

## The Veil: A Flag of the Muslim Far Right

**M**arieme Helie Lucas is an Algerian sociologist and founder of the organizations: “Women Living Under Muslim Laws” and “Secularism is a Women’s Issue”. In this interview, conducted by Iranian exiled feminist leader, **Maryam Namazie**, she presents a provocative view of the controversy over the face-veil ban in France – an issue which has paradoxically seen Western progressives making common cause with Muslim conservatives, and Western conservatives purporting to act in the name of feminism. This interview is presented in the spirit of airing iconoclastic perspectives and broadening the scope of debate on an issue where conflicting definitions of civil liberties have created much confusion.

**Maryam Namazie:** Limitations on the veil in schools and an all-out ban on the *burqa* or *niqabare* often seen to be authoritarian. Your views?

**Marieme Helie Lucas:** First of all, it is useful not to conflate the two issues: that of veiling girls in schools and banning the face covering. I will thus answer them as two separate questions.

When talking of veils in schools, one automatically refers to the veiling of under-aged girls, i.e., not the veiling of women. The question thus becomes: who is to decide on girls’ veiling – themselves or the adults who are in charge of them? And which adults?

I know of only one book that looks at this issue; it is a pamphlet entitled *Bas les Voiles* (by Chahdortt, Djavann, Gallimard, 2003) that was published by an Iranian woman exiled in Paris at the time when the Stasi Commission in France was collecting the views of concerned women (and men) before the adoption of the new law on religious symbols in secular state schools. The author states that the psychological damage done to girls by veiling them is immense as it makes them responsible for men’s arousal from a very early age. This point requires special consideration given the new trend to veil girls as young as five as shown in the numerous campaigns throughout North Africa.

The author goes on to explain that the girl’s body is thus turned into the site of

**Marieme Helie Lucas  
& Maryam Namazie**

‘fitnah; (seduction or source of disorder), meaning that she cannot look at it or think of it in positive terms. This attitude builds girls that fear, distrust, and feel disgust and anguish at their own bodies. At such an early age, little girls have no way of countering this shaping of their self; they are entirely under the thumb of anti-women men. The women growing up from these psychologically damaged girls are likely to need a lot of help to be able to reconsider themselves and their bodies in more positive terms, to reconstruct their self-image, to conquer their bodily autonomy, to abandon guilt and fear – and to give back to men the responsibility of their sexual acts. I think it would be very useful for more women researchers to delve into the psychological damage done to girls who are veiled from an early age.

Also, who is the ‘adult’ in charge of protecting the girl-child’s rights? The state already plays this role on numerous occasions, such as in preventing families from perform FGM (female genital mutilation) on girls, or in preventing forced marriages, for instance. Why should it not also take responsibility in preventing the deep psychological damage induced by wearing a veil before adulthood?

**Maryam Namazie:** Why should the state be seen as authoritarian when it prevents the veiling of girls but not when it protects them from FGM?

**Marieme Helie Lucas:** It is interesting to remember that groups of lefties and feminists (alas!) in Europe and North America defended ‘the right to FGM’ in the seventies as a ‘cultural right’ and denounced ‘western imperialism’s’ attempts at eradicating the practice in Europe. At no point was any reference made to the struggles of women on the ground to eradicate it in the limited parts of Africa where FGM was practiced both by animists, Christians and Muslims. We see the same pattern replicated regarding ‘the right to veil’, which is now seen as a

‘religious right’ despite the fact that numerous progressive interpreters of the Qu’ran have stated that it is not an Islamic injunction. What strikes me is the imbalance in treatment of ‘authoritarianism’ by those on the left and in the human rights community in Europe and North America. Millions of women in predominantly Muslim set-ups have been assassinated for standing for their right not to be veiled (so far, veiled women are not assassinated for wearing a veil in Europe, nor in North America, even if it is true that they may be verbally attacked by far-right racist individuals, who, may I emphasize, are then taken to court and generally convicted – as should be the case).

