

**Talk for the Leicester Secular Society
6 November 2011**

**Secularism, Feminism and other Scary Things.
Godless or man-hating - they love to make monsters of us all. Let's see
what the connections are.**

Cynthia Cockburn

It's a real pleasure to have this chance to meet and talk with a group of thoughtful, active, focused secularists. Because... although I'm surrounded in my own feminist activism by people who are secularist, or atheist or humanist, this isn't the main focus of our work together, and we don't often address the matter directly among ourselves.

In the few words I just spoke I realize full well that I've already opened up a whole library of definitions, inclusions and exclusions. So I need to start with a word about words. In this talk, am I talking about, do I think I'm talking to, secularists in the strict sense of those whose aim is simply the separation of church and state? Or am I talking about, and to, atheists? Or agnostics? Or humanists, with (as the I.H.E.U. puts it - quote) 'a commitment to the perspective, interests and centrality of human persons'? I'm going to use the word secularism, as I already have in the title of this talk, in a more inclusive way than is strictly proper. But I guess you're used to that.

With that apology - what I decided I'd like to do is use this occasion to explore the relationship between on the one hand "*secularism-going-on-atheism*" and on the other *feminism* (another complex and difficult to define movement). Can we, how much can we, assume a tacit or even explicit alliance between us? Where do we diverge, and what might need negotiating if we're to support each others' movements?

Looking for allies

The popular media just love to demonize atheists and feminists. They promote the idea that there can't be morality without religion. And the idea

that women have already taken equality too far. Feminists are used to a bad press, and I'm sure Secular Societies are too. The question is – does that make us natural allies?

I should say perhaps that this business of how we can cohere and support each other in heterogeneous and complex movements is very much on my mind these days, because I'm very committed to one such mish-mash: the antimilitarist, antiwar and peace movement. Actually, the way I came to meet Michael Gerard and Alan Hayes, and learn a bit about the Leicester Secular Society, was through a case study I was making in Leicester a couple of years ago for a book that's coming out early next year with the title "Antimilitarism". It brings together half a dozen cases I've made of antiwar activism in different countries. What I did here in Leicester was focus on that moment in late 2008 when Israel attacked Gaza. I heard that a couple of hundred Leicester people had gathered around the Clock Tower in protest. I looked into who'd been there, what groups were represented (there were CND and Stop the War, there were Christian, Muslim and Hindu elements, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign) – and the Secular Society was there among them. How did such a diverse alliance form, even for that short moment? What were the political and gender dynamics in it? That's what interested me.

So, yes, alliances in social movements. We're so many small groups, so fiercely motivated, often fired into action by contrary things, yet standing or marching on the street together – how do we find commonality and build a coherent world-changing movement? That preoccupies me a lot. And it's with that kind of mindset that I'm approaching the relationship of feminism and secularism now.

The first thing that has to be said is that, just as there's a difference between secularism, atheism and humanism, so there's also more than one kind of feminism. Although in this case there is an envelope word, 'feminism', inside it you find a similar diversity to that in your cluster of movements. My particular feminism has a triple concern. It's concerned with (1) gender relations – yes – but also with equally vexatious power relations that intersect

with gender and shape the way we live and experience being a woman, being a man – those of (2) race and (3) class. And in this talk I'm going to bring in all three, what I'd call a holistic feminism.

Sex and gender

The logical place to start is with *sex and gender* itself – and look to see where there may be an overlap between feminist and secular or atheist thinking. As I see it, there is quite a strong convergence in *a critique of religion*, particularly monotheisms, and of religious institutions. But how solid is this shared scepticism? There could be some cracks. Let's look.

Feminism is founded on a rather particular understanding of the difference between men and women. The popular understanding of masculine traits and behaviours is that they're given in human biology. That men are born, for instance, to compete and fight ('boys will be boys'), women to nurture and seduce. Social scientists, influenced by feminist thinking, have for some decades now been urging a contrary view of gender difference – they say 'look how differently we treat boys and girls, from birth, and even before. We have different expectations for them. We offer them different stimuli. We reward different behaviours. Of *course* they turn out different'. Gender difference is nothing but a social construction.

