

Interview

Vision and strategy: on solidarity, multiculturalism, identity politics, Muslims, Islamists and the Western Left

Tuesday 4 September 2018, by [HEINTZ Andy](#), [NAMAZIE Maryam](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2018).

Maryam Namazie is a spokesperson for *Fitnah-Movement for Women's Liberation, One Law for All* and *The Council of ex-Muslims*. She hosts a weekly television program in Persian and English called *Bread and Roses*. She's an Iranian-born writer and activist. Parts of this interview will be featured in Andy Heintz's book *Dissidents of the International Left*.

Andy Heintz - Is there a frustration that the needs of progressives, secularists and liberal dissidents within Iran are not being discussed enough by Western progressives?

Maryam Namazie - I think the problem is that many Western progressives have turned their backs on progressives and dissenters from countries like Iran or other countries in the Middle East and North Africa as well as Muslim communities within Western nations themselves. I think a lot of this goes back to this whole idea of multiculturalism as a social policy. There is this idea that has its origins in identity politics that solidarity has to be given to this imaginary homogeneous community rather than with progressive movements. When there is solidarity by these Western progressives, it is with the Iranian regime because it seemed to be an anti-imperialist regime even though it's suppressing the progressive and working-class movements in the country itself. Western progressives seeing Islamists rather than dissenters as allies is hugely problematic. We see people in the West who see themselves as progressives siding with Islamist and Islamist movements rather than with ex-Muslims, or progressive Muslims or free-thinkers from that background.

Do you think it's important to discern Western progressive criticism of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East as opposed to those who are openly siding with regimes like Iran and Syria?

Of course. There are people in the West who are anti-U.S. militarism but they are also supportive of Left and progressive movements in the Middle East, North Africa or amongst what's called the Muslim community in the West. So obviously a lot of these groups are our allies as we face what lies ahead. I'm someone who considers myself very much on the Left. But my criticism is against those who can't make this distinction. They think they have to ally with the Iranian regime or the Islamists to be against U.S. militarism or imperialism. It's not an either/or situation; you can be against both. I think people are complex. Groups and movements are complex as well. You can be a woman, a mother, a teacher, a gay-rights advocate and a refugee rights advocate. I think it's so simplistic to think that if you are against U.S.-militarism then you have to be supportive of the enemies of U.S.

militarism as well.

Is there talk of changing the community of communities approach in Britain where minority or religious leaders are assumed to represent the views of everyone in their community including in Muslim communities even when there is evidence that these leaders' views are not shared by all Muslims?

This is hugely problematic because it homogenizes entire groups of people who should be considered citizens irrespective of their backgrounds and beliefs. It also doesn't see the dissent that takes place in the so-called Muslim community when it's seen as one bloc.

It also hands over this so-called community to leaders who are often Islamists or members of the religious Far Right. If there is going to be a move away from this idea of multiculturalism and cultural relativism as a social policy, the Left needs to be stronger and carry the banner for universal and citizenship values. The human being needs to be at the center of things and not religion, ethnicity and culture. Part of taking that back will mean the Left taking back its banner and pushing for universal values such as secularism, criticism of religion and anti-clericalism. These have traditionally been a part of Left politics, but for many mainstream Leftist organizations, this is no longer the case.

Is it frustrating to hear the talk of the veil of being banned in countries like France when you compare it to the lack of discussion of the women who have risked their safety, and in many cases, their lives, to opposing being veiled in other countries?

Islamists often talk about how they want to protect women because in the West they say women are commodified and therefore their ideal Islamic religion and Islamic state protects women by protecting their modesty and veiling them so they are protected. There might be some truth in the fact that women who are not veiled and live in the West are commodified, but that's not the full truth because women who are veiled also are sexualized and commodified. The Islamists are using misogyny against women, but they are using language that is pro-women. It's very easy to see through this unless you don't want to.

There are people in politics who can easily see deceptions in U.S. foreign policy, but they don't see the same deceptions in the Islamist movement. I would suggest it's because they have an affinity for it. I'm opposed to the Iranian regime, but it doesn't mean I believe everything the U.S. government says about Iran, and it doesn't make me side with the U.S. government's attempts to push economic sanctions. I can see through the lines and I can oppose both sides and see both sides as reactionary.

Why do you think some people on the Left and Right have this monolithic view of Muslims as this homogenized group where everyone interprets Islam in the same manner?

I think it goes back to identity politics. Identities are homogenized and it's usually those in power who say what culture and religion is. When Islamists are in power, their version of things is seen to be the authentic version of Islam. That's why you see the Far Right attacking all Muslims, because they see all Muslims as the same as the Islamists. It's also why you see the Left and people who see themselves as progressive siding with the Islamists because they see this as the same as siding with Muslims or minority communities. It goes back to identity politics and what is considered an authentic Muslim. For example, if you are a Muslim who is opposed to Islamists, you're often called an Uncle Tom, or a coconut or a native informant. You're accused of promoting a colonial worldview. It's this idea that secularism, universal values and rights are Western. They are not Western values, they are universal values. We've had centuries of secularists, free thinkers and atheists fighting for universal values in the Middle East?

Do you worry the Far Right European movements and Islamists are both using the recent migrant and immigrant flows into Europe to promote a homogenized version of Islam?