I wish the magnitude of the vociferous defense of veiled women’s ‘choice’ and ‘right to veil’ by ‘progressive people’ would be matched with their defense of women slaughtered for not veiling. But what we see, instead, hidden behind the left and human rights community’s unilateral defense of the human rights of veiled women, is in fact a clearly political position. ‘Progressives’ have chosen to defend fundamentalists who they depict exclusively as victims of US imperialism, rather than the victims of fundamentalists, i.e., amongst others, the millions of unveiled women who have resisted their diktats as well as the millions of secularists, agnostics, atheists, and so on who have been abandoned as ‘westernized’ or even ‘allies of imperialism’! History will judge this short-sighted political choice just as it did the cowardice of European countries at the onset of Nazism’s rise in Germany.

With regard your question, I can only speak from my perspective as an Algerian living in France at the time of the debate on the two French laws that are incriminated the world over as being ‘anti-Islam’: the law on veiling in schools and the ban on face covering. These are two different issues and in France they have been treated separately.

The ban on religious symbols in state secular schools is done in the name of secularism, whilst the ban on the face covering is done in the name of security. The *burqa* has been added to other forms

of face covering such as masks (outside a carnival setting) or full motorbike helmets (when not riding) as all of these are routinely used to protect the identity of rioters or ‘terrorists’. (As an Algerian old enough to have lived through the Battle of Algiers during the liberation struggle from French colonialism, I know for certain that veils were used to carry arms and bombs from place to place – hence I cannot be surprised that full face coverings are added to the list of forbidden outfits.)

Let me deal with veiling in schools.

The situations of France and Britain are very different.

France is a secular country that, since the French revolution, separated the new secular state from the political influence of the Church. The secular laws that established this separation date from 1905 and 1906, way before any immigration from predominantly Muslim-majority countries. Article 1 of the 1906 law guarantees freedom of belief and practice. Article 2 of the same law states that beyond this guarantee of fundamental individual rights the secular state will have nothing to do with religion and its representatives. The state will not recognize churches, nor fund them, and so on. In the words of a modern analyst of secularism, Henri Pena Ruiz, the state declares itself ‘incompetent in religious matters’. Beliefs become a private matter, and established religions (at that time mostly the Catholic Church) lose all political power over the state. The secular state will simply ignore them as political entities. Citizens are the only partner the state recognizes, through democratic election processes.

It is a consequence of the definition of secularism as a separation of state and religion that, since 1906, displaying ‘any symbol’ of religious or political affiliation is forbidden in exclusively two specific situations: for both personnel and pupils in primary and secondary secular state schools (i.e. for under-aged children, and not including universities where students are of adult age), and for civil servants in contact with the public.

The rationale for this is that children come to the schools of the Secular Republic (where education is free) to be educated as equal French citizens, not as representatives of any specific community. Education as equal citizens is a powerful tool against communalism and

the divisive specificities that lead to unequal legal rights within a given country, as is already the case in Britain, with the so-called ‘sharia courts’ becoming parallel legal systems in family matters.

Similarly, civil servants when in contact with the public have to perform their duties as representatives of all citizens of every ethnic or religious background, and that is why they are requested not to display their affiliation within the time frame when they represent the Secular Republic.

This is a far cry from, for instance, British police stations, where one can request to be heard by a policeman of his or her own cult or ethnic group as if a civil servant cannot be educated not to be biased, and is necessarily first and foremost faithful to his or her ‘community’ rather than to fellow citizens.

**Maryam Namazie:** It is thus in the name of secularism that veiling has been outlawed in secular state schools and for civil servants in France, just as crosses or *kippas* have. Interestingly, the emphasis is on the veil, not on crosses or *kippas*. Why? And who is behind this hierarchy?

**Marieme Helie Lucas:** What blurred the issue was that the rightwing president Sarkozy passed the new law in 2004 whilst trying to rally the xenophobic far-right in favour of his candidacy. There was no need for such a new law; the 1906 law merely had to be applied.

