

Refusing Holy Orders

Religious fundamentalism is gathering strength. It has gained succour from both Left and Right. And, argue **Gita Sahgal** and **Nira Yuval-Davis** it is women who stand to lose the most

The 'Salman Rushdie affair' and the mass demonstrations of Muslims in protest - not only against *The Satanic Verses* and its author but also at the ways the British state privileges Christianity - have put the issue of fundamentalism at the heart of the British political agenda. But different fundamentalist movements: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and Hindu, have been growing in Britain during the last few years - partly as a result of international developments and partly because of the situation in Britain itself.

Women, their roles, and above all, their control, are at the heart of the fundamentalist agenda. That they should conform to the strict confines of womanhood within the fundamentalist religious code is a precondition for maintaining and reproducing the fundamentalist version of society.

Fundamentalist movements throughout the world are basically political movements. They seek to harness modern state and media powers to the service of their religious ideology. Religious fundamentalism aligns itself with different political trends in different countries and manifests itself in a variety of forms; sometimes as a form of orthodoxy - a maintenance of 'traditional values' and sometimes as a radical phenomenon, dismissing impure and corrupt forms of religion to return to original sources.

What is common to all fundamentalist movements, however, is that they claim their version of religion to be the only true one. They use political means to impose it on all members of their religion and feel threatened by pluralist systems of thought. Militant fundamentalism has to be differentiated, there-

fore, from liberation theologies which, while deeply religious and political, cooperate with, rather than subjugate, non-religious political struggles for freedom.

The rise of fundamentalism is linked to the crisis of modernity, to a general sense of despair and disorientation. This has moved people from all over the world to return to religion as a source of solace and even more so as a compass and a solid anchor to provide a sense of stability and meaningful orientation, and a coherent identity.

In the West the most influential fundamentalist movement has been evangelism, which is at the heart of the 'moral Right' in the USA. In the Third World, and among Third-World minorities in the West, the rise of fundamentalism is also intimately linked to the failure of nationalist and socialist movements to bring about successful liberation from oppression, exploitation and poverty.

Religion has also been deployed by militants as an 'indigenous' ideology with which to mobilise the 'masses' and confront racism, imperialism and superpower interventions. This has become particularly powerful since the Iranian revolution, and has affected in turn, not only Muslims in other countries, but also Jews, Sikhs, Hindus and other religions. Of course, specific local conditions have also contributed to the rise of these movements. In this article we want to look at the particular conditions which exist in Britain.

The issue of fundamentalism around the Rushdie affair has been deeply confusing and has created divisions within both left and right in Britain. For example, during the mass Muslim demonstra-

tion in London in June 1989, the group of women who had just recently established the organisation 'Women Against Fundamentalism', counter-demonstrated. They wanted to register their voices in opposition to the fundamentalist leadership of the demonstration, its demands for the extension of the blasphemy law, and especially against its position on the role of women.

The Anti-Fascist League demonstrated alongside the main Muslim march, emphasising the Muslims' right to resist racism and physically confronting a group of fascists who opposed the demonstration on racist and nationalist grounds. Another fascist organisation supported the demonstration, seeing it as Muslims expressing their inherently different and separate cultural-national essence. However, both factions of fascists, as well as the Muslim fundamentalists, opposed the Women Against Fundamentalism ... Similar unusual - if not 'unholy' - alliances and splits have appeared also in the press around, for instance, the *Sacred Cows* pamphlet of Fay Weldon.

This confusion springs from the different political ideologies with which fundamentalist movements have aligned themselves. One of the unchallenged 'truths' of the Left for many years has been the assumption of the inherently progressive nature of anti-imperialism.

By extension, any attempt to criticise and challenge the authority of fundamentalist leaders is seen by the Left as racist. They have been taught by multiculturalist and anti-racist strategists to hold as sacred the 'autonomy' of the minority 'communities' and to view them as internally homogeneous. 'Identity politics', which has emphasised people's right to express their 'difference', has drawn its power from the slogan, 'the personal is political'. Ironically, by consigning the political to the realm of the personal, the Left has been unable either to analyse or to challenge religious fundamentalism.

From a very different perspective, some of the new Right in Britain, while deeply racist, have felt that the cohesive, tightly controlled, industrious model of 'Asian families', for example, is highly conducive to the type of moral system they wish to see strengthened throughout society.