The only difference between migrants and citizens is a piece of paper. Amongst migrants, just like amongst citizens, there are different points of views: there are heroes and reactionaries, and there are women's rights defenders and misogynists. It's important to look at migrants as individuals. Even if there are a few migrants who have committed crimes, it is unfair to place collective blame on a large number of people, most of whom haven't committed a crime and are trying to escape an intolerable situation. It's important to distinguish the actions of individuals in what's considered a group, and the right to political asylum, welfare, health care and human rights. These are things you have even if you've committed a crime, or if you belong to a group that's been homogenized and individuals within that group have committed a crime.

Can today's multiculturalism be replaced by a form of multiculturalism that recognizes universal values and gender equality?

I think multiculturalism as a lived experience is a powerful thing. I think a lot of people when they use the term multiculturalism are talking about this lived experience. They live in societies with lots of different people from different backgrounds living alongside one other. These are all positive things and I think all societies are better because of the contributions of newcomers as well as people who have been there for centuries.

The problem occurs when multiculturalism becomes social policy. There is more emphasis on differences than similarities. This leads to communities living separate, but unequal lives. For example, in Britain we have faith-based schools and faith-based services as if we can't go see a doctor that doesn't have the same beliefs as we do. We also have faith-based courts such as Jewish courts or Sharia courts where there is discrimination against women. You have citizens in this country who don't have the same access to the same rights, services and education as the rest of the country. You have children from Muslim parents that are going to Islamic schools where they are taught that they need to be veiled, they can't listen to music, they can't take pictures of themselves and they can't mix with boys. This is happening to children from a very young age. These are not prescriptions for a multicultural, plural society as people envision it to be, but a society that is completely segregated, separated and unequal.

Do you think one of the biggest problems with multiculturalism is that cultural preservation is being placed above cultural and religious choice?

It does restrict the space when it's said that there is only one authentic culture and one authentic religion that people adhere to. And it's those in power that determine what the limits of that culture and religion are. This limits the space for people to live and think as they choose. It can be very repressive and suffocating. It doesn't look at the fact that religion itself is a lived experience for many people. They pick and choose what to believe. They take aspects of religion they like and ignore aspects that they don't like. They don't necessarily follow religions to the letter. A lot of people are born into a religion because of an accident of birth. They are brought up as Muslims, as I was, but Islam can be very much in the background and not play much of a part in their daily lives.

This idea of homogenized religions also erases the dissenters and the free-thinkers. We're disappeared from the public space. We can't be seen anymore. We can't be heard. When we try to speak, we're called Islamophobes and inciters of hatred and discrimination. Those are things I've been accused of, merely for the fact that I want to say "I also exist and I also have a voice. I don't believe in Islam and I want to be able to criticize it." Why is the offense to the religious more important than the offense to me? Why can't I also speak up about things I find offensive, while

simultaneously defending the right of other people to express themselves?

Do you worry that certain atheists like Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens have accepted the idea that Islamism is the same thing as Islam without recognizing the Muslims who don't support an Islamist agenda?

It's not Islam or Muslims, but Islamism which is a Far-Right political movement that wants a Far-Right restructuring of society. I think that needs to be our main target. The Far-Right will say if you deport all Muslims you're going to solve the problem. This isn't true. The Enlightenment didn't ban the Bible but it pushed all political religion out of the public space and that's what we need to with political Islam today. We also have to recognize that people have a right to religion just as much as people have a right to be free from it.

Marieme Helie Lucas has challenged the idea that extremist groups like the Islamic State ISIS are experts on Islam, instead she argues they are simply using religion to push a Far-Right political narrative. Do you agree?

When you look at Islamism or the Christian Right or the Buddhist Right or the Hindu Right, they all use religion as their banner but they are first and foremost a political movement. They will change interpretations of their religion if it suits their means and ends. They will make concessions to push forward their agenda. For example, the Iranian regime said it was the people's Islamic duty to use contraception because it wanted to reduce the birth rate. Today, however, it has changed its minds and it's using religious edicts to say in order to be good Muslims, they need to have as many babies as possible. It's the same regime using Islamic laws, but for political ends.

I think fundamentally any religion is misogynistic and inhuman, but I think believers are much, much better than the religions that they are born into because they are 21st century human beings. I think if religion ever seems nice and cuddly and loving, it's not because the religion is loving, it's because the people who practice it are.

Do you think there is a need for atheists and agnostics to unite with other progressives who practice a religious faith but are also opposing religious fundamentalism and the politicization of religion?

Of course. We're not going to win this fight if we just work with people we agree with 100 percent of the time. It's through political social movements, that we will start to make headway. Social movements are not based on your identity, they are based on your politics, your ideals and what you are trying to change in the world. There are many people fighting against Islamism. Some of these people might not even be progressive, they may be conservative Muslims. They might be very pious, but they don't believe religion should be part of the State or part of the law and they are vehemently against it. They might even use Islamic rules to prove Islam should be kept out of politics. I might not agree with them on everything, but I consider them my allies. I've been trying to build coalitions with believers and non-believers against sharia law and the right to apostasy. I think we need to stop seeing people as homogenized identities and start seeing them as real human beings.
