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Self-presentation

Siawi: Who we are and our aims

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We are women who are affiliated to various formations that have challenged religious (and ethnic nationalist) fundamentalist forces across different religions for nearly twenty years. From the Vienna Conference on Human Rights onwards we have warned of the threat of religious absolutism and other forms of identity politics. We argue that the defense of secular values and the separation of church and state is a precondition for the struggle for women's rights and other transformative struggles for socialism, democracy and against conflict. Far from being a 'majoritarian' position, we particularly focus on the threat of the erosion of secular spaces and of formal secularism, to women of migrant descent and from religious minorities.

Today, we witness major political changes in Europe, related to the renewed claim by religions, particularly modern fundamentalist forces within major religions to affect politics: some countries insist on the Christian character of the European Union, while the political entry of the Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe translates into laws restricting women's rights in matters of reproductive rights or lesbian rights. These positions are mirrored by the lobbying of Muslim fundamentalist forces to introduce religious laws for the Muslim minorities in various countries of Europe, thus curtailing women's rights in family matters and creating different rights for different categories of citizens. In states such as Britain and Poland, national identity is becoming increasingly tied to Christianity to which minorities must conform, while the EU has exerted pressure on the French government to abandon the principle of separation of the state from religion which is at the heart of French secularism.

We reject the thesis of a 'clash of civilisations' between Islam and Christianity. More pertinent are numerous alliances between orthodox and fundamentalist forces of all major religions which ally to undermine secular values, attack women's rights and demand extensions of laws that undermine freedom of speech. For instance at various times, the Vatican, Al Azhar, Jewish Orthodox forces, the Hindu right and other extreme right political movements have supported fundamentalist initiatives across religions and across national borders in Europe. We are aware of their common lobbying at the level of European Institutions and at the level of the United Nations. Diaspora support for religious fundamentalist formations or ethnic nationalism are also key elements in inciting conflicts outside Europe.

The link between the rise of fundamentalism and the erosion of secular space is very clear to us . Each of us has direct experience, in her own context, of how this translates into restrictions in

women's lives, in the name of minority rights and religious rights. The demonisation of Muslims across Europe, the adoption of repressive laws and attacks on civil liberties must be opposed without justifying fundamentalism of either minority or majority religions.

We are concerned with the drive to use human rights concepts to enforce highly contested versions of religion, to attack secularism and to promote concepts such as 'creationism'. We are especially concerned with the fact that some European feminists are afraid to support women's rights when they apparently clash with minority rights or religious rights. Universalist values are not simply a product of 'the West' to be discarded in favour of new forms of cultural relativism. They are the product of diverse struggles against both patriarchy and colonialism which could have a transformative impact on European feminism if their histories and remarkable successes could be recuperated.

We feel the need to link up women's initiatives for secularism across Europe, and to address the concerns that some feminists may have vis a vis secularism vs minority/religious rights. We want to put this question on the feminist agenda and to open the dialogue on these burning issues.

We aim at gathering feminists, individuals and groups, researchers and activists who identify the rise of religious fundamentalism and the erosion of secularism as threats to women's emancipation, and to reach out to those working on the issue, as widely as possible. We work with all those who - whether atheists or people from religious backgrounds including clerics - support secular principles.

The documents presented here [on our website] are related to:

- information on the shrinking space for secularism in Europe and the rise of religious fundamentalism
- feminist analysis on how it affects women.
- documenting struggles and strategies of women in defense of secularism in different European countries
- answering the major questions that feminists are confronted with regarding freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of expression, cultural rights, religious rights, women rights - and secularism.

We will be present at the upcoming European Feminist Forum in June 2008.

View online : www.siawi.org