These are extreme positions and the reality, it's becoming clearer, lies somewhere between them. The Y chromosome uniquely carried by males has the effect of dramatically increasing levels of the hormone testosterone surrounding the boy child in the womb, changing his body then, and at puberty. Research suggests some link between high levels of testosterone and status seeking and combative behaviours, and autistic traits like lack of empathy. But such studies often contradict each other. And anyway, testosterone is increased or diminished in both males and females by diet, by activity and circumstances. Steroidal drugs used in sport increase testosterone levels in both sexes. And, drugs apart, life itself affects our hormonal balance. Recent research (you may have seen it reported in the

Guardian last month), shows the testosterone level of men, when they're engaged in family life and care of babies, falls to lower levels than when they're single and on the make.

Feminists, while aware of the interaction of biology and culture, is a social movement. It builds its strategy strongly round the notion that gender differentiation and convergence are amenable to a degree of choice. It calls for change in social practices - of child-rearing in the family, commodification of gender stereotypes, heterosexism and homophobia. It makes a policy issue out of the social handling and shaping of physical and mental potentials.

Understanding gender this way has led women to think historically – and look back through the centuries, the millennia, at the system of male rule that's characterized all but a very few societies we know of, identify it's evolving forms, and give it a name: *patriarchy*.

That name has actually become a bit of an embarrassment – 'patriarchy' – it has such an 'old fashioned' ring to it. It makes you think of rule by white-bearded grand-dads whereas today the dominant males are young dynamic men, football stars and computer geniuses, rogue traders and financial speculators. 'Andrarchy' or 'fratriarchy', rule by men, rule by the brothers, would be more accurate terms but somehow they don't catch on. So when we want to designate the world we experience - a male-dominant gender system, a hierarchy among and between men that involves the subordination of women and of qualities deemed feminine - we're stuck with the word patriarchy. But this is understood to have more and less extreme variants in different periods and regions.

Religion

Now – *a critique of organized religion* does promise a good linking mechanism between secularists and feminists. The major monotheistic belief systems, and their clerical institutions – churches, mosques, synagogues - are clearly patriarchal and involve, sometimes to an extraordinary degree, the oppression

and control of women. So – a lot of the campaigns pursued by the National Secular Society would have enthusiastic feminist supporters or fellow-travellers. For instance, resistance to the spread of voluntary and faith schools unites us. And the shift to faith-based welfare provision. Freeing P.H.S.E. - personal health and social education in schools - from the influence of proliferators and pro-abstinence influences, that's another thing we'd jointly campaign for. And gay rights, for instance ensuring the equality legislation protects gay people's rights in employment.

But do secularists and feminists bring the *same* critique to religion and religious authorities? I think not necessarily. The thrust of the secular-and / or-atheist-and / or humanist critique, as I understand it, is the *unscientific nature* of religion, its *irrationality*, its obfuscation. Although a lot of women would also come at it that way, the specifically feminist critique is rather different. It's against monotheistic religious thought for its masculinism; the notion of a male deity, the ultimate authority. It's against the masculine hierarchy of the religious structures. And above all it's against the differentiation, subordination and control of women that they perpetuate.

It has to be said of course that while most feminists would be secular, in the strict sense of the word, not all are atheists. Some are followers of spiritual paths such as Buddhism or Bahai. And of course there are feminists who are believing Christians, Muslims and Jews. One Christian friend of mind simply says to me "but my god is not a male". That makes me feel better as a feminist. It doesn't make me feel better as an atheist!

So questions arise here on which I'd like your views in discussion – does the atheist, humanist and secular critique of religion encompass a critique of its patriarchal nature and oppressive gender relations? Or only of its irrationality?

And I'd ask the obverse question of feminists – how fully do we share the secular faith in reason and in science? Shulamith Firestone, in her book *The Dialectic of Sex* published in 1978, saw the liberation of women lying in

ending pregnancy, growing babies in laboratories. But that meant throwing yourself trustingly into the arms of scientists. Most feminists weren't about to do that. Science like religion has been a majority male profession and knowledge base, and often comes across as supremely arrogant. Science is deeply implicated with the corporate interests that capitalize on its discoveries and inventions. And while women have gained greatly from some of these - the contraceptive pill for instance - at the same time women's bodies, and the embryo and foetus, have become raw materials for exploitation and further control by science.

