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Women Against Fundamentalism: Stories of Dissent and Solidarity

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One of the groups of women whose history is expressed in the term 'Feminist Dissent' is surely Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF). The 2014 book published to mark their twenty-five year history is essential reading for anyone coming to the debates about anti-racist, anti-fundamentalist feminism.

How do you challenge reactionary ideas when expressed within minority communities without giving firepower to racists? How do you fight racism without constructing monolithic ideas of communities? How do you recognise the role of religious institutions in providing material support, in times of a shrinking state, and a sense of solace and belonging, while still allowing for criticism of their domination of struggles within communities? These are the questions that could be discussed in the space created by WAF. They aren't new, and they aren't insoluble, but at the moment they seem hardly up for debate.

As it says in the introduction to the collection of nineteen political narratives, `This book celebrates – while also acknowledging the huge challenges it faces – a particular kind of feminism, one that has been concerned with challenging both fundamentalism and racism' (7). Reading this book is both inspiring and depressing.

WAF came together in 1989 when the 'Rushdie affair' exposed the difficulties of sections of the political Left (and others) in dealing with both the attack on free expression and criticism, and racist responses to the mobilisation against the author. While many on the Left were paralysed with confusion, and fear of offending what they believed to be Muslim sentiment by opposing the mobilisation against Rushdie, a group of women associated with Southall Black Sisters met to discuss what they saw as the growing strength of religious fundamentalism. They linked the threat to Rushdie's right to expression to their own struggles against racism and the silencing they themselves had experienced in their `own' Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities.

It is inspiring that this group of women came together publicly to attempt to give clarity to a confusing situation and to the need particularly for women to have space for criticism and expression. The women came from different nationalities, ethnicities and religious backgrounds: Catholic and other Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh as well as atheist. The coming together from different backgrounds seemed to be a pleasure as well as a political strength for the women involved, especially

at a time when identity politics were dominating and dividing feminist groups elsewhere.

The discovery of what was common in the different backgrounds of the women makes a rich thread throughout the book. WAF wasn't anyone's only political home; the women continued their involvement in other socialist or anti-racist struggles. It was a forum where women involved in other activism came together to develop a definition and critique of fundamentalism and gain strength to take back into other contests.

The book is organised as a series of mini biographies, tracing personal and political development, what concerns led the women to WAF and what they took away from it. Feminists who challenge dominant narratives of gender, 'race', migration, nationalism, religion and politics have interesting lives, so the chapters are a pleasure to read. They show on a personal basis how wider battles and different experiences led to the same struggle. In Rashmi Varma's chapter, 'Telling Lives' she writes: `As reactionary fundamentalist movements across the world make daily inroads into our everyday lives, into our intimate spheres as well as the public spaces we traverse, the very act of telling lives can be a pointedly political one' (224).

In the first phase of WAF, issues tackled included the pressures on women from the Indian subcontinent to keep silent about domestic violence, the rise of the Hindu Right, the influence of clerical and nationalist struggles on Irish women in London and the meaning of Jewish cultural identity in religious and secular Zionist contexts. The contributions from Irish and Jewish women especially highlight the effect on women, both inside the nation and in the diaspora, of nationalism intersecting with religion.

The complex ways that South Asian communal politics play out in Britain and then in turn influence politics in the Indian subcontinent itself is an important theme of the book. The chapters that deal with Southall are incisive and interesting which makes sense since Southall Black Sisters shares much history with WAF. Many won't be aware that in Britain, 'the resurgence of religion as a political identity began in earnest in the 1970s, among Sikhs mustering support for a separate Sikh state (Khalistan) in India' (10). People who know something of the anti-racist movement in Southall may not have considered it from the perspective of anti-fundamentalist feminists.

Georgie Wemyss' chapter with the appealing title 'Activist Listening' describes how, on the other side of London, the politics of Bangladesh's 1971 war played out in an FE College. There, the college management's cultivation of the authority of the conservative Islamic Society to control a potentially unruly student body echoed colonial strategy of the British Empire.

Several of the chapters address complex political histories that should be better known. Clara Connolly's chapter reminds us of the huge importance and influence of Irish struggles on radical movements in

Britain, something younger activists may not appreciate, even as they protest the existence of different laws governing abortion still in place in 2016. Chapter ten, by Nadja Al-Ali, explores the tensions that arose when British and Iraqi women came together in sustained anti-war activism. Nira Yuval-Davis connects WAF politics with what is now known as intersectionality, and expresses the warmth of the connections made during WAF activism as well as the limitations of the approaches developed.

The women in WAF made a distinction between religious belief and authoritarian political movements that use religion. Looking at their own life experiences, WAF came to define fundamentalism as modern conservative `political movements that use religion to gain or consolidate power, whether working within or in opposition to the state' (p.8). This definition emphasises the similarity of different fundamentalisms, noting that they all share a central concern with women and the regulation of women's bodies.

The nuanced politics of the women in WAF, interested in critiquing the state as well as the 'sealed borders' of ethnic minority communities, expresses a struggle found throughout the world but often ignored. Within the academic world as well as in migrant and educational struggles, for example, religious identity is often privileged at the expense of other possible expressions of identity. Moreover the concept of 'secularism', often ill-defined, has been critiqued as 'western' by some academics and activists.

To WAF in the nineties, the counter to this type of thinking was twofold: first, to insist on the right to dissent from religious authority in their own communities, drawing on non-western and western traditions of secularism and free thought and the wider political struggles of the time. And second, to make visible the workings of Christian privilege, often invisible in the assumption that white British people aren't particularly religious. As a group of women affected by racism and involved in the anti-racist movement, they wanted to highlight the ways in which Christianity is part of the assimilationist project of British nationalism. Additionally, they sought more complete separation of church and state, campaigning against the blasphemy law that was only abolished in 1996, and crucially, calling for the removal of Christian privilege in schooling. They foresaw that the entrenched privilege of Church of England and the Catholic Church in relation to state schooling would cause other religious groups to demand similar accommodation.

There is a lot of honesty in the book; arguments and divisions, some serious, are discussed and examined; there is no attempt to smooth over serious differences in the name of sisterhood. Some of these differences concerned the extent to which it was possible to work as feminists within religious movements. Several contributors discuss, very interestingly, the politics of alliances, including with groups organising along religious lines. A failure to appreciate the organising possibilities

opened up for women in religious communities led some women to criticise WAF.

Other differences emerged later, especially after 9/11. Many feminists felt that it was not the right time to oppose the Muslim Right given the war drive and increased racism in the UK, or that positions from which critiques were made were problematic. This debate, which did more than anything else to spell the end of WAF as a group, is considered from different viewpoints by several contributors. They don't shy away from airing their strong disagreements with Gita Sahgal's position on Amnesty International's work with ex-Guantanamo prisoner Moazzem Begg which led to her leaving Amnesty International. That particular controversy still plays out, and WAF women continue to speak up, not always on the same side. But the bitterness of the arguments is not new, as the book makes clear.

The book itself is wonderfully accessible. The excellent introduction by Yuval-Davis and Dhaliwal traces the history of WAF against a changing British state and introduces the method of the narrative history. There's a useful index, and notes at the end of each chapter providing references for further investigation via books from the early years of both WAF and Southall Black Sisters, academic articles, videos, leaflets and links to the WAF archive which contains the excellent Women against Fundamentalism journal.

"The personal is political" has maybe become a cliché, but this book shows the importance of finding and making a space where women (and men) can talk about, and act on their real experiences, and escape the domination of abstractions used to control us. The finding of this common ground is not automatic. To expect this is to set up our own abstractions, separated from real and contradictory experience.

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