tirades, which state that homosexuals must be killed, that they are “sick” and “not natural”, and that “Muslims are going to have to take a stand [against homosexuals] and it’s not enough to call names.” He continues to hold this position : “They said ‘what is the Islamic position [on homosexuality] ?’ And I told them. Put my name in the paper. The punishment is death. And I’m not going to change this religion.”

Stand for Peace concludes : ‘This is just the tip of the iceberg : other iERA speakers include Bilal Philips, described by the US as an “unindicted co-conspirator” in the 1993 al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center ; Zakir Naik, banned from the UK for saying that “every Muslim should be a terrorist ;” and Shady Sulieman, who has said that for those who commit adultery, “their punishment is stoning to death.”’

It needs to be asked from UUK why are such speakers invited to organize events on university premises ? Why not, instead, the women from the Canadian Council of Muslim Women or their UK equivalent, or representatives from organisations of secularists or atheists of Muslim origin ?

Why in the name of openness, multiculturalism, tolerance, respect for each other's religions and cultures are doors opened to those who precisely refuse reciprocity in that matter ?

Why in the name of democracy and human rights is visibility given to the most reactionary political organizations that cover themselves under religion ?

A deliberate policy of creating antagonistic 'communities'

Protests so far have addressed the need to maintain the secular tradition of universities in Europe ; they have also challenged unequal treatment between men and women and supported gender equality. Said Krauss : "It is « vitally important » that institutions such as universities were secular and avoided segregation of any kind". □

But when will the crux of the matter be addressed : i.e. the extreme right political nature of Muslim fundamentalist groups, and the apparent inability of shortsighted liberals not to play into their political game ? When will liberals cease to consider these groups as the legitimate representatives of the 'Muslim community' ?

One of the corollaries of allowing extreme right groups to pass off as representatives of Islam and then of a whole community is that one cannot counter them anymore without being accused of being 'against Islam'. Said Richard Dawkins commenting on recent incidents of sex segregation in universities : it is time to stop 'being so pusillanimously terrified of being thought 'Islamophobic' ?

It is the evident interest of the xenophobic Far Right in Europe to highlight such attacks on university traditions and gender equality and to use those against citizens and migrants of Muslim descent, regardless of their personal faith. One can therefore meditate on the counter effect engendered by giving the floor in to aggressively reactionary organizations, as if they spoke for all 'Muslims'.

'It's shameful that our universities have accepted gender segregation under pressure from the most oppressive religious fanatics. This capitulation is a disaster for feminism, progressive ideals and above all Muslims' writes Yasmin Alibhai Brown on December 8 [[13](#)].

Should one aimed at exacerbating divisions among people along 'community' lines, one could not do any better than give such prominence to the 'fanatics'. Ultimately, it can only reinforce rejection and hostility for 'the Other' that one pretended to open doors to. 'Muslims' are obviously the first victims of these policies. This concern is echoed in the Canadian Council of Muslim Women's letter to UUK on November 28 : "We are highly disturbed by such guidelines which affect Muslims, esp. Muslim women. We are an organization of believing Muslim women who value equity, equality and empowerment and cannot comprehend your decision".

It is also the evident interest of Muslim fundamentalist organizations to instigate outrage and rejection, so that they can claim to be further victimized : they have long mastered the art of hijacking and manipulating human rights concepts, to turn to their benefit minority rights, religious rights and cultural rights, although they are on record for trampling on all those when they are in power.

Recent uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Bangladesh have demonstrated that millions of people of Muslim descent want freedom, secular democracy, human rights for all (not just for fundamentalists theocrats), but these cases also show how well organized and well funded fundamentalist groups were able to take over secular popular movements.

And Yasmin Alibhai Brown continues : 'This Tuesday, 10th December, is Human Rights Day. It is my

birthday too, and *insha-allah* (God willing) I plan to mark both by joining a demo outside Woburn House in Tavistock Square, London. These are the offices of Universities UK (UUK), an affiliate which describes itself as “the voice of UK universities”, which is a bit presumptive I think, especially now’.

So far UUK has shown no sign of coming back on their guidance document, despite protests. The online petition has gathered more than 7700 signatures to this date, and signatures are still coming in. It is therefore vitally important that more signatures come in NOW in support of protestors and demonstrators - signatures from all over the world, not just the UK, as UUK has to be shamed the world over for trading secularism and women’s rights in the name of cultural relativism.

https://secure.avaaz.org/en/petition/Universities_UK_Rescind_endorsement_of_sex_segregation_at_UK_Universities/

For the battle that is being waged now in the UK concerns us all : attempts by fundamentalist forces to undermine secularism and to destroy hard won gender equality laws have been going on steadily in most European countries, in the name of rights. The education system everywhere is especially targeted, as controlling the minds of the youth. We cannot afford to loose the battle in the UK, as it will certainly backlash on other countries. In the words of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women who responds to UUK on 02/12/13 : “We are not in the U.K, but the world becomes very small and interconnected in matters of gender equality and what you do there influences us here. As an organization of believing Muslim women we constantly struggle with those of you who become cultural relativists and those amongst Muslims who are rigid and intolerant of any diversity. Don’t you see that you, perhaps without conscious effort, are siding with this group ? Who do you think you are appeasing ? Certainly not the reasonable ones who are fighting for our rights”.

Today, December 10, Human Rights day, opponents to these reactionary politics will demonstrate in London. Many presumed ‘Muslims’ – believers and unbelievers alike - will be among them, thus illustrating the fact that UKK (like many other liberal and human rights organizations) repeatedly allies with the wrong politico-religious groups in its stated attempt to supposedly facilitate links between ‘communities’.

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P.-S.

* <http://www.siawi.org/article6373.html>

* Marieme Helie Lucas is among the initiators of the petition : Rescind endorsement of sex segregation at UK Universities.

Notes

[1] <http://blog.universitiesuk.ac.uk/2013/11/25/external-speakers-guidance-segregation/>

[2] https://secure.avaaz.org/en/petition/Universities_UK_Rescind_endorsement_of_sex_segregation_at_UK_Universities/

- [3] <http://blog.universitiesuk.ac.uk/2013/11/25/external-speakers-guidance-segregation/>
- [4] <http://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2013/03/sexual-segregation-at-a-ucl-event-a-scandal-say-students>
- [5] Video : Krauss, stating that he had been promised no such segregation would take place
<http://standforpeace.org.uk/walkout-in-ucl-over-gender-segregation-at-iera-event/>
- [6] <http://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2013/03/sexual-segregation-at-a-ucl-event-a-scandal-say-students>
- [7] <http://www.siawi.org/article6218.html>
- [8] <http://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2013/03/sexual-segregation-at-a-ucl-event-a-scandal-say-students>
- [9] <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/apr/15/leicester-investigating-islamic-group-gender-segregation>
- [10] <http://occamstypewriter.org/sylviamclain/2013/11/24/uk-university-debates-when-gender-segregation-ok/>
- [11] http://www.studentrights.org.uk/article/2082/report_unequal_opportunity_gender_segregation_on_uk_university_campuses
- [12] <http://standforpeace.org.uk/walkout-in-ucl-over-gender-segregation-at-iera-event/>
- [13] <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/its-shameful-that-our-universities-have-accepted-gender-segregation-under-pressure-from-the-most-oppressive-religious-fanatics-8991593.html>