The right and far-right forces in France have never stopped attacking the 1905-6 secular laws for the past 100 years. They have now found active and powerful partners in Muslim fundamentalist far-right forces which also want to dismantle secularism and to return to the stage when religions had political power and official representation. It is clear that while different religions will compete at a later stage – if they are to succeed in their attempt to eradicate secularism in France – they are useful allies to each other. Just watch how representatives of the Catholic Church and Jewish high authorities support practically every demand by Muslim fundamentalists! The issue of the veil in primary and secondary schools in France is but one of the many demands they constantly devise to fundamentally challenge the laws of the Secular Republic.

Isn’t it ironic that laws passed a century ago, at a time when there was virtually no immigration from Muslim-majority countries, now pass off, the world over, as laws against Islam? This alludes to the expertise of Muslim fundamentalists in media communications.

Coming back to the issue of the veil and the *burqa* in the UK, let me state that Britain is not a secular state. The Queen is the head of the Anglican Church, thus it cannot root its ban of the *burqa* or *niqabor* even head scarf on secular laws dating back to more than a hundred years nor show its commitment to free and quality non-confessional education for all children as is the case in France.

Britain has devised an alternative definition of secularism, not as separation, but as equal tolerance by the state vis-à-vis all religions. Thus the state in Britain interacts with religions, and considers ‘churches’ (or the like in other religions) as political partners and representatives of communities. It is this which leads to communalism and cultural relativism. Isn’t it high time for Britain to return to the original definition of secularism and to a form of democracy in which citizenship is at its centre?

What we see happening is the fragmentation of people, of fellow citizens, into smaller and smaller competing entities that each demand different rules are applicable to them and their ‘community’ in the name of cultural and religious identities. Laws that were voted by all citizens are challenged for the benefit of supposedly divinely ordained laws – a direct attack on the very principle of democracy. We see the eradication of the notion of citizenship, and this will have drastic political consequences in the near future. All in the name of rights!

**Maryam Namazie:** What happens to a woman’s right to choose her clothing? Some would say forcing women to unveil is on par with forcibly veiling them.

**Marieme Helie Lucas:** I would like to first point out the fact that the debate is formulated in ‘western’ terms. To my knowledge, women in Muslim contexts are not prevented from veiling and that’s the vast majority of supposedly Muslims in the world. In most instances, they are forced to cover, to various degrees, often by law, and we have yet to hear a worldwide outcry about their situation.

In sharp contrast, we hear so much about the poor women 'forced to unveil' in non-Muslim contexts – mostly in Europe and North America – but I have yet to find where this happens; nowhere to my knowledge. The limitations on veiling, in specific circumstances in France, have been addressed in my response to the previous question (under-aged girls are requested not to veil only within the premises of secular state primary and secondary schools and *burqa*-clad women are requested to uncover their face for purpose of identification; the rest of their body, hair, and head can be covered as they like). Also, as per my knowledge, when veiled women are verbally or physically attacked, there are tribunals to defend them against any form of aggression. In actual fact, the debate is reduced to the right to veil in Europe and North America with no regard for the resistance to veiling everywhere in the world and the dire circumstances for resisters. This reduction is utterly unacceptable to me.

On the one hand, there are millions of women worldwide forced to veil who risk their liberty and lives when they transgress veiling orders. They are abandoned to 'cultural' and 'religious' rights with no analysis of the far-right political forces manipulating and hijacking culture and religion for political gain under the politically correct pretext that US imperialism misused the defense of women's human rights to conceal its economic reasons for invading Afghanistan and that 'whites' are racists. On the other hand, there are women of the diaspora in Europe and North America whose 'right to veil' is defended by a politically correct coalition of the left and human rights defenders who show little interest in the numerous cases of young women trying to escape forced veiling.

**Maryam Namazie:** Isn't there some disturbing imbalance in such an utterly discriminatory political choice between those whose rights deserve to be defended and those who don't qualify? Could these champions of our rights publicly clarify their reasons for such a hierarchy of rights?

**Marieme Helie Lucas:** Clearly the question here exclusively refers to the 'right to choose' of women who want to veil in Europe and North America and that this is a very limited and partial way of addressing the problem; it means

'disappearing; the vast majority of concerned women.