A very important strand of feminist thought from the late 1980s has involved removing the veil of sanctity from science itself – showing that its claim to be value-free just doesn't stand up. Sandra Harding's book *The Science Question in Feminism* was very influential. And, here in England, Hilary Rose's *Love, Power and Knowledge*. What these and other feminists like Donna Haraway and Nancy Hartsock have been saying is that all knowledge claims are 'situated' in the claimants social positioning. Research, knowledge claims, may purport to be neutral, but in fact they're all socially situated. Sandra Harding wrote that 'objectivity' not only can but should be separated from what she calls 'its shameful and damaging history'. Science can actually be more objectively conducted if you don't claim it's value-free. Harding proposes the idea of 'strong objectivity', which allows us to abandon notions of quote 'perfect, mirrorlike representations of the world' yet still apply 'rational' standards to sorting less from more partial and distorted belief.

Then again, there are feminists who argue that reason, rationality, has in any case been defined by men and claimed as a male concept. In a seminal book, *Man of Reason*, published in 1984, Genevieve Lloyd wrote that in Western philosophy the ideal of rationality precisely excluded the feminine, and femininity was constituted by that exclusion – femininity became the paradigm case of the irrational. Some feminists have argued that there are other rationalities. Berit As, the Norwegian feminist, writes about the rationality of care. Sara Ruddick writes about maternal thinking.

So, feminists are more sceptical of science, I think, and its relationship to power, than most secularists are. Again, I'd like to hear your thinking on this.

'Race' and ethnicity

To move on beyond sex and gender...The catch phrase 'intersectionality' has become popular lately in the social sciences. It's a bit jargon-like. But it's quite a useful reminder of something that really does matter. It began, back in the nineteen-seventies, with a critique black feminists made of white feminism. Black women were reading the second-wave feminist stuff and saying, 'Hang on...the world doesn't look the same to a black woman in Western societies as it does to women of the white majority'. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a black American feminist, proposed the concept of *intersectionality* – it meant : we should understand our identities as complex, that we're each of us positioned in relation to different but intersecting major vectors of power – especially those of race, class and gender - that shape our chances and our relationships with each other. So just saying 'I'm a woman', wasn't saying anything politically meaningful. You need to say more – yes, a woman but a woman of the working class? of the Brahmin caste? a colonial subject? a South Asian Muslim in London? a marginalized Kurdish woman, in Turkey? or a Palestinian woman in Israel? It was a fall from innocence for feminism in a way – those who'd wanted to believe in a universal sisterhood had to stop and realize that sisterhood had to be worked for, across multiple mutual oppressions.

Now, this has relevance to our theme this evening. Let's take on the one hand *sex/gender* and on the other *race and race power*, white supremacy. How does our individual positionality in relation to those two dimensions of power enable us, and limit us, and shape our politics?

I can explain this best by invoking a movement that's feminist, anti-racist and critical of religion as a basis for social policy. It has several expressions. I'm thinking of a number of organizations with overlapping

membership. One is the initiative called “Women Against Fundamentalisms” – a group I was involved with when it was specially active in London in the 1990s and published a journal. WAF still meet today and maintain a website. The WAF perspective on fundamentalism (and it’s never just meant in Islam) is that it’s a modern political movement that uses religion to gain or consolidate power. It’s found in all major religions throughout the world, sometimes holding state power, sometimes in opposition to it — and sometimes working within the confines of a secular state to control minority communities. Fundamentalism is not the same as religious observance, which WAF see as a matter of individual choice. WAF’s feminist take on fundamentalism is that at the very heart of its agenda is the control of women’s minds and bodies.

There’s also “Women Living Under Muslim Laws”, W-L-U-M-L (Vloom we call it), activist women who are Muslim, of Muslim descent or allies of such women, struggling for women’s rights in the face of fundamentalism all over the world. Some of you may be involved in one or more of these activist organizations, or read their material.

Another key actor in this context is “Southall Black Sisters” who are originators of a secular women’s refuge movement among Afro-Caribbean and Asian women in London. Now here I can be sure of some common ground with the Secular Society because I know *you know* Southall Black Sisters well. They were awarded the accolade of Secularists of the Year last year.

But in introducing this complexity - the intersectionality expressed by that movement which adds an anti-racism / anti-discrimination element, to the feminist / secular relationship - we open up new and painful questions about political relationships, coherence and alliance.