So, on the one hand, fundamentalism in Britain has been encouraged by different political forces to homogenise and unite the British collectivity, religiously and culturally; and on the other hand, to heterogenise and separate it. This contradictory process has been made possible firstly, because of the particular relationship between religion and the state in Britain, and secondly, be-



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affirmed legal status as the ideological cement of national culture. There is an assumed correspondence of national and religious identity which means that non-established churches and particularly non-Christians can be only partial members of the British national collectivity and are defined to a greater or lesser extent as outsiders.

Yet, while membership in the Established Churches has fallen by 14% in the last three years, membership of minority churches (like spiritualists and Jehovah's Witnesses) has risen by 26% and non-Christian religions, especially Muslims and Sikhs, have almost doubled their membership. Religious affiliation has come, therefore, in different ways, to signify collective identity also among Britain's ethnic minorities.

In part, this phenomenon relates to global developments and the rise of religious fundamentalist movements in the countries of origin of non-Christians living in Britain. However, it is also a result of the multiculturalist policies prevalent in British education and other parts of the 'race relations industry'. Paradoxically, these policies have attempted to legitimise heterogeneity in British national culture but have ended up creating the space in which separatist and fundamentalist movements have developed and sought to impose uniformity and homogeneity among all their adherents.

The policy of multiculturalism is one of many attempts to deal with the related problems of racism and the absorption by mainstream British society of minorities drawn from the old Empire who settled here after the war. It has been widely adopted as a more tolerant way forward than full integration into a 'British way of life'. It has been accepted as a tool of social policy and in education, where it was first articulated.

Fundamentalist leaderships have been the main beneficiaries of the adoption of multiculturalist norms. Sometimes portrayed as 'medievalists who have rejected British values'; in fact, their campaigns have been fought within the framework of multiculturalism - it has provided their chief ideological weapon. They have argued to extend the blasphemy law to Islam and for separate schools for Muslims in the name of equal rights.

Under the terms of the multiculturalist consensus, which sees racism not as a form of institutionalised inequality, but as a matter of cultural difference, where mutually exclusive ways of life must be preserved, their arguments are unanswerable.

Minority communities were defined by their culture, which increasingly has been constructed as a matter of religious identity. So children in 'multicultural' schools were taught about various religious holidays as one of the main ways of acquainting them with other cultures. Even more serious was the way the British 'race relations industry' (mostly community relations

cause of the relationship between fundamentalism and multicultural policies.

Full separation between religion and the state has never occurred in Britain. This is all too often ignored both in left analysis and that of sociologists of religion, in which the hidden, and frequently open, assumption is that in modern nation-states, nationalism has taken over from religion, which has either disappeared in the secularised society, or at least has withdrawn into the private arena.

According to the latest statistics (*Social Trends 1989*), fewer than 20% of the population are members of religious organisations (only 15% are members of the 'Trinitarian' churches, such as the Established and the Catholic Churches). However, 75% of the population has a religious affiliation, the majority through the Established Churches. In a survey carried out by the Independent Television Authority in 1970, eight of out 10 Britons saw Britain as a Christian country to be very important or important to them. This was the context in

which the Powellite notion of Englishness, expressed in his 'rivers of blood' speech, has to be seen.

The Christianity of Britain, however, is not simply a question of religious affiliation or even just a part of British nationalist ideology. It is anchored in law; which means much more than the status of the queen as symbolic head of the Churches of England and Scotland. Firstly, the church hierarchy participates in the House of Lords. Secondly, the blasphemy law protects the Church of England from offensive attacks which are legal against other religions. The blasphemy law might not be often invoked, but it has been (by Mary Whitehouse) and it can be, and therefore its importance is more than symbolic alone.

Thirdly, and probably most importantly in contemporary political debates, is the fact that under the 1988 Education Reform Act, all state schools are required to have a daily act of Christian worship. (Significantly, this amendment originated in the House of Lords.) Christianity, therefore, is given an

boards and local councils) have been financing mosques and temples (but usually not churches - even black churches) as a major part of their race relations work.

The racialisation of religion, especially Islam, has reached a new peak after the Rushdie affair. Communities which were previously known by national or regional origin - Pakistani, Mirpuri, Bengali, Punjabi - are now all seen as part of the Muslim community. This is a construction brought about both by external agencies like the press, and by self-definition.