About 'choice' in general, much has already been written by feminists about how much freedom one can expect in situations where women have no say either legally, culturally, religiously or otherwise. Recently, a powerful academic article by Anissa Helie and Mary Ashe, 'Multiculturalist Liberalism and Harms to Women: Looking Through the Issue of the Veil' (published in UC Davis' *Journal of International Law and Policy*, Vol. 19.1, 2012), concluded that 'proponents of veiling often insist on an individual 'women's right to choose (the veil)... Crafted by the theoreticians of radical Islam (who usurp the mantra of supporters of abortion rights for women), such slogans can confound Western liberals who, afraid of being labelled racist, fall into the trap of cultural relativism.'

I would, however, go back even further to the old debate sparked by Marx on workers' 'freedom to work' at the time of Britain's industrialization, i.e. a time when in order to not actually starve and die, workers' only 'free choice' was to work 14 hours a day in hellish circumstances that also killed many of them, including women and children under the age of 10.

**Maryam Namazie:** Women in many countries where Muslim fundamentalists rule and terrify populations have the same 'choice' that workers had in a Britain that was industrialising: to die of starvation or survive a little bit longer as slaves / to die because they resist fundamentalists or survive as slaves. Great 'choice' indeed! Is that the only alternative women are offered by cultural relativists?

**Marieme Helie Lucas:** The number of women assassinated by family members, as well as by fundamentalist armed groups, or imprisoned by fundamentalist states in our various countries on all continents for the simple reason that they do not conform with veiling diktats should at the very least count as more important in the eyes of human rights defenders than the 'plea of veiled women' who may occasionally have to cope with racists' comments in 'the West'.

How can one dare compare, for instance, the 200,000 victims of the 'dark decade' (the 1990s) in Algeria, a vast majority of whom were women assassinated by fundamentalist armed groups, mostly ignored and abandoned to their fate by

international human rights organizations, with a handful of veiled women yelled at in Paris or London? Yes, how dare one compare? This accepted inequality of treatment only shows that for human rights organizations and left parties, the West is still the centre of the world, and what happens there – however small and marginal – takes precedence over the many crimes committed elsewhere.

I would like to point out an interesting blind spot in the analysis of the left and human rights crowd, which if it were taken into account would prevent the reducing of the issue to 'individual choice'.

The number of veiled women in the streets of European capitals has been steadily growing over the past two decades only. Their number is not proportional to a significant increase of migrant populations. These women do not wear their national costumes (including head covering or not) but the Saudi veil instead, which never existed in other countries. There is a growing number of women adopting the most drastic form of not just hair covering but of face covering.

**Maryam Namazie:** In light of this, how can this form of veiling be seen as a cultural issue when it in fact eradicates all traditional forms of hair covering and of national and regional dress?

**Marieme Helie Lucas:** How can this form of veiling be seen as a religious issue when progressive theologians and scholars of Islam on all continents keep demonstrating that veiling women is not a religious prescription, that it is a cultural one, circumscribed to the Middle East, both for men and women, adapted to its climate, and common to all religious groups as should be largely demonstrated by Christian iconography that depicts the Virgin Mary and all the holy women that shared the life of Christ in his times as well as Jewish women as veiled? Why not rise in defense of all these endangered cultures? How can they not make the link between the propagation of the Saudi veil and Saudi funding of most of the mosques and religious organizations that have been popping up in European capital cities? How can they not see this form of veiling as fundamentalism's political flag? How can they not link its propagation with the other political activities of Saudi (and Qatari) imperialism? How can they not make a political analysis of this sudden explosion of veiled women in the diaspora? How can

they reduce it to 'individual choice' of individual women in the wake of such a massive and sudden new phenomenon?