Gita Sahgal, who’s a WAF activist and writer, has made the point that actually the people of Britain are not a particularly religious population, and may actually be getting *less* religious. What’s been happening is that religion

has been more and more used by the state as a tool of social and foreign policy, for expedient political reasons. Especially this has happened since 9/11 and the onset of the responding “war on terror” (in quotes). It’s been for purposes of security and control, especially of Muslim communities. The idea that religious fundamentalists are a source of terrorism has led to [quote] ‘ethnic minority groups’ being re-thought as [quote] ‘religious or faith groups’. The 1990s policy called “multiculturalism”, which meant dealing with minorities through self-appointed community leaders, was transformed into a full-blown programme of courting the religious right of those communities in the name of ‘cohesion’. Ethnicity has been elided with faith. It started under Blair but continues under Cameron. It serves a generally conservative and rightwing current of thought in Britain.

Southall Black Sisters are brave and skilled women who are very dear and important to women far afield from West London. The basis of their practise is providing refuge from domestic violence and legal defence for black and Asian women in their area. They’ve staked out a clear identity as autonomous, secular, anti-racist and feminist. Their struggle is a complex one. It’s against on the one hand the colonialist legacy of white racism against their ethnic groups; and on the other the communal and religious patriarchal control of women in those groups. It has to deal with the racism-denial in some feminist groups and sexism-denial in some anti-racist groups.

I was looking at a recent article by Pragna Patel, a leading activist in Southall Black Sisters. She was writing about the shrinking of secular spaces in present-day Britain. She sees struggles for equality and secularism overlapping and being of growing urgency, because the human rights of women are being traded in the various social contracts being signed between the state and the conservative religious leaders of ethnic minority communities. A particularly bad instance is the creation of the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal that gives the religious leaders the authority to apply *sharia*, Islamic law, in civil law dispute resolution – and that often means the cases women need to bring to court against violence and oppression in the family.

The irony of this is, as Pragna Patel points out, that it's actually a *racist* response because it's depriving minority women of the equality and justice, protection from terror and torture in the family, that's notionally available to other, to all, women citizens of the UK. At the same time, due to the same rightwing political current, radical alternatives are being deprived of public funding - projects like black workers' support organizations, anti-racist and police monitoring groups and Asian women's refuges like SBS and the Newham Asian Women's Project.

However... those who you might have expected to be allies of such secularist feminist women have sometimes betrayed them! The left, the anti-racist left, is terrified of criticising ethnic community leaders for fear of appearing racist. You don't want to attack Muslims if Muslims are being scapegoated by the state as terrorist suspects. So those parties and tendencies often support the Muslim right uncritically. In doing so they overlook and sell out those many people of Muslim origin who oppose religiosity, communalism and traditionalist authoritarianism. Progressive secular-minded Muslims. As if they didn't exist.

A second betrayal has come from the academic cultural theorists of post-modernism and post-colonialism, who've been important shapers of opinion over the last two decades. It's become fashionable to criticise Enlightenment and modernist thought as white Western arrogance and hegemony. That means dissing secularism too as part of the package. In Gita Sahgal's words, 'Universal values are seen [by these cultural theorists] as being rooted in the certainties of modernity – with secularism as an unfortunate by-product of a specifically Western Enlightenment tradition, which now only serves to oppress minorities who do not conform to a stereotype of 'enlightenment'. It is said that the time for this particular 'grand narrative' is over.' Unqote. In this way (Gita argues) the dominant cultural theorists are overlooking and selling out those in colonized countries that actually 'owned' Enlightenment thought, and shared in the creation of modernity. They're excusing political religion as inevitable and necessary in

the struggle against imperialism and racism. As for instance against the current war on terror by the US and its allies.

What's worse (and I gather this from an article by Pragna and Sukhwant Dhaliwal) some influential feminist writers have started promoting the value and interests of 'pious women' in all religions, representing them as bearers of authentic, minority 'culture', which they see as being marginalized, oppressed and relegated by arrogant Western secularism.

Now, secularists and atheists, I believe and suppose, would be immunized by their critique of religion against unthinkingly smothering the opposition to conservative religious authorities in the name of anti-racism. They would feel a natural affinity with the secular anti-racist feminists. And, lo and behold, we see that is indeed the case: SBS are made "Secularists of the Year".

Class, workers and anti-capitalism

Let's move on to think about the relationship between feminism and secularism in the light of the third intersected power system that bears on us all so heavily – *class, capitalist class relations*.

Let's think about feminism and class first, then secularism. In the 1970s, which for someone as old as me was the heyday of second wave feminism, there was a strong and explicit socialist feminist current. The first feminist group I belonged to was a Marx reading group - *Capital* Volume 1 we read, then *The German Ideology*, and the *Communist Manifesto*. We appreciated them, but made our own feminist critique of them. Through the 1980s, beset by Thatcherism, socialist feminism became an important dimension of our resistance. In 1985 some of us started a *European Forum of Socialist Feminists*. Really inspiring and active it was. We had an international conference every year for ten years.