Minority communities have therefore come to be seen not only as defined primarily by religion, but also as being internally unified, homogenous entities with no class or gender differences and conflicts. Women's demands for freedom and equality are clearly outside 'cultural traditions' (often themselves only half-understood) and therefore not regarded as legitimate. By contrast, the most conservative traditions are considered the most 'authentic'. Appeals to culture and tradition are used to attack women organising autonomously.

Women affect and are affected by ethnic and national processes in many significant respects.¹ Some of these are central to the project of fundamentalism, which attempts to impose its own unitary religious definition on the collectivity and its symbolic order. The 'proper' behaviour of women is used to signify the difference between those who belong to the collectivity and those who do not; women are also seen as 'cultural carriers' who transmit the 'cultural heritage' and way of life to future generations. Being properly controlled in terms of marriage and divorce properly ensures that children who are born to those women are not only biologically but also symbolically reproduced within the boundaries of the collectivity.

It is not incidental, therefore, that the control of women and the maintenance of the 'patriarchal family' are at the heart of all fundamentalist agendas. Paradoxically, some women have been attracted to fundamentalist movements as the place where they can find refuge from the sexism and racism of their host society and gain some empowerment which is legitimate within their communities. Such empowerment, however, is under the strict control of the male leaderships of fundamentalist movements and subjected to a narrow definition of 'a woman's place'. Women themselves have been recognising it and establishing organisations in different countries to challenge fundamentalism.

One such group - Women Against Fundamentalism - was set up in London in the spring of 1989. Although the direct impulse stemmed from public debate around the Rushdie affair, the organisation encompasses a broad range of women's groups and individuals from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The preoccupations of Women

Against Fundamentalism coalesce around the three central areas through which fundamentalisms operate in practical terms against women. They are: the question of separate religious schools; women's refuges; and the anti-abortion campaign.

The issue of separate religious schools - and particularly single-sex schools for girls - is one of the major demands of fundamentalist leaders. In Britain it has never been compulsory for schooling to be conducted through state education. Private schools have educated the elite, and voluntary-aided schools have been the semi-private system in which religious schools (mostly Church of England and Catholic) have been partially financed by the state.

Single-sex schooling for girls has often been considered by feminists to positively enhance girls' academic achievement. However, this feminist thinking assumes a structure and curriculum which is similar to that of a mixed school. This is not the case where religious education is concerned. The story of Catholic education in Britain provides both a warning and an example. By having low expectations of their pupils, many Catholic schools have helped to maintain the Irish in low-paid, ghettoised work. They have presented a strong sense of Catholicism while wiping out any sense of Irish identity by failing to teach Irish history or language. Yet many in the Irish community would oppose their disestablishment. They are cherished as a sign of success of the struggles of Irish Catholics in Britain.

Muslim fundamentalists have campaigned to establish such voluntary-aided schools for their communities. Until now, most of them have been rejected by government school inspectors because their standards have been too low. The vast majority of private Muslim schools, with the exception of a couple of religious seminaries, are for girls only. Their purpose is very clearly to bring up girls to be dutiful wives and mothers. They teach creation theories in science (like Christian fundamentalists) and offer poor facilities for the achievement of any qualifications.

Although most Asian parents would probably prefer single-sex education, they would not want to send their daughters to these schools; even fewer would risk their sons' futures. However, only a few parents would publicly oppose a religious demand. By making separate education for girls a central plank of their national campaign, Muslim fundamentalists have shown a keen awareness of the fears of their constituency. Their discourse ties the control of girls to the dangers of growing up in a secular society in the morally-degenerate West. A few years ago in Manchester there was a successful community campaign involving Asian feminists, to stop a state school from being converted into a Muslim school. In the more intimidatory and cohesive atmosphere following the

Rushdie affair, such a campaign would be much more difficult to organise.

Though Muslim fundamentalists are the most vocal, they are by no means the only group demanding separate schools. Jewish Hassidic, Seventh Day Adventists, Sikh and Hindu groups have all demanded separate religious schools. These demands are likely to be fuelled by the education crisis, which has caused severe teacher shortages in many schools. In the East End of London, for instance, where Britain's biggest Bangladeshi community is settled, thousands of Bangladeshi school children are without school places. Local voluntary-aided Catholic schools do have vacancies, but these are not available to those children.

Conflict over the control of women in fundamentalist communities has not been confined to the question of separate schools. It has recently spread also to women's refuges, which were initially established by the feminist movement to provide women with a separate space away from their husbands' violent attempts to control them. The debate about refuges shows how the contradictory influences of feminist and multiculturalist policies adopted by the local state (mainly in Labour-led councils) affect the rights of minority women.