If, let's say, there was a sudden spread of nuns' outfits, concomitantly in Italy, France and Spain, and if Catholic women in visible numbers would aggressively assert their right to be clad as 'true Catholics' (a modern invention that would be contested by respected Christian theologians – just as this new rage for veiling is contested by numerous progressive Muslim theologians and scholars of Islam that neither the left nor human rights organizations ever quote in defense of unveiled women against the inaccurate claims made by fundamentalists)? Wouldn't the left point at the right and far-right political movements hidden behind this supposedly religious revival? Wouldn't the left analyze it in political terms, rather than in religious ones, and denounce it? If there were rumours, or examples of 'improperly' clad Catholic women being coerced into this outfit, or beaten up, or forcibly secluded, or killed, wouldn't human rights organizations start looking into it? Wouldn't they defend the victims? Wouldn't they denounce these as human rights violations? Or would all these supposedly progressive forces continue to turn a blind eye to human rights abuses and to the cries for mercy of victims? Would they focus on the 'right to veil' of Catholic women?

It is clear to me that by reiterating the claims of fundamentalists over women, without even checking out the most blatant of their lies, the left and human rights crowd only betray their fear of being labeled 'Islamophobic'. They unwittingly (I hope) reinforce fundamentalist views which claim they are the only legitimate representatives of Islam, and that their opponents are anti-Islam.

This is what is behind the question of 'choice': it places the debate away from any political analysis that would point at the right and far-right nature of fundamentalists' manipulation of the veil. The right and far-right views of the supremacy of the individual are rooted in economic liberalism.

**Maryam Namazie:** Whilst we might consider secularism a precondition for women's rights, Islamists consider Sharia law a precondition for women's rights in the way they see them. Who is to say who is right? They would argue

secularism is a western concept and a form of cultural colonialism.

**Marieme Helie Lucas:** I object to using the term 'sharia law'. It presupposes that there is somewhere written a body of laws that are used by all Muslims. A simple overview of laws in Muslim-majority countries shows that there is no such thing. The vast diversity of laws in predominantly Muslim contexts show that laws have different sources: from giving legitimacy to local cultural practices (FGM passing off as Islamic in some regions of Africa), to different religious interpretations (for example, Algeria legalized polygamy whilst Tunisia banned it using exactly the same verse of the Qu'ran but with a different reading of it!), to using laws of former colonizers (such as the ban on contraception and abortion in Algeria, using the 1920 French law), and so on. It would therefore be a huge mistake to think that all the laws in Muslim-majority countries have their source in religion.

'Sharia' is a term coined by fundamentalists in order to make believe that such a body of laws exists; using the term just allows more people to believe in its existence. Exactly just as media started using other terms coined by fundamentalists, such as *jihad* (which means a spiritual fight within oneself to come closer to God, rather than a 'war' with weapons, as they interpret it); or 'the Islamic veil' when they propagate Saudi veiling; or 'Islamophobia' when one challenges their views on Islam... Do not use the language of the enemy! It gives credibility to their lies...

As I have already pointed out, there are lots of places in the world where veiling is compulsory and no forced unveiling anywhere. Not even in primary and secondary schools in France, because ultra-orthodox families have a choice to enroll their daughters in religious schools... The only obligation of families is to send their daughters to school, but the choice of that school is not within the mandate of the secular state.

And nowhere are women forced not to wear a veil in public; they are only asked in France to not cover their face. Hence secularism neither veils nor unveils women. Undoubtedly, however, fundamentalists' interpretation of supposedly divine orders aims at veiling women. Secularism is not an opinion nor is it a belief; it is exclusively a definition and a

regulation of the position of the state vis-à-vis religion. Either the state interferes with religion or it does not. Secularism is the formal set-up in which the state does not interfere with religion. We should not accept any other definition of secularism.

As for the accusation of secularism being a western concept, haven't we heard that of feminism for decades? But if we are to look into history, especially the history of women in Muslim contexts, we find out that many women, for centuries, fought for what is now considered feminist ideas and women's rights, that they dedicated themselves to literature, poetry, women's education, politics, legal rights for women, just as is the case now, and that they were supported by enlightened men and women, both believers and atheists, just as is the case now. Anyone interested in exploring some of these stories from the past should read *Great Ancestors* by FareedaShaheed and Aisha Shaheed (published by Women Living Under Muslim Laws).