Now, it's true that some of us felt that some socialist feminists were adopting the Marxism without really making a feminist critique of it. That some, what's more, were forgetting the body politics, the heart of mainstream radical feminism: the struggle against rape, domestic violence, homophobia, sexual exploitation. Why they would do that is that they wanted to go on working with men on the left. So some were failing to challenge such men both for their failure to adopt the theoretical critique of patriarchy and their failure to live up to it, practically, taking on child care, refusing privilege, stopping sexist objectification of women, and making space for women in left movements. An autonomous, holistic, feminist socialist-feminism is what we wanted.

The socialist feminist current died out in the mid-1990s, demoralized by the evaporation of socialist and marxist thought generally after the fall of the Berlin wall, when anything that looked like a 'grand narrative' began to be vilified. It was the time of the surge in US world hegemony, and the renewal of war. A few of us have only recently started once again to write confidently in this marxist feminist vein.

Meantime, in the last five years a new feminism has emerged. It's young women, typically in their early twenties, it's energetic and inspiring. The London Feminist Network conference last year drew 1200 women – that's a lot. Feminista 2011 is next weekend – at Friends House. Let's see how many it draws. Now, while this recovery of a feminist spirit and movement, the engagement of real numbers of young women, is a good thing, the spectrum of feminism it embraces is rather narrow. On the one hand there's the equality agenda characterized by UK Feminista - equal opportunities for women in work and politics. And on the other there's body politics – characterized by the London Feminist Network, good stuff in its own right, Reclaim the Night marches, opposing the commodification of women's bodies, prostitution, porn, lap-dancing. But so far there's a big gap in the programme - missing is globalization, the effect on women of war and militarism, of the wrecking of the environment, of capitalist depredation and exploitation worldwide. So, for some of us, the struggle is back on for a

holistic feminism. It tends to be older feminists, women in their fifties, sixties and seventies that represent that. Speaking for myself, I just have to be intersectional. I can't separate class, race and gender in my politics.

What about secularists? While preparing this talk I scanned through the last six issues of the National Secular Society Newsletter and noted 45 or 50 distinct topics it's dealt with. And I asked Mike for a list of the topics of Leicester Secular Society talks from January 2010 to the present moment. I couldn't find anything in the Newsletter that suggests an interest in a socialist analysis of class. In Leicester, there was reference to Marx in a talk last year, and a mention of the Left in relation to Darwin earlier this year.

It seemed to me, and you will tell me if I'm wrong, that organized secularists locate themselves in a broad span of 'progressivism' that for a lot of individuals may well include socialism or marxism or perhaps labourism or social-democracy, but that political analysis, a critique of capitalism as a system and the social inequalities it sustains, is not a defining feature of secularism.

I was wondering whether the intimate but tense relationship between *religion and capitalism* produced a kind of logical secular position favouring socialism. Thinking back to Max Weber and Richard Tawney (do you remember Tawney's lovely book *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* – that paperback with a Lowry painting on the cover of two tall industrial chimney stacks with a church spire between them?)...

The Mediaeval Catholic church had banned usury, interest on loans and investments. It pontificated against the accumulation of wealth: 'it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter Paradise'. The Reformation - Calvinism, Protestantism, eventually Puritanism – accompanied the growth of capitalism and the replacement of feudal hierarchies by the new fluid capitalist classes (the bourgeoisie, the working class), and was more inclined to value industriousness and to let business do its thing. As religion pulled back from its dominance over peoples lives and

minds, in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, political thought secularized. Tawney wrote, 'Religion has been converted from the keystone which holds together the social edifice into [just] one department within it, and the idea of a rule of right [has been] replaced by economic expediency as the arbiter of policy and the criterion of conduct'.

If secularization historically favoured and enabled capitalism, where does that leave secularism in relation to working class struggle, opposition to capitalism, today? The anticapitalist movements seek justice and equality – they are not a reaction back to religious morality. Although there is a moral element to it – for instance there's something of moral outrage in the reaction recently to the sheer greed and venality of financiers and bankers. But I don't think it's a morality inspired by religion. (Interesting though, conversely, watching the clerics of St.Paul's just now testing their own moral reflexes on the abuses of wealth and the protests of the 99%!!)