In the early 80s black women who had set up autonomous women's groups took up the issue of domestic violence and began to argue for local council funding for refuges. They were bitterly opposed by conservative community leaders who argued that domestic violence did not exist, or that it was a problem that could be solved by traditional mechanisms within the community. Some white feminists also felt that separate refuges were in contradiction to the central idea of the women's movement: the notion of 'sisterhood'. Black women countered, from the perspective of the anti-racist movement, that there was a need for Asian (and sometimes Afro-Caribbean) women to have separate spaces to live with people who understood the pressures they felt, including dealing with racism. But the essential aim of all refuges was the same - to provide an alternative space for women who have suffered from domestic violence.

Anxious to implement equal-opportunity policies, some councils did fund these refuges, even though they provoked a community backlash. Today the problem of domestic violence is so widely recognised that a claim from community organisations to provide advice or other services dealing with this is a significant factor in receiving funding. This has created a sharp turn-about. Community leaders who had earlier opposed provision of refuges are now applying for funding themselves, but are then using their services for the purpose of reintegrating women back into the family. The notion of 'cultural difference' has turned the idea of a

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refuge on its head.

New refuges are being funded solely on the basis of religious allegiance. Fundamentalist leaderships are venturing into areas, like refuges, from which the 'old guard' shied away. Some councils have tried to impose religious leaders on the management committees of refuges as a form of 'community control'. Feminist women, by definition, were deemed 'outsiders'.

The third broad area of conflict is over the growing influence and power of the right-wing Christian fundamentalists and the support they receive from their American allies, especially over the issue of reproductive rights.

Recently, abortion clinics in Britain have been picketed by anti-abortionists, inspired and coached by Rescue, a North-American organisation and part of the evangelical 'moral Right'. This is just one instance of the growing influence of this movement on the British scene.

The abortion debate and the wider issue of women's reproductive rights, have always been at the heart of the feminist agenda, as well as the 'pro-Life' movement. In Britain there has also been a long tradition of women coming from Ireland - both South and North - to have an abortion. Abortion and contraception are illegal in Ireland, as a direct consequence of the political power of the Catholic Church within the state. The growing power of fundamen-

talism in other parts of Britain, both Christian and non-Christian, may prevail to the extent of altering the moral climate, thereby threatening those reproductive rights of women which are presently recognised through state legislation. It may also increase pressure women from within their communities.

Britain is still far from being a fundamentalist country. Its 'moral Right' is smaller and not as overtly political as in the USA; its black and non-Christian fundamentalists come from oppressed racialised minorities. And yet the continued close ties between state and Christianity on the one hand, and the collapse of anti-racism into multiculturalism and the equation of cultures and religions on the other hand, are fertile ground for the growth in influence of fundamentalist militants.

Non-Christian fundamentalism is proving confusing not only to the white Left, but also to parts of the radical black autonomous movement who have been critical of multiculturalism. Their theorists, like A Sivanandan from the Institute of Race Relations, have charged multiculturalist theories with ignoring racism as a social and historical force. They argued that it was not only culture which helped to form black communities, but their historic struggles against imperialism and the British state. It was issues such as police harassment, housing and immigration which were crucial

for communities to establish themselves around.

This heroic tradition celebrates black women who fought beside their men, but also ignores internal conflict and sees any mention of it as divisive. By stressing those elements which brought communities together, including (but not exclusively) religion, this perspective has found it difficult to analyse fundamentalism. Its rise has been blamed on the failure of radical anti-racist movements, ignoring the centrality of control of women in all fundamentalist agendas.

Women who have pointed this out have been accused in those political circles of causing a racist backlash. It seems that the notion of *Izzat* or the honour of 'the community', which women have traditionally to uphold, has been transferred to the anti-racist struggle as well. Women are expected to submerge their own interests to uphold the honour of the heroic anti-racist tradition.

But many do not and cannot accept this. The challenge ahead is to find effective ways to confront the contradictions and conflicts within minority communities as well as oppression and racism in the state and society at large. To find ways of resolving the tension between autonomy and tolerance, diversity and equality. To have the right to dissent and oppose both racism and fundamentalism. And sexism.

1. *Woman-Nation-State* ed, N Yuval-Davis and F Anthias, Macmillan 1989

'Fundamentalist leaderships have been the main beneficiaries of the adoption of multiculturalist norms'



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