Similarly, there have been many supporters of secularism in Muslim contexts over the past centuries, just as there are many today. That includes atheists, agnostics and believers who thought and still think religions benefit from the fact that political power does not interfere with personal beliefs or spirituality. Today, the former Great Mufti of Marseilles is a strong supporter of secularism in France, as are many progressive imams who go public every Sunday in a religious TV show on French Channel 2 about their support for French secularism which guarantees freedom of belief and freedom of practice.

So the real question for me is: why don't we hear more about such Muslim supporters of secularism and why won't the media give less public space to the expression of fundamentalist hatred for secularism? It is yet another fundamentalist distortion to present facts in the light of secular law being against divine law...

Recent surveys show that about 25 per cent of the population in France declares itself atheist, and the percentage is the same among supposedly Christian and supposedly Muslim individuals. But the percentage of all those who declare themselves in favour of secularism rises to 75 per cent, and is identical for presumed Muslims and presumed Christians.

There are strong movements for secularism in all so-called Muslim countries, whether in Pakistan, Algeria or Mali. Citizens go public in support of secularism, risking their lives in places where fundamentalists run armed groups that attack their opponents.

Why are photos of their public events and street demonstrations never seen outside their national media?

**Maryam Namazie:** Some will say this raises the question of how far we are willing to allow the state to intervene in private matters such as the way we dress. Your comments?

**Marieme Helie Lucas:** If we do agree that this sudden rise of specific veils worldwide passing off as the Islamic veil is neither cultural nor religious but a political flag that fundamentalists use in order to increase their political visibility at the expense of women, then we must also admit that wearing this form of veil – now – in Europe and North America has a political purpose; the women who wear it, whether they are aware of it or not, are wearing the flag of a far-right political party. Hence I could hardly agree with the formulation: ‘a woman choosing how to dress’. This veil is definitely not to be equated to wearing high heels versus flat shoes, or miniskirts versus trousers. It is not a fashion; it is a political marker. If one decides one is going to wear a swastika as a brooch, one cannot ignore its political meaning; one cannot pretend one does not care for the fact that it was the ‘flag’ of Nazi Germany. One cannot pretend one just likes its shape. It is a political statement.

Women from all over Asia and Africa who wear a face covering or *burqa* today, whether they do so in Europe and North America or whether they wear it in their own countries, are wearing a form of veiling that they have never seen before, except if they grew up in a very specific and limited part of the Middle East. They cannot pretend they are going back to their roots and wearing the dress that their foremothers wore centuries ago, nor can they pretend that they wear it for religious reasons. Muslims were Muslims for centuries without wearing such an outfit: in South Asia, they were wearing saris, or in the Sahel they were wearing *boubous*... Today, *burqa*-clad women wear an outfit that was unseen and unheard of until a couple of decades ago when fun-

damentalist political groups ‘invented’ the *burqa* as their political flag.

Hence if the state were to regulate *burqas* or the *niqab*, it would not regulate ‘the way we dress’, nor would it deal with a personal taste in fashion, but with publicly wearing the political sign of an extreme right movement.

It may be the role of the state to do so. This can be debated. But what is not debatable is that women wearing the *burqa* today are in the grip of a transnational far-right movement. Whether *burqa*-clad women are aware of the present-day political significance of their veil or whether they are alienated into the fundamentalists’ politico-religious discourse is irrelevant.

**Maryam Namazie:** In practice, how can restrictions be put in place (also looking at the French example) without further inflaming racism and bigotry against Muslims and immigrants and what is the connection between the two? I ask this given that some will argue that criticism of the veil and *niqabis* is racist.

**Marieme Helie Lucas:** In that case, is resistance to *niqab/burqa*/head scarf and any other form of veiling to be labelled “racist” in our countries too? Were the women who chose to die rather than to veil in Algeria in the nineties all racist against their own people and against their own faith as many of them were believers in Islam?

Can’t we stop thinking ‘the West’ is the centre of the world? What about the Sudanese woman who at this very moment in Khartoum risks flogging and imprisonment for refusing to veil? What about the numerous Iranian women who have been jailed for decades for wearing ‘un-Islamic’ dress?

