

Freedom 'to' and freedom 'from': rebalancing the tension in favour of gender equality - On the British State religious or faith-based approach to minorities

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The various social contracts that are emerging between the State and the dominant religious right minority leaderships in the UK trade on nothing less than the human rights of minority women, says Pragna Patel.

There is more than one form of freedom, explains Aunt Lydia, a prominent character in Margaret Atwood's Novel: 'The Handmaid's Tale': there is 'freedom to' and 'freedom from'. The tension between freedom to be autonomous, to be self-defined, and freedom from uncertainty, from insecurity, has been characterised as the central tension between feminist politics and fundamentalist politics [1].

A recent Southall Black Sisters study serves to highlight another element to the tension [2]: it reveals that wherever religious fundamentalism and the religious right are in the ascendancy, the right to manifest religion overshadows the right to freedom from religion. Of course, this reflects a number of economic, social and political trends, global and national, but the result in any event is a diminishing welfare state and a corresponding increase in the communalisation of minority communities, with community groups and civil society organising solely around religious identities, particularly in the West.

The background to the study lies in the way in which the British State has vigorously promoted a religious or faith-based approach to minorities over the last two decades, notwithstanding the assimilationist tendencies of successive government agendas on 'cohesion', 'integration' and 'Big Society'. The agenda is partly to do with a perceived need to appease conservative religious leaderships within those communities, and partly in the belief that the right to manifest religion signifies equal treatment of minorities – a belief shared by sections of the so called progressive left. Dominant demands for separate schools, personal dress codes, blasphemy laws and personal laws to cover marriage, divorce and child custody have been taken to represent a strong counter hegemonic voice to 'western' cultural and religious imposition, and to that extent minority rights are increasingly and almost exclusively linked to the right to manifest religion. Our concern at Southall Black Sisters [3] is that, in the process, the British State is unable to distinguish between valid demands for equality and those that simply mask inequality.

The findings of the study – which comprised of one to one in depth interviews in the UK with 21 women from different religious and backgrounds – demonstrate that the pressure to characterise minority communities through the prism of religion has compounded a highly problematic and flawed assumption at the heart of the faith-based approach: that those who have no access to or

interaction with broader society identify with their particular faith based communities.

In the face of their experiences of gender related violence and control, a majority of the women interviewed in the study were acutely critical of tradition, culture and religion for perpetuating gender inequality, discrimination and violence. Although the majority were 'believers', all but one woman made a clear differentiation between believing and being part of a 'faith community'. All viewed religion as a matter of personal choice or belief rather than the basis of their social identity. Most women located themselves along a multiple axes of difference, i.e. according to age, gender, ethnicity and nationality. Surprisingly, religion was not amongst the three strongest aspects of their perception of identity. Indeed, the way women chose to identify themselves was largely determined by their experiences of gender discrimination and oppression. For many, their common humanity remained their main source of identity – a matter that is perhaps not surprising in view of their experiences of abuse, violence and marginalisation which had left them feeling stripped of their humanity.

The study found that, far from inspiring 'confidence and trust', faith groups evoked a range of fears about religion and faith-based organisations. Every single woman was acutely aware of the gendered impact of religious dogma and expressed very strong negative sentiments of mistrust and alienation from faith-based leaderships. They strongly opposed religious prescriptions against women, and feared abuse of power – including sexual harassment and exploitation – by religious leaders. Much of their rejection sprang from actual experiences of unsuccessful attempts to seek protection and help from religious leaderships in the UK, or in countries of origin.

Many women interviewed in the study talked about the potentially divisive impact of religion by recounting personal experiences or stories of war, divisions, hostility and problems caused by the politicisation of religious identities in their countries of origin.

"Islam does not force anything on anyone so why should those who live within it force others? I want my children to know what it says in Islam. The main principle is to live by humanity; they should not look at colour. The poet Iqbal – our greatest poet – said, whether black or white, poor or rich, old or young, we should all obey Allah. If there is no difference for Allah, why do we bring about difference? I like his (Iqbal's) idea of unity for all human beings."

The study revealed a pervasive scepticism about religious institutions, which were seen as corrupt, exploitative and unaccountable places. Most women recognised such institutions, not simply as places of religious worship, but as profoundly reactionary and gendered political institutions riven with sectarian, class and caste divisions and discrimination. Many talked of rifts and fights between rival factions of trustees seeking to assert their power and authority or seeking financial gain.

A striking feature of the lived reality of the women interviewed in the study was that none saw their identity as fixed and unchanging. Instead, they occupied spaces at the point of the intersection of a number of cultural and religious and non-religious traditions. Their realities showed that their practices and traditions are syncretic and undogmatic and that it was precisely such lifestyles that created moments of happiness in otherwise relentlessly difficult and traumatic circumstances.

"Tomorrow I go to celebrate Valentine's Day. Islam says we shouldn't dance. . I used to get awards for dancing. I love celebrating Valentine's Day. I will wear red clothes and red lipstick and get a red rose from my husband. I wear lots of make up and perfume. I also love celebrating Christmas and Easter. These are small pieces of happiness." (Waheeda)

This is precisely why all the women in the study said they cherished the secular space provided by SBS, which they saw as an empowering space: a space that enables them to gain access to other

ideas, traditions and cultures and most importantly; a space that unlocks their access to secular state services, which many regarded as the final safety net in their struggle to assert their fundamental human rights and freedoms.

The findings of the study show that, whilst religion is relevant to the lives of some of the most vulnerable and marginalised minority women, they also want autonomy and choice in how they seek to define themselves and live their lives. They value their right to freedom from aspects of their religion and culture – a freedom which is often seen to secure their right to life, to be free from inhuman and degrading treatment, to choice in marriage, to private life, to freedom of expression, to an education and to a fair trial. They know that the ascendancy of religious leaders and institutions as providers of services threatens the rich, creative, fluid and dynamic expression of identity that they have struggled to create; that, instead, they may be coerced into conservative, illiberal and fundamentalist identities that can serve only to subjugate them to the gate-keepers of so called ‘authentic’ religious traditions.

In conclusion, the SBS study findings bring us back to the tension between right to freedom from religion and the right to manifest religion. This tension is particularly pertinent in the face of the current ascendancy of faith-based approach to minorities, driven as it is by ideological and economic imperatives, and its use as a political resource by the State and the religious right within minority populations to gain power and privilege. Examples include the withdrawal of Home Office funding in 2011 for the Poppy Project which supports sex-trafficked migrant women and instead awarding the funding to the Salvation Army [4], and local authority acceptance of various social projects including a domestic violence help line based in the East London Mosque and Centre. In this context, our overlapping struggles for gender equality, democracy and secularism take on a sense of urgency: we can see that the various social contracts that are emerging between the State and the dominant religious right minority leaderships in the UK trade on nothing less than the human rights of minority women.

Pragna Patel

P.S.

* Open Democracy. 15 February 2012:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/pragna-patel/freedom-to'-and-freedom-from'-rebalancing-tension-in-favour-of-gender-equality>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.wluml.org/node/452>

[2] <http://www.tramaditerre.org/tdt/docs/1933.pdf>

[3] <https://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk>

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2011/may/09/poppy-project-funding-salvation-army>