But if it's not religious outrage, is anti-capitalism *anti-religious*? I think the answer is some is, and some isn't. Conversely, secularists may or may not be anti-capitalists. There's a lot of fluidity in the relationship between socialism and secularism, I think, as there is in the relation between socialism and feminism.

What may be more a defining feature of secularism is 'democracy'. I read an article online by Muriel Fraser defining 'secularism' and she is very emphatic that it shouldn't be equated with atheism. She defines it rather as [quote] 'treating people as individuals, not as members of a group', which she sees also as a quality of democracy. 'Democracy,' she says counts the votes of individuals. It doesn't let their unelected faith leaders speak for the whole group.' Voting is done in privacy, away from pressure to conform or belong to something – religion or party. A secular and democratic state (Fraser cites France) has a view of citizenship as non-discriminatory and inclusive. But I admit I'm inexperienced and under-read in all this and will welcome your insights.

Respect for women in the movement

I want to end by mentioning one aspect of the relationship of feminism and secularism that's a bit troubling – the *inter-personal* aspect. In any mixed movement women who think as feminists often find themselves involved in what's sometimes called 'double militancy'. You struggle for the cause of the movement. It might be antimilitarism, it might be climate change, or secularism. But you find yourself having to struggle *at the same time* for the rights, equality and voice of women *in* the movement. It's an 'in and against' thing.

And stuff's been going on on the Web lately that reveal a feminist struggle internal to the secular movement, at least in the USA. I'm sure most of you know about this and what kicked it off, but for those who may not...this summer there was a furious spat between Rebecca Watson and Richard Dawkins. Watson had been speaking at an atheist conference in Dublin. Going up to her room afterwards she was joined in the lift by a male participant in the conference who propositioned her. She posted some words of mild complaint on her blog Skepchick. "Guys, don't do that!" she wrote. Richard Dawkins, who'd been present at the conference, came down on Rebecca Watson like a ton of bricks, "Stop whining and grow up" he told her on the blog Pharyngula. The tone of voice was scathing. He compared her mild harassment with atrocities against Muslim women - genital mutilation, stoning for adultery. The spat became a free-for-all, they called the scandal "elevator-gate".

Interestingly I think, Kimberly Winston of the Religion News Service, wrote in Huffington Post 'The incident struck a chord perhaps because atheists and other skeptics pride themselves on reason and logic – *intellectual exercises that theoretically compute to equality.*' My question is, perhaps the key question of the many I've been asking in this talk, is *do they, actually?* Does rationalism equate to equality?

Rebecca Watson blogs that when she started the site Skepchick, “I didn’t call myself a feminist. I had a hazy idea that feminism was a good thing, but it was something other people worried about, not me. I was living in a time and culture that had transcended the need for feminism, because in my world we were all rational atheists who had thrown off our religious indoctrination...”. I think the fact that she gave her blog the laddish title “Skepchick” bears that out. But then, in the skeptic community, she met fellow atheists saying on the one hand “no we don’t want more women, women are irrational” and on the other “yes, lets have more women so we can fuck them.” She wrote “today I’m a feminist because skeptics and atheists made me one.”

The result of Elevatorgate has been a lot of soul-searching among more serious secularists-stroke-skeptics. There’s discussion of the numerical dominance of men in the movement, their grasp of key positions, the greater importance ascribed to male writers, and the thoughtless sexism of some men lower down in the status system. My hunch is that this debate is fiercer and perhaps more needed in the USA than in Britain. In the secular movement here I see a lot of women named in leading positions. You can tell me about this. But it’s still pertinent, I think, to ask the question:

Do secularists see women’s disadvantage as the hangover from a religious past? In other words, do they condemn patriarchy as part and parcel of religion and pre-Enlightenment thought, that it lives on as an unfortunate flaw in modern states and societies. (I think that may be the implication of Dawkins citing Muslim fundamentalism in answer to Rebecca Watson.)

Or... do secularists understand women’s disadvantage (as feminists do) as manifesting a contemporary patriarchy, a living, breathing, adapting, self-reproducing system of male dominance? Do they understand it as a right-here-and-now power relation that thrives in secularist, atheist and humanist communities (as in my research I’ve seen it thriving in antimilitarist and peace movements), because it thrives wherever men (and women) have not yet made the personal and collective commitment to root it out and bin it?

Over to you!

5301 words

SOME RELEVANT READING:

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