Racism, xenophobia, marginalization of and attacks on migrants (or people of migrant descent) have always been there. At the beginning of the twentieth century in southern France, there were pogroms against Italian migrants who ‘came to steal the bread of French workers’ – sounds familiar today, doesn’t it? There were numerous dead and wounded. But if we look at French citizens whose family names betray an Italian origin today, they are fully integrated and no one even thinks of contesting their belonging to the French nation. It is the same for Spaniards, Portuguese, Greeks or Poles and Russians who all came to live in

France in recent history, became French citizens and have now “melted” into the general population.

There are a growing number of well-known people in France with Arabic names (and often erroneously presumed Muslim); they are professors, lawyers, medical doctors, scientists, journalists, film makers, actors, bankers, computer experts, entrepreneurs... This signifies their incorporation into the nation just like the Italians, Spaniards... less than a century ago.

A beautiful play entitled *Barbes-Cafe* was shown last year in different cities of France. It was entirely the work of people of Algerian descent, most of whom fled fundamentalists’ death threats and attacks on them in the nineties. This play is a hymn to emigration using popular songs in Arabic from the beginning to the end of the 20th century and traces the history of emigration from North Africa, the pain and longing of migrants and the terrible conditions of work, but it also celebrates the law that allowed families to join workers, the free and secular education for their children, the solidarity between indigenous and migrant workers in unions and left parties and so on. It ends with images of those of migrant North African descent who ‘made it’ and opened the gate for generations to come. It is a manifesto of hope, albeit not trying to conceal the hardship many workers faced – for their children and grandchildren to become a part of France.

October 27 was the anniversary of the March For Equality and Against Racism that four young men and women, French citizens of North African origin, initiated in October 1983. They started from Marseilles and walked for two months throughout France, visiting towns and villages, speaking to their urban and rural fellow citizens, denouncing racist crimes and discrimination, and advocating the equality of all citizens. They also denounced the label ‘Muslim’ that was imposed on them for reasons of geographical origin. Along the way, other citizens of all origins joined them and started marching with them. When they arrived in Paris, 100,000 people had gathered to welcome them and support their goals.

It is not predetermined that oppressed people or victims of discrimination turn to far-right movements. In such circumstances, people have a choice to become revolutionaries or fascists. The



fundamentalist response to racism is a fascist response. We should not under any pretext grant them any legitimacy. We should support people's movements for equality and full citizenship.

Fundamentalists have a keen interest in making sure they get the benefit of racist incidents; just like the traditional (xenophobic) far-right political movements, they need to radicalize their troops and recruit more people to their cause. Both these apparently antagonistic far-right forces share the same goal: they welcome bloodshed. Hence they are prepared to provoke racist incidents. In the past few years, fundamentalist inhabitants of a Paris neighbourhood started praying in the streets and blocking traffic for hours on Fridays. The pretext was that their local mosque was not big enough. But for sure the Great Mosque of Paris, only a few

tube stations away from them was/is permanently quasi-empty. Police watched on without doing anything and this has now been going on for more than seven years. The only response, of course, came from a far-right group which launched public invitations to share a 'wine and pork' aperitif on the very same streets on Sundays.

The cowardly left should have taken this into its own hands, demanding that people vacate the public space if they have not received police authorization to occupy it as is legal. The cowardly left is prepared to ignore provocations by Muslim fundamentalists because they do not want to be seen as 'Islamophobic'. In a way, one feels they do not make a difference between believers in Islam and the far-right supposedly religious movement that feigns to represent all Muslims.

It was in the hope of avoiding a confrontation with Franco that European governments, including the then socialist government of France, refused to help and to protect the legitimate government of the Republic of Spain. It was with the hope of avoiding a confrontation with the well-behaved Hitler that European governments went to Munich and allowed the invasion of Poland (actually Czechoslovakia – WW4R) by Nazi troops. History shows that cowardice in politics leads nowhere and that everyone has to pay the price for not standing for principles and rights in due time.

Victims of racism need to be defended, including legally; social and political problems need to be addressed by social and political means, not with religious ones.

\* (This interview was originally published at <http://ww4report.com/node/12854>).